State of the College 2026
President Roger J. Thompson, EdD
October 21, 2026

Opening and recognition

Thank you, Kiki, for that kind introduction—and for your leadership as our Associated Students President. Kiki and I meet each month—president to president—and I value hearing her perspective on what matters to our students.

I am grateful to you and your fellow student leaders for the energy and care you bring to this community. And, Kiki, I hope you can stay with us. I have a little more to say about you later—but I will save that for now**.**

Good afternoon, everyone.

Let us remember that we are in the holy presence of God.

Welcome to our second annual State of the College address. Thank you for taking the time to be here, and for everything you do for Saint Mary's.

I want to begin with something worth celebrating together.

By now, you have heard the news: in the latest *U.S. News & World Report* rankings, Saint Mary's is tied for Number One among private regional

universities in the West, and tied for Number Three overall in the Regional Universities West category.

Saint Mary's also ranks Number Eight for Best Value and Number Ten among Best Colleges for Veterans in our regional category—recognition that speaks to the importance of making an excellent education accessible to the students we serve. And if, somehow, you have managed to miss that news, we have put up a few new banners around campus to help you out.

I am pleased that we can share this recognition so visibly. People arriving on our campus should know that something exceptional is happening here.

But those banners do not tell the whole story. The people in this room do.

Behind that recognition are **faculty** who give a student the extra hour that makes a difficult idea finally come into focus. **Staff members** who help a family work through an unfamiliar process. **Coaches** who insist that excellence includes what happens in the classroom. **Colleagues** who make this campus a place where students can find their footing, their friends, and their purpose.

So, before we go any further, please give yourselves—and one another—a round of applause.

That recognition belongs to this community. It reflects years of effort, relationships that have endured, and a commitment to education that remains deeply personal.

For a prospective student who has never visited Moraga, a ranking may be the first reason to take a closer look. What we want that student to discover is the Saint Mary's we know: a place where serious learning happens through human relationships, where questions of meaning and responsibility belong alongside questions of knowledge, and where students are encouraged to put their education to work in service of others.

That is what we have to offer. And we have every reason to be proud of it.

Our direction and the work before us

Last year, I spoke about four themes that would help guide our direction: the Student Experience, Academic Excellence, Access and Belonging, and our Places and Spaces.

Those priorities remain. They describe the kind of College we want to be and the experience we want every student to have.

Today, I want to talk about the progress we are making toward them, the challenges that still require our attention, and why I remain confident in our future.

A State of the College address is usually an occasion for a president to look well beyond the immediate horizon. To describe what an institution can become, and to invite its community to help bring that vision to life.

I want to do that. I also want to be honest about where much of my attention has had to be since I arrived at Saint Mary's.

Years ago, a colleague whose father was a longtime college president shared an observation about leadership that has stayed with me.

Deans, vice presidents, directors, and managers, his father would say, perform their jobs **through the lens of a microscope.** They examine the details—the important details—that make an organization work.

Having spent a couple of decades as a vice president myself, I understood that perspective. Much of my work involved looking closely at an organization and finding ways to make it better.

But a president, he would add, needs to look through a telescope—to see farther ahead, keep the larger direction in view, and guide the institution toward its North Star.

Of course, every leader needs both perspectives. But that observation has taken on greater meaning for me as President. Leadership needs room to look beyond the immediate problem, toward the possibilities ahead.

Since I arrived at Saint Mary's, however, the vast majority of my time has been spent looking through the microscope. Our financial circumstances have required it.

I look *forward* to looking *forward*.

I look forward to spending more of our time together discussing the opportunities we can pursue, the partnerships we can build, and the education we can make possible for the next generation of Gaels.

We are not yet where we need to be financially. I will speak plainly about that today.

But we are also making progress that deserves to be seen and understood. Even as we address our immediate challenges, people across Saint Mary's are doing work that opens new possibilities for our future.

That is the momentum I want to begin with.

Let me first recognize several leaders who are helping carry that work forward. As I call your name, please stand and remain standing. And I would ask everyone to hold your applause until we have recognized all four leaders.

Dr. Kimberly Mayfield Lynch has joined us as Dean of the Kalmanovitz School of Education. **Dr. Gesine Gerhard** is the inaugural Dean of our School of Arts and Sciences. **Dr. Berna Aksu** is serving as Interim Dean of the School of Economics and Business Administration. And **Jessica Frazier** has joined us as Associate Vice President and Dean of Students.

Each brings experience and perspective to work that matters deeply to this College.

Each is also joining colleagues whose knowledge of Saint Mary's is indispensable to our success.

Please join me in welcoming and thanking these leaders.

Enrollment and opportunity

This fall, the number of new students joining Saint Mary's, including transfers, increased by approximately 18 percent.

That is real growth. It means more students have chosen to make their education and their future part of this community.

I hope you have felt their presence. If you have stood in line lately at Oliver Hall around lunchtime, you probably have.

Each new student brings something to the life of the College: another perspective in a Seminar discussion, another participant in a campus organization, another person discovering what it means to be a Gael.

I encouraged our new students at New Student Convocation to 'be a sponge' and take advantage of as many opportunities on campus as they can, and it appears they have taken that message to heart.

Two important contributors to the growth of new students have been **Nursing** and **Aquatics**.

Both give students new reasons to choose this College. And both depend on the strengths that were already here: excellent teaching, personal attention, and a community committed to their success.

Nursing is attracting students who want to prepare for a career in health care while benefiting from the personal attention and sense of community Saint Mary's offers. Its growth is expanding our reach to students with a clear professional goal in a field where their skills are greatly needed.

Our new swimming and water polo programs are bringing student-athletes to Saint Mary's who want to compete at the Division I level while earning an education that will serve them long after their athletic careers.

Their arrival adds to the life of our classrooms and our campus. It also extends a tradition in which our student-athletes are expected to take their academic responsibilities as seriously as their competitive ones.

I also want to recognize the head coaches helping build these programs: **Ellie Monobe**, who leads Men's and Women's Swimming; **James Lathrop**, who leads Men's Water Polo; and **Stephen Loomis**, who leads Women's Water Polo. Thank you for the leadership and energy you are bringing to Saint Mary's.

I would like to thank **all** of our Nursing and Athletics colleagues, and all of our campus partners who have helped these programs get underway.

We should celebrate our enrollment growth. We should also understand it clearly.

Our traditional recruitment results did not meet our expectations this semester. Growth in new programs is encouraging, but we need stronger results across the College.

Our established academic programs offer extraordinary opportunities, and we need to bring those opportunities to the attention of more students and families.

I appreciate the work of our Admissions team and have confidence in them. Recruitment is demanding work in an increasingly competitive environment. It requires persistence and the ability to adapt as students' needs and choices change.

We are strengthening that work through new outreach, new relationships, and new ways to help students see themselves at Saint Mary's.

This year, our recruitment team will visit **more than 700 high schools and college fairs**—far more than ever before. At these kinds of events, our colleagues will meet students and counselors, answer their questions, and introduce them to the opportunities at Saint Mary's. That expanded presence will help more students discover what this College can offer them.

We also introduced our **Lasallian Guaranteed Admission Program**, creating a clear pathway to Saint Mary's for eligible graduates of Lasallian high schools across the country. It builds on our shared educational mission and gives those students another reason to see their future here.

And—I have said this before—recruitment is a responsibility in which the whole College has a part. Recruitment and retention are everyone's job. A conversation with a faculty member, a warm welcome during a visit, or the enthusiasm of a current student can help a prospective Gael imagine a future here.

One person who brings that sense of belonging to life is **Clarence Celestine**, who works in Gael Dining—and who, I am told, makes the best omelette in town.

Last spring, our Black graduates honored Clarence alongside the Emmy Award-winning **Dr. Terri Jett** as recipients of the **Pamela Y. George Staff Award**, recognizing their impact on campus. If you have spent time in Oliver Hall, you can understand why Clarence received that recognition.

He connects with students, makes them feel welcome, and gives many of them an encouraging start to their day.

Those everyday interactions matter. Knowing that someone is glad to see you—that someone cares how you are doing—can make a difference in how you feel about being here.

Clarence reminds us that helping students find their place at Saint Mary's is work that happens across this campus, wherever people take the time to care.

Our goal is sustained enrollment strength grounded in the quality of that experience. This fall gives us reason for encouragement, and it gives us work to build on.

Nursing and the Phelan Simulation Lab

Nursing offers a particularly vivid example of what that progress looks like.

Just over a year ago, we welcomed the first students in our Bachelor of Science in Nursing program.

Today, we are building the academic capacity and learning environments that will support its continued growth.

By next fall, we anticipate approximately 200 Nursing students on campus.

Think about what that means for Saint Mary's—and for the communities those future nurses will serve.

It means students preparing for a profession that demands sound judgment and a steady presence at some of the most vulnerable moments in people's lives. It means an expanding program that connects our educational mission with an urgent human need.

A few weeks ago, we celebrated the opening of the **Liz and Jeff Phelan Simulation Lab**. If you have had a chance to visit, you know why we were so excited to cut that ribbon.

The lab gives students a setting to practice clinical skills and develop the confidence to use them. They can work through realistic scenarios, learn how to assess a situation, and sharpen their patient communication skills.

They also learn to coordinate with other members of a care team and work together as a cohesive unit.

As we discussed at the opening of the Sim Lab, strong nursing preparation involves much more than mastering equipment or memorizing procedures. A nurse must recognize the person receiving care. Listen carefully. Notice what may not be immediately obvious. Bring compassion to a situation that can be frightening for a patient and a family.

That combination of rigorous preparation and care for the whole person belongs at Saint Mary's. It is consistent with the kind of education we seek to provide across the College.

I want to thank Provost Carol Ann Gittens, our Director of Nursing, Pam Stanley, and the faculty and staff who have built this program and continue to strengthen it.

Are any of our Nursing students or Nursing faculty here today? Pam, would you and your colleagues, and any Nursing students who are with us, please stand so we can recognize you?

Thank you. We are proud of what you are building, and we are glad you are part of Saint Mary's.

The Phelan Simulation Lab also reminds us that academic progress often depends on people who believe in our students enough to invest in their future.

Liz and Jeff Phelan helped make that lab possible, together with **Dennis Meiss** and **Janet Ralston**, **Dick and Bobbie Svec**, **Kristy Furrer-Crouch**, and other generous supporters. We are deeply grateful to them.

Their generosity leads naturally to another important part of our progress: the growing support of people who want to help Saint Mary's succeed.

Philanthropy and relationships

We have seen a significant increase in philanthropic support this past year.

In fiscal year 2026, the funds we raised increased by **50 percent over fiscal year 2025**—a powerful expression of confidence in Saint Mary's and our future.

That progress matters to our financial future. It also matters because of what it makes possible for our students and faculty.

A scholarship can make the difference between a student attending Saint Mary's and believing it is out of reach. A gift to an academic program can expand the tools and experiences available to its students. Support for a facility can create opportunities that will serve many generations of Gaels.

The people making those gifts are expressing confidence in this College. They want to be part of its future, and they want to know that their support will make a tangible difference.

Jeff Shilling and our Advancement team have been working with enormous energy and determination to build those relationships. I want to recognize that effort and the contributions of the trustees, alumni, faculty, staff, De La Salle Christian Brothers, and friends who help connect people with the work happening here.

I continue to devote a substantial share of my own time to that work, too—traveling to meet with donors, listening to their hopes for Saint Mary's, and building relationships over many conversations**.**

Some of the most encouraging conversations I have as President are with people who care deeply about this College and are thinking seriously about how they can help. Let me share just one example:

Several years ago, a group of friends from the Saint Mary's Class of 1967 purchased a bench just outside Dante Hall and had their names engraved on it.

They called themselves "The Group." Apparently, they put all their creativity into the friendship—and saved none for the name.

The bench honored friendships formed at Saint Mary's that had endured for decades.

Recently, several members of The Group returned to campus for a Golden Gaels reunion.

As they reconnected and reflected on their college years, they also heard about our continued commitment to making a Saint Mary's education accessible and affordable.

They put their heads together.

What if they could take the friendship they had carried with them for nearly 60 years and use it to help open the doors of Saint Mary's for someone else?

The result is the **Everlasting Friendship Scholarship Fund**—a gift that honors their shared past while investing in the future.

It is a beautiful expression of what it means to be a Gael. These friends are helping a new generation of students experience the education, friendships, and sense of belonging that have meant so much in their own lives.

For me, that is the power of the Gael experience: we carry Saint Mary's with us—and, in turn, we help carry it forward. The dollars matter, but this work is about relationships as much as resources.

And the trust our donors have shown in us needs continuing care. Our Stewardship team plays an essential role in that work, helping us show our supporters what their gifts are accomplishing, honor their intentions, and keep them connected with the people and programs they are helping.

We are also building relationships with individuals and families—relationships whose impact may unfold over years. That requires sustained attention, even when a gift is not immediate.

I also want to make an important distinction as we talk about philanthropy and our budget. A gift designated for a scholarship, a lab, an athletics facility, or a building has a particular purpose. It cannot simply be redirected to meet any operating need we may have.

So, growing donor support and continuing financial challenges can exist at the same time. Our task is to strengthen philanthropy across our priorities, including the support that gives the College flexibility to address its most pressing needs.

I am grateful to everyone who has contributed, and to everyone helping us build the relationships on which continued progress depends.

Financial stewardship and the work ahead

The progress I have described is encouraging and real. So are the financial challenges we still face.

I want to speak directly about these challenges, because confidence in our future requires an honest understanding of our present.

Last year, I made clear that Saint Mary's could not continue operating with recurring budget deficits. That commitment has not changed. We must establish the solid financial foundation this College needs to thrive.

This year, I anticipate not only a balanced budget, but a small surplus.

That would mark an important turning point for Saint Mary's. Bringing our operations into balance—and beginning to move beyond that—would give us a stronger foundation on which to build.

But we have not achieved that result yet. Getting there will require disciplined decisions and sustained attention. The climb remains steep, and we must follow through.

Our financial difficulties developed over many years. Since my arrival in the summer of 2024, addressing those longstanding deficits has demanded determination and difficult choices. It has required reductions, changes in how we work, and decisions that have caused pain.

Further changes will be necessary in the months ahead, and some will have difficult consequences for members of our community. I recognize the weight of that, and we have a responsibility to communicate clearly and treat those affected with care and respect.

The work has been hard and continues to challenge all of us. Many of you have carried responsibilities and faced choices that have stretched you beyond what you imagined. I have felt that, too. These decisions demand careful reflection on what they mean for our colleagues, our students, and the future of Saint Mary's.

Across the College, people are being asked to do more with fewer resources. Colleagues have seen work they value reduced or have had to

reconsider plans they believed would benefit students. And uncertainty about what comes next can take a toll of its own.

Those experiences deserve acknowledgment. An honest account of the state of this College must include the strain people are feeling, alongside the progress we are making.

I am grateful for the professionalism and care you continue to bring to your work. I do not take that commitment for granted, and I do not want gratitude to substitute for a candid discussion of the circumstances in which you are working.

As President, I have had to say no to many things. Some were good ideas I had to decline. Some have been requests from people whose judgment I respect and whose dedication to Saint Mary's is beyond question.

Those are difficult conversations. A worthwhile proposal does not become less worthwhile because we cannot afford it.

But we have to make decisions with the resources we have, and with responsibility for the College and its future.

I have had to say no in order to say yes to Saint Mary's.

Yes to a College that can meet its obligations. Yes to an education students and families can depend on. Yes to a future in which our mission has the financial foundation it needs.

We need to bring our recurring expenses and resources into a sustainable relationship. We need stronger enrollment, continued attention to student persistence and success, and a larger role for philanthropy. We also need to examine how we operate and where we can use our resources more effectively.

A balanced budget this year would be an important step. It would not mean that all of our work is finished. We need to sustain that discipline beyond a single year so that Saint Mary's can plan with greater confidence and invest from a position of greater strength.

I also know there are differing views about how to get there. Faculty and staff have raised serious questions, offered alternatives, and asked for clarity. I respect that engagement. People speak with conviction because they care about this place and the education it provides.

The conversations I have had with our Academic Senate and with colleagues across campus have reinforced the importance of direct dialogue. We may not agree on every decision. We should be able to understand the problem we are trying to solve, the reasons for a decision, and the work that follows it.

I have a responsibility to listen, to explain the direction we are taking, and to work with our campus leaders through the appropriate governance processes. I also have a responsibility to make difficult decisions when they are necessary for the long-term health of the College.

Our purpose in this work is to preserve and strengthen the education at the heart of Saint Mary's.

We need a financial foundation that allows excellent teaching, dedicated student support, and the work of this community to continue for generations to come.

As we work toward a small surplus this year, I am reminded of Winston Churchill's description of a turning point: 'It is not even the beginning of the end. But it is, perhaps, the end of the beginning.'

Achieving that surplus would not mean our financial work is finished. It would mean that the difficult work we have undertaken together is beginning to give Saint Mary's a stronger foundation—and greater room to shape its future.

Operational review and Accenture

That responsibility also led us to seek outside help in examining our operations.

We brought in strategy and consulting firm Accenture because we recognized that we could benefit from additional expertise in strengthening how our administrative services support our mission. Their team has been speaking with colleagues and learning how our work gets done.

I appreciate everyone who has participated and shared their experience.

Our partnership with them will continue as we work together on charting the path forward for Saint Mary's.

Saint Mary's needs modern, reliable systems and clear, consistent practices that meet the demands of a college operating today. We cannot continue to rely on outdated processes that make work harder for our colleagues and limit how effectively we serve our students.

This next phase will involve further engagement with colleagues across campus. You can expect this initiative to be conducted thoughtfully and responsibly, and we will continue to keep the campus informed.

WSCUC and institutional progress

Our work on financial and institutional sustainability is also central to our response to the WASC Senior College and University Commission.

As I have communicated previously, we are taking the concerns identified by WSCUC seriously.

Provost Gittens and a team of colleagues have been working on our response and preparing the report we will submit to WSCUC next month. The next on-site visit by WSCUC is expected next fall.

I want to thank Carol and everyone contributing to this work. It requires careful attention to evidence, a clear account of our progress, and an honest assessment of what remains to be done.

I am encouraged by the work underway. We are addressing WSCUC's concerns and preparing to demonstrate the steps we are taking to strengthen Saint Mary's.

We will continue to attend to the requirements of this process and keep the community informed. Our confidence must be grounded in the work we do and the progress we can show.

The report is an important milestone. The lasting value will be a stronger institution, with the practices and financial discipline to support our students and our mission over time.

Returning to the larger view

I have spent time on these challenges because they matter. They affect our ability to do everything else I have described today.

But they do not account for everything happening at Saint Mary's, and they should not define the limits of our imagination.

When I say that I look forward to looking forward, I mean that I want us to have greater room to pursue the possibilities we can already see. Stabilizing the College is essential presidential work. It is also work that makes a wider range of choices possible.

The microscope and the telescope belong in the same room.

We need to understand our circumstances closely enough to improve them. We also need to keep our eyes on why that improvement matters and where it can lead.

These efforts are connected by a commitment to the future of this College. They give me reason to believe that we will gain more room to look ahead—and more ability to act on what we see.

I want to turn now to a project that lets us see Saint Mary's through the eyes of the people at the center of our work.

The College Tour and our students

Last month, the crew from *The College Tour*, an Amazon Prime and YouTube series that showcases colleges through their students' stories, came to campus to help tell viewers about Saint Mary's.

Many of you already know about the project. What I want to emphasize today is who is telling that story.

Eight of our students stepped forward to share their experiences. They volunteered their time, prepared for filming, wrote their own scripts, and took on the responsibility of representing this College to people who know little or nothing about us.

We invited those students to be here today. If you are with us, would you please stand as I call out your name? I ask everyone to hold your applause until I have read each name:

- Will Barsotti
- Alex Cutonilli
- James Fleischman
- Sofia Huntley
- Jessiah Jones
- Jasper Pacheco
- Kiki Paredes
- Aruna Silva

Thank you. You have given something important to Saint Mary's, and I hope you enjoyed the experience. Let's give them a big round of applause!

We are really excited to see your television debut. Some of you may now have visions of a career on the big screen, so we do ask that you finish your degrees before your agents start calling.

I had the opportunity to sit down with the show's host, Alex Boylan, as well.

It was a pleasure to talk about Saint Mary's, but our students are the people who can show what an education here feels like from the inside.

We expect to start rolling out material from the project in February, with the episode premiering in June on Amazon Prime. That will give us new opportunities to introduce Saint Mary's to students and families far beyond our immediate community.

I am grateful to our students and to our colleagues in Admissions, Marketing & Communications, and Student Life who worked with our students and helped coordinate the production. Their work will help more people encounter the College through the voices and experiences of our Gaels.

And those voices remind us of something important as we think about the future. The education we are trying to sustain is already changing lives. Our students are living that story now.

The direction ahead

Last year, I asked us to think about the College we could become.

A College that connects its liberal arts foundation with new opportunities in health, education, business, the arts, and public service. A College that prepares students to engage the world thoughtfully and contribute to their communities.

That direction remains compelling to me.

As we consider future opportunities, I want us to keep asking practical questions. What will this make possible for students? How does it build on our strengths? What will it require to do it well and sustain it?

Those questions can guide ambition without diminishing it. They help us pursue opportunities with the care our students deserve.

We have people here who know how to teach, create, discover, and serve. We have students eager to learn. We have alumni and friends who want to

contribute. And we have a mission that gives our work a clear human purpose.

Those are substantial strengths. Our task is to put them to work together, with the resources and institutional foundation that allow them to flourish.

The Centennial and our next chapter

That brings me to a milestone that invites all of us to look farther ahead: our Centennial, which will celebrate our 100th year here in Moraga.

Our Centennial planning team has been meeting monthly, brainstorming ideas, and developing a plan for how we will mark this occasion.

There is more to share as that work develops. Today, I want to recognize the people giving their time and thought to it.

Would members of the Centennial planning team who are here please stand?

Thank you. I appreciate the care you are bringing to this opportunity and the work you are doing to help the whole community take part.

An anniversary gives us a tangible reason to remember. It also allows us to recognize the people who built and sustained Saint Mary's, the students who found their direction here, and the generations of faculty, staff, and De La Salle Christian Brothers whose service helped to shape this College.

It also gives us a reason to ask what we want to make possible for the people who come after us.

Those who built Saint Mary's could not have known every challenge we would face or every profession our graduates would enter. They could establish a place of learning with a purpose strong enough to endure through change.

We have that same responsibility now.

And when I look around this room, I see people who are already doing the work to build that future. You are doing it when you help a student persist

through a difficult semester. When you make an unfamiliar process easier to navigate. When you bring a new idea into a classroom, develop a partnership, or find a thoughtful way to solve a problem.

Much of that work will never appear on a banner. It is nevertheless the work on which the future of Saint Mary's depends.

So, as we move toward the Centennial, I hope we will bring our experience and our ideas to the planning. I hope we will help connect alumni and friends with the life of the College.

And I hope we will see this milestone as an invitation to contribute to the next chapter, as well as celebrate the chapters that brought us here.

Our Lasallian theme this year is Inclusive Community. We come together with different responsibilities, perspectives, and experiences. What makes us a community is the care we bring to one another and our willingness to work toward a shared purpose.

That purpose has carried Saint Mary's through change before. It will guide us through the work ahead.

Closing

In closing, I look forward to looking forward. And I am encouraged that, even now, this community is giving us so much to look forward to.

We have more new students choosing Saint Mary's. A growing Nursing program and new opportunities in Aquatics. Supporters investing in our students. And students ready to tell the world why this College matters to them.

We have difficult work still to do. We also have evidence of progress, reasons for confidence, and people who care enough to keep building.

As we move through the changes ahead, I find encouragement in these words of **Saint Francis de Sales**:

“Do not look forward in fear to the changes in life; rather, look to them with full hope.”

For me, that hope carries a responsibility: to lead with care, communicate openly, and recognize how our decisions affect the people who make Saint Mary’s what it is.

Thank you for your candor, your ideas, and your commitment to our students. Thank you for the work you do every day to make Saint Mary’s worthy of the trust placed in us.

The best days of Saint Mary’s are ahead. We have the opportunity—and the responsibility—to help bring them into being.

I hope you will stay to spend some time with colleagues and friends.

Please take the opportunity to thank someone whose work you appreciate, welcome someone you have not yet met, and enjoy the community we are building together.

Saint John Baptist De La Salle … Pray for us.

Live Jesus in our hearts … Forever.

Thank you.