**President’s Convocation**

**Address of John J. Hurley**

**President of Canisius College**

**September 7, 2016**

**Montante Cultural Center**

I would like to welcome you all back to the start of a new academic year and I hope that everyone had a productive and enjoyable summer. To all of the new members of our Canisius community, I want to offer you a warm welcome to the college and my best wishes for a happy and fulfilling experience at Canisius.

I ask that we pause at the outset and recall two of our wonderful colleagues who passed away this summer. In July, Dr. Stan Arbeit, professor emeritus of marketing, died at the age of 90. And last month, Dr. Ann Wright, professor of Biology, passed away after a year-long battle with cancer. Could I ask us all to observe a moment of silence in their memory? [PAUSE] Thank you. As we know, Ann’s death comes very soon after our colleagues in Biology lost Dr. Susan Aronica last February, so the thoughts, prayers, and support of the Canisius community are especially with the Biology Department as they cope with these personal and professional losses. We remember today Stan and Ann with great fondness for their many contributions to Canisius and to their students.

As the fall semester begins, I know that enrollment is on everyone’s mind. We opened the fall semester with a freshman class of about 610 students, which is consistent with the past two years. The academic profile of the class is better than last year, as we saw an increase in applications but we doubled the number of disapproved students to drop our acceptance rate to 71%. Sixty-nine percent of our freshmen are living on campus. We also welcomed 122 transfer students to Canisius this fall which exceeded our goal and a larger percentage than expected elected on-campus housing. Overall, undergraduate enrollment stands at 2500, which is at budget, and we have nearly 1181 students in the residence halls, 30 more than the goal. We are at 104% of the graduate enrollment goal. The net result of all of this is that the budget that the Board of Trustees approved last spring appears manageable and achievable at this time.

I would like to make some observations about our recruitment and enrollment efforts. First, summer is becoming a very important time in the admissions cycle. As we know, colleges and universities use May 1 as a national deposit day. For the highly selective schools that have many more applicants than places in the class, they know what their class number will be on May 1. For the less selective schools, like Canisius, May 1 is but one measuring point. This year, our admissions counselors brought in an additional 74 freshmen - about 12% of the class – and 60 transfer students after May 1. That’s 134 students recruited after the so-called deadline of May 1. And members of the Griff Center, working hand in hand with our admissions staff, were able to reduce the number of cancellations after deposit by 50% over last year.

Second, when you add together the number of freshmen and transfers for a total number of 732, we find that new student enrollment is increasing year over year, while we’re holding the line on financial aid. This year we found that about half of the transfer population came out of community colleges and the rest from four year institutions, which is high. But this is not an accident or good luck: Our admissions counselors work very hard on the transfer market and it is paying off.

Third, I would stress that there is a strategy here. We are attempting to simultaneously maintain academic standards while we closely manage the financial aid budget. We have been able to hold or reduce the discount rate slightly but it has come somewhat at the expense of freshman head count.  But given the current discount number, we do not have room to let it drift higher in search of a larger freshman class, even if we thought that was desirable. The inescapable fact is that we continue to operate in a very competitive and price-sensitive market in which there are too many schools chasing too few students. And as I’ve noted, we have actually become more selective in our admissions, so we are eschewing the “easy fix” of simply relaxing admissions standards to increase enrollment. We will press on with this strategy while we continue to work on regional and international recruiting initiatives in the years ahead.

Finally, as you know, the college unveiled a new integrated marketing strategy and brand identity last fall which was widely accepted by all stakeholders as capturing the essence of Canisius and the compelling message we want to communicate to prospective students. Since the undergraduate admissions cycle is spread over three years – from the time a high school sophomore takes the PSAT to the moment the senior finally enrolls at their school of choice – it’s not possible to fully and accurately judge the impact of the new branding and marketing strategy with just one class. We’re off to a great start, but it needs to run through a full three-year recruitment cycle.

In the near term, we will have to adjust our budget expectations for the freshmen class to a target more in the range of 600 students until market conditions or results suggest otherwise. This means that our college-wide rightsizing initiatives are not yet complete and that we will need to continue to explore ways to strategically reduce our costs and generate new sources of revenue to balance the budget.

This summer was a busy one for Tom Ciminelli and our Facilities Maintenance staff. There were numerous office moves to coordinate, some permanent and some temporary, to accommodate renovations. We had major construction in Bagen Hall where we created new office space for the Student Records and Financial Services Center; in the library where we built kitchen, storage and office space for the Tim Horton’s operation; in the Koessler Athletic Center where the pool and surrounding area underwent a major reconstruction; and in the Winter Student Center where the kitchen venting system had a major overhaul. And my personal favorite is the new floor tile in the tunnel between Old Main and Horan O’Donnell. This had not been touched in over 50 years and looked it, so this is a welcome refresh to this heavily traveled space. I would like to salute Tom and his staff for their tireless efforts over many weeks this summer to implement these major projects and also get the campus ready for the start of the academic year.

Last year, we elected to not renew the college’s lease for the Canisius Center@Amherst space in the University Corporate Centre complex and as a result, moved the Center for Professional Development to the first floor of Science Hall this summer in a move that will save money and allow us to expand the vision of the CPD into a center for lifelong learning.

We welcome to Canisius two new academic deans, Dr. Beth Gill, to lead the College of Arts & Sciences, and Dr. Dan Borgia, to lead the Wehle School of Business. They arrived in July and are fully immersed in their work with Dr. Peg McCarthy in two critical schools of the college. We wish them the best in their new positions.

We also welcome a new men’s basketball coach, Reggie Witherspoon, who was hired in May after Coach Jim Baron unexpectedly retired. For those people who have followed the local basketball scene, you know that Coach Witherspoon had a productive 14 year run at the University at Buffalo before departing in 2013. We are thrilled to bring Reggie and his wife, Dawn, back to Buffalo and we know that he will do an outstanding job with the Canisius program.

And finally, we welcome to the Canisius Jesuit Community a new rector, Fr. Tom Slon. Fr. Slon is a native of Buffalo, actually Cheektowaga, and is a graduate of Canisius High School. While he does not hold a position with the college, he is responsible for the Jesuit Community and will serve on our Board of Trustees. I know that he will make it a point to be involved with all of the Jesuit works in the city of Buffalo – Canisius College, Canisius High School, the Nativity Miguel School, and also St. Michael’s Parish downtown.

We filed last week our monitoring report with the Middle States Commission on Higher Education, which was a required follow-up to the accreditation process that we completed during the 2014-15 academic year. This report will be available to the college community on the portal. In working with Dr. Peg McCarthy on this report over the summer, I was impressed with the substantial progress we had made over the past year since the Middle States visiting team rendered its final report. I must single out the contributions of Fr. Pat Lynch and Dr. Mark Meyer for their tireless efforts over the past year in the assessment of the college’s core curriculum. I know that many, many others participated in this monumental undertaking – the Core Curriculum Committee, the faculty who collected assessment data for their courses, and those who did the detail work of reviewing artifacts – but it was the dogged persistence of Fr. Lynch and Dr. Meyer who kept the process on track to a successful conclusion. In discussing the monitoring report and the work to be completed at last year’s Convocation, I had remarked, somewhat in jest, that “Failure is not an option.” Thank you, Fr. Lynch and Dr. Meyer, for heeding my words. Would you please rise and be recognized?

In May, our Board of Trustees approved the college’s new strategic plan, which we are calling ***Canisius 150: Excellence, Leadership, Jesuit***. I was very encouraged by the participation of all of the college’s stakeholders - faculty, staff, students, trustees, alumni – in the planning process. We now have a blueprint that will move the college forward toward a great celebration of its Sesquicentennial that we will kick off in the Fall of 2019, the planning for which will begin in earnest this year.

***Canisius 150*** arises in a context that I think we all know and understand well, but allow me to review how we have gotten to this place.

Our strategic assessment initiative began in Fall 2012 with the delivery of the Pappas Consulting report which provided us a comprehensive analysis of the entire college, from academics to business operations. The goals, of course, were to put the college on a solid financial footing and to begin to develop an institutional culture that would allow us to thrive in a period of great change and disruption – in the world and in higher education, in particular. Our initiative was driven, in my view, by four underlying principles or commitments.

First, our recognition that student revenues – tuition, fees, room & board – are the lifeblood of the college. Consequently, we need to constantly keep our students and their families in mind, make responsible decisions about our financial structure, and reduce cost wherever possible. And our focus on student revenues means that we must market the college aggressively and recruit and retain students.

Second, that we remain firmly committed to the value of the humanities in an undergraduate education, primarily because we see how they develop critical thinking, oral and written communication, and a strong understanding of ethics, all things which the world beyond Canisius prizes. We need to do this well, and collect data that proves we do it well. But, we also need to recognize there must be a payoff on a Canisius education and that our graduates must land jobs and embark on careers. So, what we do here – in the classroom, in student activities, in the residence halls, in Campus Ministry - must prepare our students for the world writ large. And we ignore this important concern at our peril.

Third, that we will remain faithful to our Catholic, Jesuit mission. We join with the worldwide Society of Jesus in focusing on a faith that does justice in the world. As we come to grips with the fact that there will be fewer Jesuits among us on the campus, we need to prepare lay faculty and staff as well as our Board of Trustees to assume responsibility for our Catholic, Jesuit mission.

Fourth, in all that we do, we need to be a well-run organization that makes disciplined, data-driven decisions, that promotes individual and institutional accountability, and that is committed to a culture of measurement and assessment.

We undertook a number of initiatives under the umbrella of the strategic assessment process as recommended in the Pappas Report – initiatives that were aimed at rightsizing the college and positioning us for the future. And in this, we have been successful. We reduced operating expenses by driving out waste and reducing the headcount to reflect the new reality in enrollment. We streamlined our operations. We refinanced $53 million of the college’s long term debt last fall, and we have reduced the amount of debt outstanding by $16 million over the past two years, strengthening our balance sheet and reducing annual interest expense in the process. Our endowment stood at $115 million at the end of July. In our budgeting, we have begun to set more realistic revenue goals, which we are meeting.

Against this backdrop, we spent the last year engaged in a new round of strategic planning for the college. We sought to create a plan that would take these principles and commitments and reflect them in a new roadmap for Canisius. That plan is driven by our vision to become a leading educational choice for those who seek innovative learning opportunities rooted in our Jesuit values and mission. We wanted our plan to reflect our promise to all of our students – graduate and undergraduate: to provide them with a challenging, engaging education that will enable them to succeed in a rapidly changing global society; to cultivate in our students the skills, habits of mind, and values to pursue successful professional careers and lead meaningful intellectual lives; to nurture in our students a sense of responsibility to create a more just, equitable, and sustainable world.

How will we do this? ***Canisius 150*** has four primary goals with several objectives. It is backed up by an ambitious operating plan for this current year that is aimed at making progress on each of the goals. The four primary goals:

1. **Pursuit of Academic Excellence through Diverse and Innovative Learning Opportunities**

The academic goal – and the center – of the plan will focus on program development and curricular revitalization. We used to talk about the four P’s of marketing: Product, Price, Promotion and Place. While our business school faculty will be sure to let me know that the 4 P’s are now 50-plus years old and perhaps outdated, I think it is still important to talk about what we offer here in terms of academic programs and the quality of the student experience, as we work on the “price” and “promotion” elements in enrollment management and marketing and communication: namely, branding, recruiting strategy and financial aid.

To that end, in my past two Convocation addresses, I have called on the faculty to embrace the review process in the Academic Program Board as an opportunity to explore curricular innovations and strengthen the academic program in every department. As our accreditation experience has taught us, this must involve assessment and data and it must be linked to learning goals at the college, school and department or program levels. This will be a special emphasis of our new deans, Drs. Gill and Borgia, and I would urge the academic departments to not approach this as just another bureaucratic task, but rather an opportunity to insure that the curriculum in every program meets the needs of a rapidly-changing world that is global and digital.

Our academic goal also means new program development. I expect to see shortly a proposal for a new masters program in Data Analytics and I thank the interdisciplinary committee of faculty from physics, mathematics and computer science, led by Drs. Dave Sheets, Leonid Khinkis and Rick Wall, who have been part of this initiative. But, we need to go further and identify other new programs that are responsive to the world around us.

We recognized in our planning process last year that experiential learning is a key part of the student experience at Canisius so we want to increase the number of opportunities available. We will seek to expand resources for scholarship, faculty development and faculty-student collaboration aimed at improving the student experience. Dr. McCarthy has already announced the creation of the IMPACT Center for Research, Innovation and Scholarship and the Excellence in Teaching Fellowship program as the first steps toward the realization of this objective.

Our focus on diverse and innovative learning opportunities drives us to develop a more coherent and comprehensive international strategy for Canisius. There were several excellent ideas generated in Dr. McCarthy’s affinity planning group that addressed this topic last year that will be part of this strategy. Additionally, we expect to announce shortly a collaboration with the University of Dayton at their China Institute in the Suzhou Province which will involve sending our students and perhaps faculty to China, and establishing a presence there and in other places in Asia from which we will recruit students to Canisius.

Finally, Dr. McCarthy has asked Dr. Borgia to review our approach to lifelong learning as reflected in the programs sponsored by the Center for Professional Development, the Women’s Business Center and the Office of Professional Studies. We would like to develop a more integrated and comprehensive approach to lifelong learning through the development of both credit and non-credit courses and programs. There are so many opportunities presented by the renaissance we are seeing in our region, but we also need to think beyond Buffalo, as much of this lifelong learning will occur in the online environment.

1. **Attract, Engage and Retain the best students who will form that lifelong connection with Canisius College**

Goal two addresses the recruitment, retention and engagement of students and developing in them a desire for a lifelong connection with Canisius. I’ve already spoken about the recruitment strategy. The rollout of the remaining parts of the You Can branding initiative will be part of this. As the academic year opens, you have seen new banners around campus reflecting the branding strategy. The website redesign and reconstruction is expected to be completed by the end of the Fall semester and go live in January.

Retention is equally important. After we developed a more integrated approach to retention in 2013, which led to the creation of the Griff Center for Academic Engagement, we saw an immediate uptick in the retention figure to 86%. But then it drifted down and we expect fall to fall retention for the 2015 freshman class to be in the 83% range. I am asking the college’s Retention Committee to look at our experience of the past three years and to make recommendations on additional initiatives we might undertake in this area. I would caution that there are probably no silver bullets. We know, for example, that the number of Pell-eligible students in the undergraduate population has grown from 30% to 40% in the past eight years and that single factor likely acts as a limit on how far we might go with our retention rate. But that’s not to suggest we can stand pat.

We will also pursue the development of deep relationships with and through our alumni, friends, and businesses that will both help our students get the best job opportunities and also increase philanthropic support for the college.

1. **Commit to real institutional effectiveness through planning, assessment and a focus on long-term sustainability**

Institutional effectiveness is one of the accreditation standards that a college must meet and we are addressing this through goal three of the plan. It means using this plan to drive our financial and operating plan for the college. Institutional effectiveness will also mean the development of a new facilities master plan to provide for our needs over the next decade. The completion of Science Hall remains the top priority. We anticipated making some major foundation asks in the past year, but that did not occur because of the foundations’ schedules, not our inability to submit proposals. I continue to work with our people in Institutional Advancement to bring this project to conclusion. In the meantime, there are other facilities needs that we must put on the drawing board and our planning process this year will identify and prioritize these.

Institutional effectiveness is more than just bricks and mortar. Linda Walleshauser joined us last year as our new associate vice president for human resources and compliance, and we have charged her with developing a human resources strategy for the college, an initiative that will help us recruit, retain and develop the best talent for Canisius. Linda has already established herself as a great point person on human resources issues across the academic and administrative divisions of the college. We plan to go further, starting with new engagement surveys for faculty and staff this year that will serve as a baseline for our program.

The policy manual project, which Linda is also coordinating, is well underway and our outside consultants have delivered first drafts of the nine volumes of the new manual. Our volume review teams are hard at work reviewing these. I continue to think that this will prove to be a very valuable exercise for the college. Already, in the areas in which I have been involved, I have gained new insights into best practices and absolute requirements that we need in our policies.

Both faculty and students have been calling for a better, more comprehensive approach to environmental issues in our operations on the campus, and ***Canisius 150*** calls for the development of a plan for a Green Canisius to guide our sustainability initiatives. We will be conducting some baseline assessments in the coming year to help us develop realistic goals for this plan.

1. **Deepen our Commitment to our Catholic and Jesuit Identity**

Our planning process provided us with an opportunity to reflect on our Catholic and Jesuit identity and how we might commit to that in new and creative ways as we approach our 150th anniversary. Among the 28 Jesuit colleges and universities in the United States, there is already underway a process for assessing an institution’s commitment to mission that is called the Mission Examen. It uses as its template a document published by the presidents of the 28 colleges and universities, *Some Characteristics of Jesuit Colleges and Universities*, which is available on the Association of Jesuit Colleges and Universities website. Canisius will go through this process at some point over the next few years.

As the campus knows, we lost our director of mission and identity, Fr. Michael Tunney, to Fairfield University over the summer. Dr. McCarthy has a search for his replacement underway and she hopes to have a candidate identified very soon. We will ask the director to develop a new operational plan for the office that will focus on expanding our programs for faculty and staff to deepen their understanding of the Jesuit tradition. That plan will also include a reexamination of the hiring for mission protocol that Fr. Tunney developed a few years back to determine how we might make this a more integral part of our human resources strategy.

Our focus on our Catholic and Jesuit identity includes two additional objectives that I would like to address in greater detail with you today.

Goal 4 of the plan includes an objective on diversity, and views our commitment to diversity as an outgrowth of our Catholic, Jesuit identity. Last year, Dr. McCarthy formed an affinity group dealing with the issue of diversity. I attended some of these meetings and the conversation is no doubt an important one. The strategic plan is aimed generally at embracing diversity in all its forms. We intend to look at our policies, our recruitment practices and our academic programs and ask ourselves whether our world here at Canisius truly embraces and celebrates diversity.

Diversity is a multi-faceted issue but there’s one part of the discussion that we need to single out for special attention and effort and that is racial diversity, particularly black-white issues. Last fall, on college campuses across the nation, protests about racial issues erupted. This was an outgrowth of the Ferguson, Missouri protests and the Black Lives Matter movement, but the protests went far beyond the issue of policing in black communities. This discussion seemed to ignite some smoldering concerns on campuses and we saw several issues conflated: university ties to individuals who owned slaves or promoted or supported segregation, the lack of diversity in university faculties, the white Euro-centric emphasis of university curricula, hate speech, and others relating generally to the place of the black student in the American university.

Campuses and campus leaders dealt with these matters in different ways, some successfully and some not so successfully. In some cases, there has been a backlash from the media or alumni/benefactors who have criticized the entire episode as an example of political correctness run amok in the academy. They have urged college leaders to stand firm and to refuse to knuckle under to attempts at revisionist history. And in some cases, alumni and benefactors have backed those sentiments up by withholding their financial support. As the questions were different on each campus, it has been difficult to draw general lessons from universities’ experiences. But, it’s clear that colleges and universities are not exempt from the broader discussion of race in America – a discussion that I think we desperately need to have - and I think that any attempt to characterize this as simply political correctness is woefully misguided.

At those campuses where there were no protests, it would perhaps be easy to conclude that everything was just fine and that the problems with race were “out there” and not here on our campus. Some of us at Canisius –including me - may have been lulled into thinking that this was the case. A meeting that I had with about 40 of our African American/Black students last spring convinced me otherwise. I asked for this meeting because I wanted to hear directly from the students about their perception of racial issues on the campus in the hopes that we could deal with concerns before they became flashpoints.

At this meeting, our students were respectful, candid, direct and challenging. They spoke about their experiences in personal terms and in many instances, their time at Canisius has included painful episodes. They described feelings of isolation, alienation and stereotyping. They regretted that the white majority at Canisius seemed unwilling to truly confront racial issues and to have constructive discussions inside and outside the classroom. They expressed a deep desire for people to get to know and understand them as individuals and not simply as black students.

They pointed out that in general, the curriculum at Canisius did not reflect much of the history of their people and that the faculty and staff was overwhelmingly white and in many cases, not sufficiently sensitive to or prepared to deal effectively with racial issues. They noted that in our marketing of the college, in student life, and in our programming, particularly student entertainment, we may accept racial diversity but we do not truly celebrate racial diversity.

I experienced a powerful ninety minutes with our students that night. I have spent the summer collecting my thoughts as to what I heard and planning how we might begin to deal with this at Canisius. I owe, and indeed we all owe, our students a response. In the days and weeks ahead, I will be announcing to the campus some initiatives to begin to facilitate a campus-wide conversation of these issues. There are several components that need to be addressed – academic, student life, student government, human resources, marketing, financial aid – so it may be a series of initiatives as opposed to a single grand strategy. But overall, I want to see us develop a campus culture in which these open and honest discussions occur, where concerns are surfaced and addressed appropriately. I want to develop a campus where all of our students of every color feel equal, valued and respected and where we truly embrace and celebrate diversity as a strength.

Each one of us has a part in this and I hope that you will participate in the campus conversation with a sensitivity, an openness, and a willingness to challenge your own perceptions. Our mission statement speaks to our commitment to a transformational education for our students. May this discussion be an integral part of that transformation!

The second objective in Goal 4 that I want to highlight is the call for the development of The New Buffalo Institute at Canisius College. As I said earlier, we stand with the Jesuits in focusing on the faith that does justice in the world. During the planning process last year, I was gratified to see college stakeholders expressing broad support for Canisius College’s commitment to social justice, especially in our local community. There was a desire to reexamine everything that the college is currently doing in the way of social outreach or service activities to see if we could better align our activities with the present and future needs of the community. At the same time, there were those who felt that we needed to look at all the new developments in the Buffalo community to see if there were academic programs, collaborations or other opportunities for Canisius to capitalize on in what is increasingly being known as the “New Buffalo.”

In its 146 years, Canisius has always viewed itself as an integral part of the city’s fabric and has embraced its role as a significant contributor to the progress of the city and the region. This has taken many forms over the decades. Currently, the college is involved in several outreach programs and initiatives. As we look at the opportunities and challenges in our community, this is the moment to recommit ourselves to justice in the world and to enhancing the integral role that Canisius plays in Greater Buffalo.

And so, ***Canisius 150*** calls for the development of The New Buffalo Institute at Canisius College. This Institute will be a vehicle for reorganizing, refocusing, and prioritizing existing connections and activities in the community and developing new initiatives to better align our efforts with community needs and priorities. We see this initiative as inspired by our mission as a Catholic and Jesuit university and we want to see our commitment to social justice and to the good of our community find expression in new and creative ways. We also see this initiative as a more focused effort to identify new ways in which Canisius can participate in and contribute to the opportunities that will be created in the New Buffalo economy. This will be a source of new academic programs, new sources of students, and stronger connections between Canisius and the community.

Within the next week or so, I will publish to our Strategic Planning Committee and to some external stakeholders of the college a whitepaper that will serve as the initial planning document for The New Buffalo Institute. I will be working with a subcommittee of the Strategic Planning Committee and some others to do the first stage of planning for the Institute and I welcome the participation of others from across the campus in this important new initiative.

In conclusion, I wish you all the best in all of your endeavors this academic year. May we work together effectively to pursue the *Magis* and may Canisius emerge stronger, more vital and more important to this community we have called home since 1870. May God bless all of you in your work this year and may God bless Canisius College!