

Part 7: Alvernia University 2018

Alvernia's recent progress reflects both its steady growth and improvement during the last decade and the "greater expectations" established in the 2007 strategic plan. This success has, quite naturally, led the entire Alvernia Community--faculty and staff, students and alumni, trustees and community leaders, other friends and supporters--to have even greater expectations for our future.

What aspirations do we have for Alvernia in 2018? What are our hopes for this special place, our aspirations for the University and especially for the educational experience of our students . . . undergraduate and graduate; those in Reading, at our sites in Philadelphia and Pottsville, and those learning on-line; the pre-school children at our Alvernia Montessori School, professionals enrolled in non-credit training and development programs like Leadership Berks, retired adults enjoying the offerings of the Seniors College?

Communities thrive only when their individuals do, so we should expect the most from ourselves--our own supreme effort, the maximum use of our talents, humility about our personal accomplishments and great appreciation for those of others. Each member of the University community must *first* model our Franciscan core values of Service, Humility, Peacemaking, Contemplation, and Collegiality and the ideal of "knowledge joined with love," if Alvernia is to flourish and achieve our vision: "To Be A Distinctive Franciscan University, Committed to Personal and Social Transformation, Through Integrated, Community-Based, Inclusive, and Ethical Learning."

As we consider our aspirations for 2018, certainly the right starting point is the challenge to more fully realize our Mission and Vision Statements and to successfully achieve our strategic priorities and goals. Were we to do so, Alvernia will—quite literally-- look far different.

By 2018 we will have a much larger campus, building on the recent addition of the Upland Center, Angelica fields, new administrative services center on Morgantown Road, and partnerships with entities like the Ken Grill Pool Association and St. Anthony's Parish. Angelica Park will provide a magnificent entry experience leading to the new grand campus entrance on St. Bernardine Street shared with the Congregation. Hopefully, it will also be a major environmental destination and a catalyst for Alvernia's sustainability efforts. We will have made great progress in the development of an "East Campus," the area below the Sisters' property stretching down to Angelica Park. A recreation center and field house will be the central feature of this area, perhaps accompanied by some specialty town house residences and definitely including a practice field and ample parking.

With all of Bernardine Hall's classrooms and most in Francis Hall already renovated, future main campus development will focus on the addition of academic facilities, such as an expansion of the Franco Library and a much larger academic center in place of the Business/Communication building opposite Bernardine Hall. The Dr. Frank A. Franco Library and Learning Center will be a hub of student and campus activity, with a more comprehensive mission and scope of services befitting its full name. Creatively designed learning spaces and faculty development programs will better support the adaptive pedagogies needed for 21st

century students of diverse backgrounds and abilities. All of this will be needed to support highly regarded signature programs, such as in Nursing and the Health Sciences, perhaps in Early Childhood Education and other specialty areas, certainly in Leadership Programs and Ethics Education.

These and other programs will have strengthened the individual college-school identities, while underscoring the competitive “Alvernia Advantage” of being a close-knit, yet diverse, small university that emphasizes “Integrated, Community-Based, Inclusive, and Ethical Learning.” A more coherent general education program will have heightened the liberal arts dimension of Alvernia’s identity and strengthened the integration of students’ liberal arts and professional studies. Targeted new programs will also have been developed by entrepreneurial faculty and academic staff. Some programs may replace or modify existing offerings; some will build on areas of academic strength; some will take the University in new directions. The Faculty Excellence Program will combine endowed professorships and other forms of essential faculty support with high standards of expectation, especially for the quality of instruction. The faculty will have grown in size and stature, with many well known for their scholarly and professional accomplishments as well as for inspired teaching.

Alvernia’s full-time undergraduate enrollment will be more diverse and will have grown, but probably not as dramatically as in the last decade. Hopefully, enrollment will have increased primarily because of much improved student retention and transfer recruitment and a more modest increase in the number of new freshmen. The residential population on the main 48 acres will probably be at or close to capacity, with the eventual completion of Founders Village, but there may be other near-by housing options for students and new faculty. Living-learning communities and theme housing will be catalysts for a vibrant co-curricular program, and Alvernia athletes will be well known as scholars and servant leaders as well as conference champions.

Alvernia will have significantly improved our market position in all graduate and adult programs by ensuring that our programs and delivery systems are highly competitive, especially by increasing the use of on-line modalities. Strategic partnerships, such as the new nursing initiative developed in 2011 with the Reading Hospital, will have helped expand Alvernia’s graduate and other post-baccalaureate offerings. Both the Montessori School and Seniors College will be far better known and will keep campus buzzing even during summertime!

Alvernia’s prominent role in providing advanced degrees and specialized certifications to those seeking career advancement, along with its longstanding commitment to educational access for underserved populations, will be the cornerstones of its contributions to the quality of life of its City and County. But the University will have also enhanced ways that “the community is part of its curriculum,” by making community-based research and service-learning essential elements of its offerings. Strategic partnerships, such as a much expanded South Reading Youth Initiative, and other creative efforts to improve educational attainment and health care in Greater Reading, will have further reinforced Alvernia’s value as an essential community resource. Alvernia graduates will be well prepared to be agents of positive change in their communities. And graduates of Leadership Berks and Alvernia’s other leadership programs will join trustees and

other members of the Alvernia community in contributing greatly to the quality of life of our city and county.

And yet “Alvernia Nation” will in 2018 reach far beyond the boundaries of Berks County and even Pennsylvania. The Study Abroad and International Mission Programs, greatly expanded back in Fall 2011, will include annual programs in Brazil, the Dominican Republic, and Assisi, in partnership with the Bernardine Sisters, to complement initial sites in Europe, Africa, and Australia. Global perspectives will be far more integrated throughout the curriculum and co-curriculum, and the Diversity and Cross-Cultural Initiatives Plan will have spawned a range of additional improvements, including increased enrollment of underrepresented groups, especially from the local community. The University will be well established as a major cultural and artistic resource locally, respected as a center for interfaith dialogue, with the O’Pake Institute and Holleran Center helping establish a national reputation for community engagement.

Reflecting Alvernia’s growing reputation regionally, and even nationally, alumni chapters will dot the East Coast and perhaps a few other locations. Alumni volunteers will be major partners with academic departments, career services, and admissions. They’ll also provide expanded leadership as trustees and faithful supporters of the fundraising efforts. However, the Board of Trustees will still attract top community leaders ardent about the University as an invaluable community resource and a strong, values-based academic institution.

Board and alumni leadership will have enabled the Alvernia to make steady progress with fundraising. The Alvernia Annual Fund, essential for keeping the University affordable for deserving students, will have doubled during the previous decade, both in participating donors and dollars contributed. Major campaign gifts will come from friends and alumni alike and include both capital support and endowment commitments.

The most compelling case for support will be the University’s deeply embedded and actively lived Franciscan heritage, with faithful sponsorship by the Bernardine Sisters and lay leadership from faculty, staff, and administrators passionately committed to the Mission. Franciscans on the Board, the Congregational Leadership Team, and the faculty and staff will contribute the “ministry of presence” as well as vital expertise in Franciscan Studies. Lay women and men throughout the campus, well prepared by the Mission Education Program and inspired by the Sisters, will be leaders in advancing the institution’s identity as a “Distinct Franciscan University.”

In 2018, as in past years, Alvernia graduates will themselves be distinctive. Broadly educated to be critical thinkers and creative problem solvers, they will be reflective professionals and engaged citizens. Respecting the dignity of all and committed to the common good, they will be open to the world and its diversity of peoples and be contributing members of their communities. Imbued with the Franciscan core values and the ideal of “knowledge joined with love,” they will be ethical leaders with moral courage. Alvernia graduates will in 2018, as today, do well and do good.