

**Fall 2023 Semester Start-Up Remarks**  
**Dr. Michael S. Brophy**  
**8/22/23**

Welcome back or, if you're new to Hilbert, welcome to our Franciscan learning community. We begin the year with a renewed commitment to the students we serve, knowing that our student body is growing increasingly diverse. We are a college that recently celebrated our 65<sup>th</sup> anniversary. A college that has changed with the times, transitioning from a teacher training program for the Franciscan Sisters of Saint Joseph, to a women's college, to our present day setting as a coeducational institution.

A college that began as a two-year college that began offering four-year degrees in the 90's and graduate degrees a little over a decade ago. A college that began offering athletics in the 1970's as a two-year college and now offers 18 NCAA Division III teams. Where more than 40% of our traditional aged students compete on an intercollegiate level. Together with our nationally recognized academic programs, these teams enroll students from around the country and the world.

A college that has committed to delivering its degree programs in an online modality to students of all ages who study in many different time zones across the world. Still, our DNA remains the same. We, all of us here today, are entrusted to sustain the charism of the Franciscan Sisters of Saint Joseph in all we do, especially with those we serve each day, face-to-face and online, our students.

***Who we serve***

We serve first generation students, increasingly so, as our partnerships with the Buffalo Public Schools take root and flourish. Our *Higher Education Opportunity*, *Dual Enrollment*, *Liberty Partnership*, and *Say Yes* programs have increasingly diversified our campus in many positive ways, and we are proudly at the front of the class when it comes to making access for urban students.

We continue to grow our enrollments in well-established programs, like our law, justice, and security programs. In areas like psychology and accounting, that have been refreshed and taken online. And in newer areas like biology and drug and alcohol counseling.

We serve athletes. Along with our online and international initiatives, this third growth initiative is exceeding all expectations. Whether it be our new women's hockey program or our well-established baseball program, these programs are attracting student athlete from all over the country and the world.

Students trust us. They invest in us. They vote with their feet by enrolling at Hilbert. We have grown more than 25% over the last 24 months because students are finding us, they are enrolling, and they believe in us.

### ***How we do this***

In some respects, we follow the tried-and-true strategies of the Franciscan Sisters of Saint Joseph. We put students and their mentors, our faculty and staff, in settings where they acquire knowledge, develop higher order learning skills, and discern what is true.

The truth about humanity. The truth about the world around us. And the truth within ourselves. Our central questions: How do we learn? How do we apply the practical wisdom that grows within each one of us, each day, and within each interaction with others? These questions consume our creative energies. These energies create new learnings. Guiding it all is one central belief. We believe that everything in God's creation is sacred, especially the relationships we have with others.

And, yes, because we are a Franciscan institution, we also treasure the natural setting we're in. One in which we host the critters we share the campus with. And sometimes, we even import other friends to remind us of the care we can extend to all of god's creatures.

### ***How our students are changing***

We know the lives of our students have changed.

We know their phones are their most constant companion. Born in 2005, they more than likely played with their parents' phones or tablets in their highchairs. In grocery carts. On the beach. These phones may be their earliest memories.

And so have we adjusted. We redesigned our curriculum for our online learning management system, one of the main points of contact with our students. We provide laptops and textbooks to every student, ensuring equity for all. And now more than 80% of our students utilize digital textbooks.

We did exactly the right thing. Whether it was the pandemic or the momentum of the digital age, all students are now online students. Sure, some of them may live on campus. They may even come to class, but we know their orientation to learning and discovery is online. They believe anything can be found online. They expect everything they need to be available to them 24/7 on their phones. And that includes all of us. Our services. The information we impart. The wisdom that can be communicated online. The way we support their online communities.

While we are fully engaged in serving students online, we know that the value-added of being on campus and interacting with faculty is what we have done so well for so long. We know families make significant sacrifices for their children to be on campus, to live in our residence halls, to attend class, and to compete on the court or field.

We embrace the reality that students bring their online world into our classrooms with no second thoughts about how these two worlds battle for their attentions and by extension, how these two worlds challenge our abilities to multi-task.

We know many of our students identify themselves in ways and with labels that may not have even existed even a decade ago. Their race. Their beliefs. Their gender. Their worldview. We keep things simple at Hilbert. We are a Franciscan and Catholic community. All are welcome. So, naturally, we have no litmus test work for working here. We know your wisdom and your talents are going to make a difference this year.

Recently, in a *New York Times* op-ed, David Brooks observed that humanity is in the grips of a psychic pain. A pain that has grown over the last century, accelerated by technology. Accelerated by the pandemic. Feelings of loneliness and isolation for some. Rage and disaffectedness for others. Trauma has become an identity for many.

Hilbert College cannot possibly cure the ills of the world. But we have been brought here today to serve as role models to others. Other employees. Our students. External stakeholders. Our job is to graduate lay Franciscans. Graduates who are thoughtful, kind, and anticipating the needs of others. They have learned that appreciating the differences within a community prepares them to be effective and successful as they journey beyond our graduation ceremonies. As a faculty and as a staff, we embrace a higher order of learning: we know we will learn from working with others. We know we will be stronger.

### ***How we are changing***

Over the last five years, with the support of covid-related funding and investment from College reserves, we have weathered the enrollment and financial storm that still rages around our sector. More than 90 small private colleges have closed since 2016, 9 in New York State. That is not our fate. We are small but mighty, but we also have been savvy and sure-footed during a time when it feels like the College is constantly threading a needle in a hurricane. And this threading takes its toll. There may be times when you, like many of your colleagues across the state and across the country, have worried about the College's resources to support your work.

Looking back over the last 36 months we can see how well the College, led by our Board and the President's Council, has navigated these times. We preserved our workforce to the best of ability. We then added back to it when we could. We added academic and athletic programs. We upgraded facilities and technology. I have the joy of watching much of the activity across the College, and for those of you who are new and wonder how we have done this, I can tell you that each and every member of the Hilbert community has contributed to our turnaround.

No doubt, we still have our hands full with the many pressures facing small, faith-based schools. Later in the fall, I will present the traditional State of the College update regarding our enrollments, our financials, and our well-being, but you can begin the year knowing that we have hit most of our marks as the summer progressed.

This afternoon Senior Staff will lead conversation regarding the work that has been done across the College to apply the wisdom we drew from last year's undergraduate retention patterns. We certainly learned some lessons from our changing student profile, and we need everyone to support the new initiatives that have been developed to better support student success, especially among our emerging populations.

Another major development at the College is the Board's establishment of the Franciscan Services consortium. A two-college consortium of Hilbert College and Valley College, located in three states, that extends Hilbert's marketing reach into new markets and allows the College to begin sharing expenses with Valley.

This summer the senior staffs from Hilbert and Valley came together for a two-day retreat. At the end of that time, they had identified six areas of collaboration: enrollment, governmental resources, DEI, technology, finance, and human resources. This fall, Hilbert's President's Council will receive an update on current and future possible work between the Colleges. The more we work together, the more we discern the benefits of this new consortium. A consortium whose primary focus is to strengthen the financial position of both colleges.

### ***Why we do this***

Our students come to Hilbert, whether it be face-to-face or online, to study in our liberal arts tradition. At Hilbert we study the arts and sciences because we need to know more about what it means to be human. We are like many other liberal arts schools. But we take it to a higher level. As a Catholic college devoted to the dignity of the person, we reinforce the importance of how we interact with others. How we care for others. We develop our awareness of others and what makes them human. We care about each other, and we strive to model this in all we do, every day and for everyone.

Every morning we come to campus knowing that we are going to have to fight for the attention of our students. That we will have to find new ways to engage them. That we rely upon the College to provide us with the resources to do our job, whether it is teaching, fixing the air conditioning, tutoring, fund raising, leading student groups, or everything in-between.

We embrace the mission of the College, working on those things within our control that will improve our service to students. Just as our predecessors, the Franciscan Sister of Saint Joseph, did. And during their journey here at the College, the character of each student is developing and strengthening. Yes, we are in the character formation business.

For those of you that are new to our community: Welcome, you are about to experience a kindness and a thoughtfulness that I have found to be second to none. You will go home each evening, and I know there will be many times that you will be thinking of this kindness, regardless of the challenges you faced that day.