

SPONSORSHIP COVENANT

ALVERNIA UNIVERSITY AND THE BERNARDINE FRANCISCAN SISTERS

Purpose

1. For over fifty years the Bernardine Franciscan Sisters (hereafter “the Congregation”) and Alvernia University (hereafter “the University”) have worked together to enable their complementary missions to flourish. Founded in 1958 as a women’s college to prepare Bernardine Sisters for the mission of Catholic education, Alvernia is now recognized, regionally, nationally, and internationally, as a comprehensive, multi-campus university. The Congregation, as founding sponsor devoted to the mission of Jesus, and the University, as a major congregational ministry, are together dedicated to serving the Church and society.
2. In that spirit, the Congregation and the University (hereafter, “We”) desire to make a formal statement of mutual support, engagement and accountability (hereafter, the “Covenant”). We create this Covenant to nurture and sustain this most important partnership, building on the warm, positive, and collaborative relationship between the Sisters and the University.
3. This Covenant is intended to inspire and guide the Board of Trustees, University administration, and the Congregational Leadership Team, as well as the Alvernia and Bernardine Franciscan communities. As expressed in the Congregation’s mission statement, we aim “to create, together, communities of love and service in which we welcome all as sister or brother.”¹
4. This Covenant reflects our shared commitment to strengthen the educational mission and vision of Alvernia University, as a Franciscan² institution, work undertaken in the name of the Catholic Church and in service to women and men of diverse backgrounds and faiths.

Shared Principles

1. Through the Congregation’s sponsorship, Alvernia University is part of the mission of the Church and the Bernardine Franciscan Sisters’ mission to transform and heal the world, while addressing significant educational needs, especially those of the local and regional communities. Safe-guarding this mission for the future is the shared responsibility of the Congregation, Board, and University President.

¹ Excerpt from Bernardine Franciscan Sisters’ *Mission Statement*.

² “Franciscan” is understood as an expression of Catholic. It is presumed that Franciscan identity—in this document—indicates a heritage that is rooted in the Catholic church’s ministry performed by a Franciscan congregation of religious women, the Bernardine Franciscan Sisters.

2. To meet this responsibility, we seek to strengthen the sacred relationship between the University and its sponsoring Congregation. With that intent, we embrace values which reflect the spirit of our relationship.
 - i. The Congregation's Mission Statement expresses its purpose: to "strive to create communities of love and service wherever we are, we recognize the dignity and giftedness of each person, and we seek to live as models of justice, peace and reconciliation."³
 - ii. The University's Franciscan core values—Collegiality, Contemplation, Humility, Peacemaking, and Service—imparted by the Congregation, shape the promise of its Mission Statement: *Alvernia is a rigorous, caring, and inclusive learning community committed to academic excellence and to being and fostering broadly educated, life-long learners; reflective professionals and engaged citizens; and ethical leaders with moral courage.*⁴
3. In all that we do, the Congregation and University affirm a commitment to a) open, direct, and collegial communication ; b) a spirit of mutual trust, responsibility and accountability; and c) processes of respectful discernment and deliberation.

Mutual Commitment

1. This document is a voluntary commitment to share moral and spiritual obligations and is not intended to create new legal rights or abrogate civil or canonical legal processes.
2. All matters expressed in this Covenant are to be interpreted and handled in a manner that violate no legal requirements, and will not in any way adversely affect the independent status of the University or the rights and responsibilities of the respective parties under civil or canon law, the Articles of Incorporation or Bylaws of the University, nor the governing documents of the Bernardine Franciscan Sisters.

The Congregation will:

1. Seek to provide a model of dedication and excellence in the performance of their responsibilities and positions in the University, both as individuals and as a group.
2. Assist in designing and implementing Board education and development opportunities concerning the University's mission ; including more extensive opportunities for members of the Mission Effectiveness Committee, which will encompass learning, social interaction, and meaningful experiences.
3. Ensure in whatever ways possible that the University remains one of the congregation's priority ministries in the future, and seek to mission Sisters to the University in various capacities.
4. Practice a ministry of hospitality to the University community, in support of its Franciscan mission, and encourage the Congregation to continue a visible presence on the University's campuses through a variety of means and opportunities.

³ Excerpt from Bernardine Franciscan Sisters' *Mission Statement*.

⁴ Excerpt from Alvernia University *Mission Statement*.

5. Encourage the active engagement of Sister-Trustees in Board activities and campus life; encourage other Sisters, as they are able, to be involved, formally or informally, in University activities and campus life.
6. Participate, in collaboration with the Office of Campus Ministry, in ministry to the students and the University community, with particular attention to Franciscan spirituality.
7. Ensure regular communication with the Board Chair, the University President and the Mission Effectiveness Committee related to significant Congregational issues.
8. Engage in the process for identifying, recruiting and orienting new University trustees, both lay and Franciscan.
9. Facilitate communication of requests from the Board of Trustees related to matters which must be submitted to the *Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life (CICLSAL)* for approval.⁵
10. Ensure adequate and appropriate communication *within the Bernardine Franciscan community* related to Board and University issues.

The Board of Trustees will:

1. Seek to provide a model of dedication and excellence in the performance of their responsibilities and positions in the University, both as individuals and as a group.
2. Provide ongoing educational processes so as to ensure the Board's continuing awareness of the history, values, and charism of the founding Congregation and to keep the spirit of the Congregation in the forefront of their work.
3. Promote and ensure understanding and appreciation of the Franciscan mission and identity of the University--among the students, members of the Board of Trustees and the personnel of the University.
4. Promote and ensure the integration of mission and identity, as appropriate, in the University's curriculum, programs, policies and practices by allocation of appropriate resources.
5. Maintain an inclusive composition of membership that gives evidence of ecumenical, interfaith sensitivity.
6. Ensure regular communication with the Congregation, the University President and the Mission Effectiveness Committee related to significant Board issues.
7. Affirm the importance of reserved seats on the Board for members of the Congregation or their designees, as provided for in the Bylaws.

The University President will:

1. Seek to provide a model of dedication and excellence in the performance of his/her responsibilities and position in the University.
2. Ensure that the University is guided by *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, which states that the university "possesses [necessary] institutional autonomy . . . and guarantees its

⁵ This is the group in Rome that oversees religious congregations and their leaders. Its role would refer to permissions needed for certain financial transactions as they relate to the sponsorship of the University.

members academic freedom," even as its mission in Catholic higher education privileges "(a) the search for an integration of knowledge, (b) a dialogue between faith and reason, (c) an ethical concern, and (d) a theological perspective."⁶

3. Seek to ensure that "close personal and pastoral relationships exist between University and Church authorities," especially between the President and the local Bishop, "characterized by mutual trust, close and consistent cooperation and continuing dialogue."⁷
4. Provide opportunities for members of the administration, faculty, staff and students to develop and maintain awareness of the history, values, and charism of the founding Congregation and keep the spirit of the Congregation in the forefront of their work.
5. Ensure regular communication with Congregation, the Board Chair, and the Mission Effectiveness Committee related to significant University issues.
6. Maintain structures and practices within the University designed to promote the Franciscan and Catholic mission and identity of the University.
7. Actively seek members of the Bernardine Franciscan Sisters who are qualified for faculty, staff and administrative positions.
8. Ensure that the salaries and benefits of Sisters, as well as their responsibilities and obligations, will be commensurate with those of lay persons in like positions and will be paid to the Congregation.
9. Maintain spaces on campus for worship and reflection, in collaboration with the Congregation, as well as visible religious symbols and Franciscan art throughout campus sites, to aid in providing a material culture of faith.
10. Continue University participation as an active member of the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities and the Association of Franciscan Colleges and Universities and support its initiatives.

Implementation:

1. The Congregational Minister, Board Chair and University President will meet annually to discuss this Covenant and to share perspectives on the sponsorship relationship and the University's Franciscan identity.
2. The Congregational Minister, Board Chair and University President will communicate annually to their respective members the importance of this Covenant.
3. The Congregational Minister, Board of Trustees Chair, and University President will review this Covenant at least once every five (5) years. The parties can amend this Covenant in writing at any time upon the mutual agreement of the parties.

⁶ *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, I, A, 12 and 15.

⁷ *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, paragraph 28.

Appendix

History of the Charism

The heritage of Alvernia University and its foundational Franciscan values can be traced to the growth of numerous religious orders which owe their origin to the preaching of St. Francis of Assisi. The Bernardine Franciscan Sisters, founders and sponsors of Alvernia University, are members of the Third Order Regular of St. Francis.

As an agent of spiritual change in the Middle Ages, Francis of Assisi gave us a legacy that is timeless and universal. To be Franciscan is to respect the dignity of each human person and all creation; to be open to the world and its diversity of cultures, faiths, traditions, races, and peoples; to honor right relationships; and to seek peace through action for justice.

In the 13th century, the growth of the Franciscan Order was enriched by a desire for learning among the early friars and Franciscan scholars, including St. Anthony of Padua, St. Bonaventure and Blessed John Duns Scotus. A distinguishing trait of this tradition is the intellectual view described by saint and scholar Bonaventure as “knowledge joined with love.”⁸

Franciscan education recognizes the importance of learning and love as complementary realities. One expression of this distinctive aspect of Franciscan education in the United States began in 1894. Mother Veronica Grzedowska led a small group of Bernardine Sisters to this country to serve the people of St. Joseph's Parish in Mt. Carmel, Pennsylvania. Within a short time the group relocated to the city of Reading. Sacred Heart Convent was built in 1906. In 1926 St. Francis Orphanage was constructed and three decades later became the birthplace of Alvernia College (1958), later, Alvernia University (2008).

As pioneers in the field of Catholic education, the Bernardine Franciscan Sisters were part of the 20th century movement in the Catholic Church to serve poor and immigrant populations in America by founding and staffing schools and hospitals throughout the U.S. and abroad. Their inclusive embrace positioned the Congregation to move beyond the needs of the Polish settlements of the nineteenth century, anticipating Alvernia's present-day outreach to the under-served in Reading and elsewhere. Permanently embedded in the Congregation's mission is the commitment to work with and on behalf of the poor.⁹

This heritage has guided the University for nearly six decades. In recent years, the University community created revised Mission and Vision Statements, approved by the Board (2007). The Mission Statement reaffirms the University's dedication to its Franciscan core values

⁸ Excerpt from Alvernia University *Mission Statement*.

⁹ Excerpt from Bernardine Franciscan Sisters' *Mission Statement*.

and the accompanying educational ideal of “knowledge joined with love,” as it seeks to realize fully its Vision to be “a Distinctive Franciscan University.”

In the formulation of the University’s Strategic Plan (2007, Updated in 2011), the first priority focuses on Mission and Identity. Among initial action steps taken by the administration, The Franciscan Learning Community (FLC) was formed to develop a shared understanding of the University’s Franciscan heritage and to develop a pervasive program of mission education and integration. In their report to the Alvernia community, the FLC wrote: “We want to keep the Franciscan Tradition vibrantly alive, not just preserve it. In order for this to happen, the quality of relationship between Alvernia and the congregation is central.” The Bernardine Franciscan Sisters fully supported these initiatives and desired to participate in furthering the shared journey of the University and the Sisters.

In 2010-2012, at the invitation of the University’s President, the Congregational Leadership Team and select Board of Trustees members formed a “Sponsorship Learning Community” both to deepen their mutual understanding of the missions of the Congregation and the University and to advance their shared commitment to the core Franciscan values which guide these communities. This document is the direct outgrowth of that effort.