

At heart of secular university, St. Joseph's College eyes evangelization opportunities

As St. Joseph's College in Edmonton looks to the future, a top priority is emerging.

The Catholic college, affiliated with the University of Alberta, has to a better job of tooting its own horn.

"We have not been good, over the last 92 years of the college's existence, at promoting ourselves," Rev. Terry Kersch, president of St. Joseph's College, said Nov. 21 as it launched its five-year strategic plan. "There are people that walk by this building for 20 years and they think it's a seminary."

Unlike most Catholic colleges and universities worldwide, which are stand-alone entities, St. Joseph's College is part of a uniquely Canadian model that began with the University of St. Michael's College – affiliated with the University of Toronto – and was expanded across Canada by the Congregation of St. Basil.

Located on the U of A campus, in the heart of a secular environment, St. Joe's College focuses on the Catholic intellectual tradition.

"This an opportunity for evangelization," Kersch said. "There's one thing we cannot develop and that's a ghetto mentality. We're actually in the thick of things. We're in the trenches. We are at the heart of a secular university where we have the opportunity of expressing our diverse views."



Faith is discussed openly, unlike anywhere else on campus, says St. Joseph's College president Rev. Terry Kersch. Lincoln Ho, Grandin Media

St. Joseph's College operates as a type of faculty at the University of Alberta, running courses and programs. The students graduate with degrees from the U of A.

As of this week, the college had 2,402 enrolments. Its courses cover philosophy, theology, science and sport combined with a faith element.

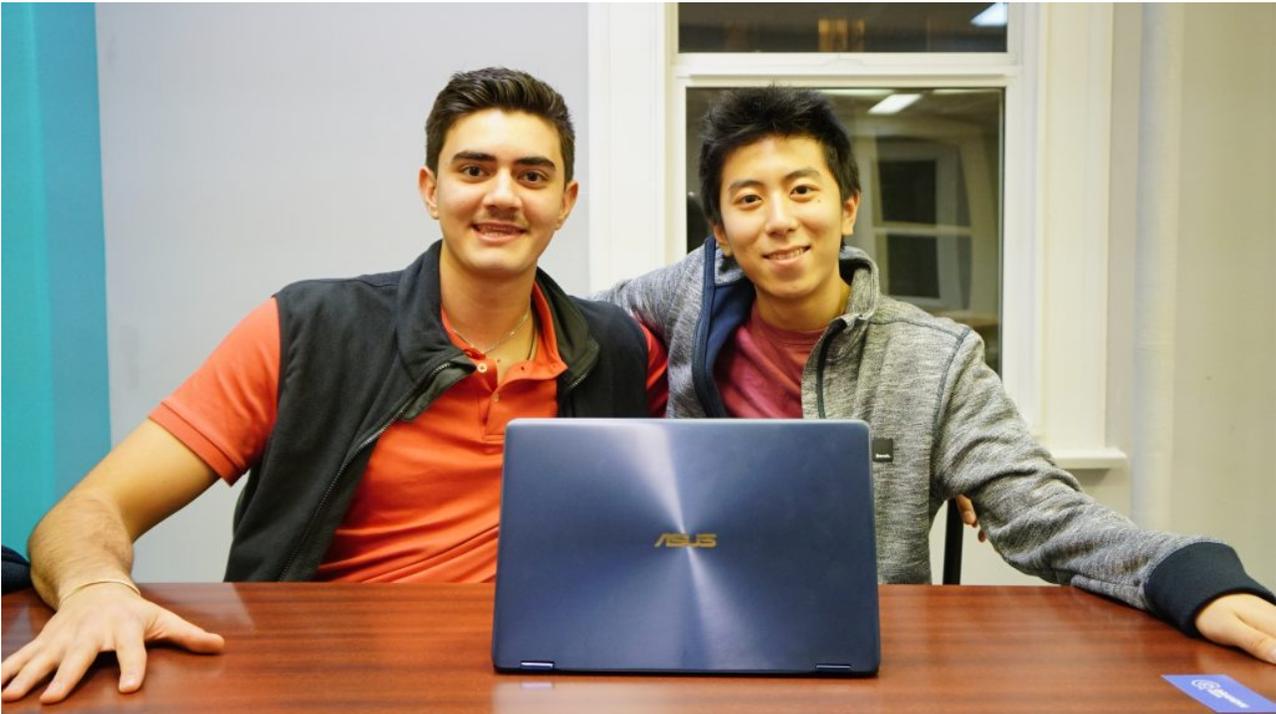
"There's no reason why you can't be a physicist and faithful at the same time," Kersch said, adding the college gives students an opportunity to discuss faith without reservation.

"You can't go to a classroom across the street and talk about God. You can talk about it here. Faith is a welcomed topic in this environment. There are no holds barred in discussions here, and not just for Catholics."

The college's new strategic plan outlines 59 objectives to be achieved, focusing on academic excellence, publicizing research, expanding opportunities for students, and engaging with the community. Now it's a matter of promoting that both on and off-campus. How that will be done is still to be determined.

"A lot of the mechanisms are in place. The courses are in place. The research is in place. It's a question of making it known," Kersch said.

"For me it's a question of reaching more people and more people being aware of the work that we do here."



Engineering students Sean Sander and Tom Zhao, both from Lethbridge, are living in residence at St. Joseph's College. Lincoln Ho, Grandin Media

Student Sean Sander agrees.

"I feel like St. Joe's passes along through word of mouth more often than not. That's how people find out about it," said Sander, who is studying chemical engineering at the U of A.

Sander is one of 63 students in the men's residence at St. Joseph's College. The college's women's residence has 284 students. The students live, eat, play sports and – for Catholic students – worship together.

"It's a very supportive community, just the sense of it being more than a residence," Sander said. "You come here and meet everyone and you become friends with everyone."

Sander said the college was recommended to him by his uncle who lived on campus in the 1980s. And Sander personally chose St. Joe's because it's Catholic.



Mass is celebrated regularly in the St. Joseph's College chapel. Lincoln Ho, Grandin Media

“Having the chapel here is handy come Saturday or Sunday Mass. I think that’s partly why this place is so excellent, with the underlying Catholicism,” he said. “It appeals to the whole person.”

Sander even recommended the college to his friend, Tom Zhao, who also lives in its residence.

“I feel more belonged here rather than other residence, where there are more than a couple of hundred students. I appreciate that about St. Joe’s,” said Zhao, who is also studying engineering and is an atheist.

“It doesn’t matter what religion you’re from. I just felt like I belong here.”

Asked what St. Joe’s College can do to promote itself, Zhao suggests the college should make it easier to find for students to apply by having a greater presence on the U of A website.

Already, Kersch said St. Joseph’s College now has three staff members in its Office of Advancement to promote the college and its research on campus and in the community.