Memo

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To: All Deans*

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SUBJECT: 2025-2026 Academic Year Priorities for Faculty Members

As we prepare for the start of a new academic year, let us first celebrate our shared accomplishments of the year that has passed. In June 2025, the Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE) **reaffirmed our University's accreditation**. The Commission's action concluded a very successful MSCHE self-study review process and site visit, representative of nearly three years of research and hard work by our students, faculty, administrators, staff, Board of Trustees, and external community members. Another accomplishment of the last year is that despite significant headwinds, **we are on track to exceed our first-year undergraduate student enrollment projections.** We have also collectively made great strides in our **online academic program development initiatives** with a view to serving new student populations and responding to the different ways students learn while contributing to the long-term sustainability of our institution. Furthermore, we have explored and enacted **academic efficiencies**, effectively streamlining our course offerings, strategically evaluating our operations, and critically assessing how we advise our students ensuring their success.

Although we should be proud of our accomplishments, the past year was also challenging. Due to budgetary pressures, we temporarily reduced faculty research reductions, paused research leaves, implemented a new graduate assistantship model, and strategically realigned our budgets. I am grateful to all of you for your cooperation as we navigated this together. As we continue to face both new challenges and opportunities, we must always ground ourselves in our core mission - to serve our students in such a way that they are successful during their studies and beyond graduation. To accomplish this, we must be creative and take appropriate actions to safeguard and enhance St. John's long-term viability. With this in mind, the academic priorities for the 2025-2026 academic year are as follows:

Student Enrollment
Across New York State and much of the Northeast, high school graduate numbers are declining, competition among institutions is intensifying, and families are evaluating cost and value with emphasis on career outcomes. These realities present significant challenges, but they also affirm the importance of our recent efforts in student recruitment and admission.

Over the past few years, Enrollment Management has successfully implemented numerous changes to existing policies and procedures, which include the optimization of the student search process, reassessing the financial aid leveraging model, introducing merit awards for prospective external graduate students, and developing personalized and customized communications to prospective students, their families, and their influencers.

Although a number of faculty members have assisted Enrollment Management in its recruitment efforts, we need more cooperation from every academic department. This includes personalized and consistent outreach to prospective and admitted students in every degree program during the enrollment funnel. It also includes the timely acceptance of graduate student applicants. I ask that you stress the importance of this to your faculty and that you provide Enrollment Management with regular reports detailing their student recruitment activities.

Academic Advising

Academic advising plays a vital role in helping students navigate their educational journey. It provides personalized guidance on course selection, major and career exploration, and academic planning to ensure that students stay on track to meet their goals. Effective advising can support students through academic or personal challenges, connect them with campus resources that enhance their learning and development and can prevent delays in graduation. For many students at St. John's, especially those who are first-generation, at-risk, or unsure of their path, academic advising offers a crucial support system that fosters persistence, engagement, and long-term success.

During the past year we have worked with an outside consultant to assess our academic advising practices. Through the examination of organizational structures and processes and extensive interviews with students, faculty, administrators, and staff, some key strengths and weaknesses have emerged as listed below.

Strengths
- The tutoring center and career readiness teams are strong, but they need to be optimally integrated into the student experience.
- The adoption of Degree Works among advisors has improved and will need to continue to be further integrated to provide a comprehensive plan and roadmap when advising students.
- The use of professional advisors within some schools provides the most dedicated advising support for students and allows faculty to assume a mentorship role.

Weaknesses
- The current 'one size fits all' approach for first-year students does not work for our diverse student population and academic portfolio.
- There are challenges with the 'first year to second year advising handoff'.
- First-year students with declared majors have a desire to be more directly advised by their schools and colleges.
- There is no centralized CRM to support advising.

This upcoming academic year, a major focus of our office will be to increase retention, persistence and graduation rates through enhanced advising methods. In the fall we will finalize the new academic advising model, the first phase of which will be implemented next spring. We plan to move away from the 'one size fits all' approach to a more tailored advising model for the different student subpopulations. The number of at-risk first-year undergraduate students is increasing at St. John's so moving forward we will have a structure that provides personalized, proactive support to help them overcome academic and personal challenges. As we roll out this new advising model, we are going to require increased cooperation and assistance from faculty members across all academic departments. It is unacceptable that our retention, persistence and graduation rates are declining, and I ask that you communicate the importance of this initiative and the need for involvement to your faculty members.

Online Learning Strategy

Online education provides accessible and flexible learning opportunities which allows students to learn at their own pace, accommodate their schedules, and overcome geographical barriers. Furthermore, the online space is rapidly expanding, and we need to transition many of our graduate market-driven academic programs to an online modality in order to capture new student markets and to drive net tuition revenue. I am excited that St. John's is in the early stages of a new online strategy, and our Chief Online Learning Officer, Michael Koskinen, has developed a five-year St. John's Online Strategic Plan with the following main goals:
- Launch a total of 21 market-driven undergraduate and graduate online degree programs by Fall 2029.
- Increase our fully online student population by 1,100 incoming students.
- Implement student services specifically structured to support the online student experience.

This plan is ambitious but realistic, and I need your assistance. As we move forward, I ask that you fully support Michael when he presents and discusses these plans with your faculty members, sets timelines and expectations, and navigates issues that arise.

Academic Program Review

To ensure that our academic programs remain effective, relevant, aligned with institutional goals, resources, and student needs, we initiated an academic program review process last year. We have compiled longitudinal data on enrollment, degree completion, and instructional costs for all undergraduate and graduate programs.

This data is being used by EAB to help assess program viability and to identify underperforming academic programs. Once the analysis is completed this fall, we will follow established University processes with quantifiable outcomes tied directly to strategic goals and expense savings.

This is not going to be an easy process, but we cannot continue to offer our current extensive academic program portfolio if we are to remain competitive. In addition to our own program review, the federal government has enacted a financial value transparency and gainful employment framework rule requiring us to provide extensive data on our students that will then be used to calculate which programs are "low-earning" or have "high-debt-burden,"(Final Regulations). The results of the calculations will be published on their website. Moving forward we will need to focus on offering fewer academic programs and prioritize those with high market demand and excellent student outcomes. I am grateful for your support to date, and I look forward to walking this road together.

Artificial Intelligence
AI is rapidly shaping higher education by transforming how institutions teach, support, and engage students. From personalized learning platforms that adapt to individual student needs to AI-driven tutoring and advising tools, artificial intelligence is making education more accessible and efficient. Many universities are using AI to analyze student performance data, identify at-risk students early, and provide targeted interventions to improve retention and success. As AI continues to evolve, we are taking important steps to support both students and faculty as we navigate this new landscape together.

During the last year the AI Academic Task Force, comprised of our own experts from around the University, has made great progress. It recently launched a St. John's webpage (www.stjohns.edu/AI) which provides a wealth of resources to the St. John's community. These resources include: how to study with AI, which academic programs have AI integrated into the curriculum, AI research projects and AI events on campus. Recently, revised academic guidelines were posted in addition to a new AI micro credentials, and access to a Microsoft Pilot Industry License. These are exciting times, and we are fully committed to supporting our University community in using AI safely and ethically as we move forward. Please encourage your faculty to explore the AI at St. John's webpage, to familiarize themselves with AI, and direct any questions to the AI Academic Task Force.

Publishing of Canvas Courses
Starting this fall, all Canvas course sections will automatically be published the weekend before the semester begins. For this semester, that date will be August 29, 2025. This change is being made for the convenience of our students and to provide consistency in how courses are deployed in the learning management system. This change does not require the faculty to have their course fully prepared, or all content uploaded in Canvas by that date. Please inform your faculty members of this change.

Operational Efficiency
Universities tend to have a plethora of procedures and policies that have been in existence for multiple years and although most of these may function perfectly fine, there is always room to think differently and optimize. In the upcoming year, we will start to examine our own academic operations, in many cases leveraging digital tools, to ensure that our limited resources are used effectively to maximize educational outcomes while minimizing unnecessary expenses.

I remain enthusiastic about this upcoming year. Although we will face challenges, they will reveal new opportunities and perspectives, allowing us to build on the innovative strategies of last year and move forward in a productive manner.

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