

## President of St. John's shakes up the status quo

By Monica Roman Gagnier / Journal staff writer

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St. John's College President Mark Roosevelt in his office. (Eddie Moore/Albuquerque Journal)

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Mark Roosevelt, president of St. John's College in Santa Fe, knows firsthand the heartbreak of closing a school.

When he was superintendent of Pittsburgh Public Schools from 2005-11, Roosevelt had to shutter about 30 public schools after the city's massive population loss. The big steel mills closed in the 1980s, and it took many years for Pittsburgh's economy to revive.

As Roosevelt sits in his office on the tranquil St. John's campus, surrounded by images of Abraham Lincoln, the scars from his Pittsburgh days are palpable.

"Do you realize that we're going to lose 200 small liberal arts colleges in the next 10 years?" is his opening gambit.

The underlying message is clear: St. John's won't be one of them, at least not on Roosevelt's watch.

In 2018, St. John's took the radical step of cutting its tuition for the 2019-20 academic year from \$52,000 to \$35,000 and saw a surge in applications. Its commitment to a classical education in an era in which learning to code is seen as the key to career success prompted The New York Times to dub the school "The Most Contrarian College in America."

A copy of the 2018 article hangs framed outside Roosevelt's office, ushering one into the inner chambers of the school's contrarian in chief.



An equatorial armillary sphere, designed and built by David Harber, was installed in September outside the Meem Library at St. John's College. (Courtesy of St. John's College)

Roosevelt is a curious mixture of opposites. A patrician who is a great-grandson of Theodore Roosevelt, he is plain-speaking and exudes a kind of toughness that seems at odds with the cloistered halls of academe. Indeed, one gets the feeling the Rough Rider's direct descendant doesn't care if people like him or not.

Still, St. John's is on a charm offensive. Roosevelt has decided that the college needs to do a better job of explaining its relevance in a world addicted to the selfie and the cellphone.

In the now-classic book, "Colleges That Change Lives," by Loren Pope, St. John's keeps company with such academic institutions as Whitman College of Walla Walla, Washington; Reed College of Portland, Oregon; and Antioch College of Yellow Springs, Ohio.

Before joining St. John's in 2016, Roosevelt was hired in 2011 to bring Antioch back to life. The private liberal arts college closed in 2008 for three years until a group of alumni joined forces to resurrect it.

While it may share a devotion to inquiry and free thought with other small liberal arts institutions, St. John's is an original. There simply isn't another college in the country like it.

There are no majors. There are no electives. There are no professors. Educators are known as "tutors" and each tutor has to teach the entire curriculum, which encompasses philosophy, literature, and the history of science and mathematics. There are no lecture classes.

St. John's in Santa Fe and its sister campus in Annapolis, Maryland, are cagey about their foreign language requirements. While the words "required" or "mandatory" aren't on the website, all students study Greek for two years and French for two years as part of the curriculum.

As Roosevelt himself said in his convocation speech to incoming students last week, "St. John's is as different from other small liberal arts schools – such as Middlebury, Pomona or Oberlin – as these schools are from the University of Texas or Ohio State."

There are no “trigger warnings” to protect students from the sometimes violent content of the Greek classics. There is little attempt to incorporate voices outside the white male-dominated canon of Western Civilization, though Frederick Douglass, Booker T. Washington and Jane Austen make the cut.

Diversity may be limited in its curriculum, but St. John's is committed to having an eclectic mix of backgrounds among its roughly 850 undergrads. Here's how the numbers stack up: 47% of the student body is female, 28% are people of color, 14% are international and 13% are the first generation in their family to attend college.

Just 12% of its students come from New Mexico, where students receive an automatic \$10,000 grant, which lowers the annual tuition from \$35,000 to \$25,000.

Some 21% of St. John's students receive Pell Grants, a federal program that gives low-income recipients financial aid that doesn't have to be paid back. More than 90% of students receive some form of financial aid, said Roosevelt.

Who are St. John's students? “They're seekers,” said Roosevelt. “They're willing to work much harder than the typical student. They want to understand why things are the way they are.”



Claire Motsinger, of Santa Fe, is a student at St. John's College, where she is working on her senior essay about Franz Kafka's “Description of a Struggle.”

Asked what she tells people when they ask what her major is, St. John's senior Claire Motsinger first laughs, then replies: “I say I'm studying philosophy, literature, the history of math and science of the Western canon.”

A Santa Fe native and a graduate of the New Mexico School for the Arts, Motsinger said she picked St. John's because she wanted “something academically rigorous” to balance her high school education, which emphasized sculpting and printmaking.

While at St. John's, Motsinger has had work-study jobs at the International Museum of Folk Art, as well as the Metropolitan Museum in New York, where she plans to work after she graduates in the spring.

Although St. John's doesn't have a swimming pool, it has an arts studio where Motsinger would work on the potter's wheel when she wasn't studying.

Although all St. John's undergrads study the same great books of Western civilization, seniors can break out of the curriculum if they wish with their senior essay. For her essay, Motsinger chose Franz Kafka's "Description of a Struggle."

Motsinger said she decided to attend St. John's because she wanted "quality over quantity."

In his welcoming speech to the incoming freshman last week, Roosevelt told students, "You will work very hard here. How different is this from many other schools? Just check out the recent book 'Academically Adrift,' which examines how little work college students actually do and how little they learn."

The book found that about a third of the 2,300 college incoming freshmen tested on measures such as critical thinking, analytic reasoning and other higher-level skills had made no gains in those areas when tested again as outgoing seniors.

Of course, not all students stick around St. John's once they realize what they've gotten themselves into. According to the website [collegetuitioncompare.com](http://collegetuitioncompare.com), the school's graduation rate is 64% within six years, versus 68% for private liberal arts colleges on average.

That's a number Roosevelt is focused on improving. He said that no St. John's student is allowed to drop out without him personally signing a permission slip.

Told about a restaurant employee in town who has dropped out of St. John's twice, Roosevelt asks, "Does he want to come back?" and jots the young man's name down.

He said St. John's has added mental health counselors and private tutors to prevent troubled students from dropping out, but lamented, "It's hard for some kids to ask for help."

While the tuition rollback in the 2019-20 academic year was viewed by many as a way to make St. John's more affordable, Roosevelt said it was actually a move to "increase transparency."

He points out that it's a well-known secret that colleges engage in obfuscation as they attempt to woo students into taking on the biggest financial obligation in their lives to date.

According to the Federal Reserve Bank of New York, outstanding student loan debt in the United States lies between \$902 billion and \$1 trillion, with around \$864 billion of this federal student loan debt.

Unlike many other forms of debt, federally backed student loans cannot be reduced or eliminated through bankruptcy. Unpaid student debt can be garnished from wages, tax refunds and even from Social Security.

By lowering tuition dramatically, Roosevelt said St. John's is attempting to avoid the game-playing that colleges engage in when they offer so-called merit-based scholarships.

To make up for the shortfall in tuition revenue, St. John's has stepped up its fundraising activity. At the same time it announced the tuition cut, it kicked off a \$300 million capital campaign and is closing in on its goal. According to the trade publication [insidehighered.com](http://insidehighered.com), more than \$1 million has come from gifts under \$5,000, a first for the school.

Roosevelt boasted that the donations coming will be used to help keep tuition down and improve the quality of education. "We're not going to build a swimming pool or a football stadium (there isn't a football team) or hire sushi chefs in the cafeteria," he said. "We're about education and critical thinking here, not great amenities in the dorms."

While St. John's classics-based education might not fit the vocational needs of some employers, it does provide a good springboard for post-graduate education. About 70% of "Johnnies," as they are known locally, will go on to graduate school.

According to statistics provided by St. John's, from 2005-14, the school ranked in the top 4% for all colleges and universities in the percentage of alumni getting Ph.D.s in the humanities, journalism, business, science and engineering.



In the humanities alone, St. John's ranks No. 1. Hey, who needs a football team, anyway?

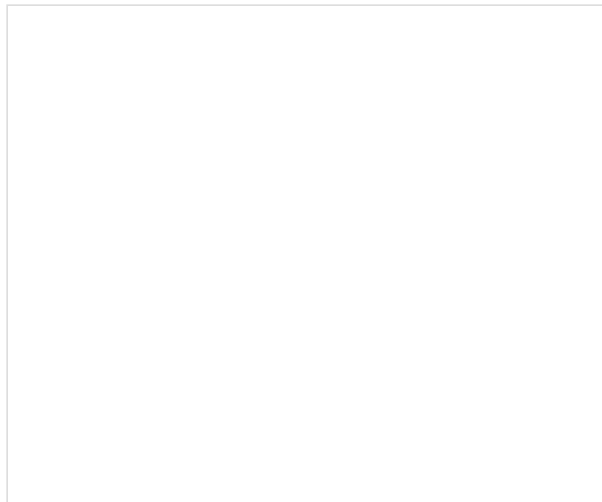
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