

New Saint Mary's College President Already Firmly Involved

By Sophie Braccini



James Donahue

Photo Sophie Braccini

Saint Mary's College's 29th president, James Donahue, has been in charge of the college for just over five months and has already taken stock of the comparative advantages, the issues, and the dynamics of the 150-year-old higher education institution. An academic scholar and thinker at heart, Donahue will not be an ivory tower leader. Faculty, students and the community are witnessing the personal involvement of someone who wants to leave a legacy.

While he values the Christian Brothers' compelling tradition of humility and modesty, he believes Saint Mary's needs to move forward with more pride in its distinctiveness. "We have a great story to tell; we need more swagger!" he says.

Underscoring that Saint Mary's College was the only California school to be included on the "Colleges that Change Lives" list, Donahue says, "What we are doing here is remarkable, and we need to claim it, make a more prominent statement about what we are doing: training leaders."

In order to forward its mission, the president wants the college to invest in technology, update facilities, and provide more financial aid to deserving students. And while he believes the college is well run and financially sound, he says it needs to be more effective at fundraising to address the affordability issue. "We have potential for more aggressive fundraising and we deserve that," he says, "and it is my job to lead that charge."

Donahue is married, has two sons and a brand new grandchild. He was born and raised in Philadelphia, attended the College of the Holy Cross in Massachusetts, and went on to Princeton for his graduate work in the Theological School. He then moved west to the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley for his Ph.D. He initially devoted his life to being a theologian scholar in the area of ethics, went on to consult for businesses and institutions, and taught ethics in the Georgetown University School of Business.

"I've always been interested in the everyday reality of how values and beliefs translate into everyday actions," he said. "My decisions and choices are a matter of moral integrity. My moral compass is important to me. [I make sure that] my actions and my decisions are in line with my values."

His scholarly interests expanded to the choices organizations and institutions make. "That's what led me to administration eventually," he explained. He became dean of students

and vice president for student affairs at Georgetown before taking the helm at the Graduate Theological Union, an institution that does academic theological research.

A Roman Catholic, Donahue has always been involved in religious pluralism, and acknowledges that we are living in a world with a variety of ways and beliefs. Even if Saint Mary's is very much a Catholic institution, he says it is also a pluralistic one, and being Catholic at the college means bringing the insights of this tradition to bear on the evolving realities of higher education.


In preparing for the future, Donahue is working on the college's next strategic plan. He does not see the number of students increasing dramatically, but says some programs like the School of Business and the Executive MBA program are growing and represent an enormous opportunity. The School of Education is also growing. "The world of education is a changing landscape, and we are careful about evolving our curriculum appropriately," he says. Staff is also working on a master plan in partnership with the town.

Donahue's job at Georgetown University included a town/gown relationship with Washington D.C., and says the same principles for a good relationship apply here: trusting one another, having integrity on all sides, and being willing to find appropriate levels of compromise. He knows that there are multiple interests at play and is aware of the distrust that field lights, noise and parking issues have created with some neighbors. "I want to win that back by being a credible partner," he says, "but one interest cannot dictate the terms. Everyone needs to have a voice."

"I would like to think that most of the residents of Moraga see Saint Mary's as a resource," he adds. "I want to move away from the community seeing us as yet another developer. We want to be Lamorinda's college."

For Donahue, the mission of the college is to train thinkers and leaders.

"The set of skills the college is teaching – how to think, how to write, how to argue, and looking at the big questions of human existence – is taken by the students; they put them together and go off into the world to become leaders," says Donahue. "We are committed to enabling our students to discover who they are and what they can be, while providing them the tools to find a place in the working world. This is what the Lasallian tradition is about; students come first here."




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