



August 10, 2026

The Honorable Linda McMahon
Secretary of Education
U.S. Department of Education
400 Maryland Avenue, SW
Washington, D.C. 20202

Dear Secretary McMahon,

Thank you for your August 3 letter, “A National Call to Action to University Presidents and Governing Boards.” Saint Leo University welcomes this forthright conversation. We were founded in 1889 by Benedictine monks on a simple and enduring premise: that a university's first obligation is to form the whole person – intellectually, morally, and vocationally – in service of a community larger than itself. We offer this response in that spirit, and we are pleased to publish it prominently for our students, faculty, alumni, and the public we serve. Saint Leo is a private Catholic Benedictine university enrolling more than 10,000 students on our residential campus in Saint Leo, Florida, and through our online and regional programs nationwide. Our Benedictine values – excellence, community, respect, personal development, responsible stewardship, and integrity – have guided this institution for 137 years and continue to shape how we answer the questions you have posed.

1. Transparency and Merit in Admissions

Saint Leo publishes its admissions criteria openly, and our review process weighs academic preparation, demonstrated achievement, and fit with our mission of student-centered, values-based education. As we grow new pathways – including partnerships with Catholic secondary schools and military-connected populations – we are committed to holding every applicant, regardless of pathway, to the same transparent and merit-based standard.

2. Free Speech and Open Inquiry

The Rule of Saint Benedict calls the community to listen – to God, to one another, and to the stranger – before it speaks (*conversario*). That disposition of hospitality toward the free exchange of ideas, rather than its suppression, is the foundation of our approach to campus discourse. Saint Leo has not experienced the disruptive protest activity that has troubled some campuses nationally, and we intend to keep it that way: our students and faculty are expected to resolve disagreements through civil debate, not disruption, and our policies protect both the right to speak and the rights of others to learn, teach, and conduct research without interference.

3. Intellectual Pluralism and Academic Vitality

A Benedictine university is, by charism, a house of hospitality to differing minds; our tradition has never asked scholars to check their convictions at the door, and we do not intend to start. Saint Leo evaluates faculty on scholarly merit, teaching effectiveness, and service – not political affiliation – and we are strengthening our faculty accountability framework to ensure rigorous, viewpoint-diverse engagement across every discipline. Students, in turn, are assessed by faculty on the strength of their reasoning, not the views they hold. We believe a classroom that only ever agrees with itself is not doing its job, and we hold our departments to that standard.

4. Affordability, Value, and Student Outcomes

Saint Leo has been recognized nationally for its contribution to social mobility, and we take seriously our responsibility to deliver a degree that pays for itself. Our average level of scholarships makes us one of the most affordable private institutions in the state of Florida. We are actively working to contain the cost structure of a Saint Leo education, expand need- and merit-based aid, and align new academic programs – in nursing, cybersecurity, artificial intelligence, and applied fields – directly to occupations with strong regional and national demand, so that our students graduate prepared to repay their loans and build a career.

5. Academic Standards and Rigor in the Age of AI

Saint Leo is redesigning assessment and curriculum to ensure that artificial intelligence strengthens rather than substitutes for student learning. Through our partnership with IBM, we are training faculty to integrate AI literacy into coursework transparently, updating academic integrity policy for the realities of generative tools, and maintaining the small-class, mentorship-driven model that has always been core to our identity as a safeguard against the erosion of rigor.

6. Safeguarding Research Integrity from Malign Foreign Influence

Saint Leo's research portfolio is modest by design; our international engagements are principally academic and operational partnerships – dual-degree agreements, student exchange, and administrative service arrangements – rather than sponsored research. As a matter of policy, our international agreements are subject to transparency requirements and legal review, and are structured to guard against foreign partners directing curriculum, controlling data, or influencing governance. Our Cybersecurity programs carry a National Center of Academic Excellence in Cyber Defense (CAE-CD) designation from the National Security Agency, held jointly with the Department of Homeland Security, and these programs are explicitly protected from countries designated by the United States as "foreign adversaries," with internal protocols that include additional screening in place to safeguard intellectual property. This standing reflects a broader institutional history of trusted service to the federal government and the U.S. military: Saint Leo has operated degree programs on U.S. military installations since 1973, beginning at Avon Park and MacDill Air Force Base, and today maintains Education Centers on bases in multiple states, serving thousands of active-duty service members, veterans, and military families. We welcome continued federal guidance to ensure our safeguards keep pace with the complexity of global higher education.

7. Prioritizing American Interests

Saint Leo answers this call to action through concrete investment, not aspiration alone. We are expanding programming for military-connected and veteran students, building a pipeline from Catholic K-12 education into a Saint Leo degree, and growing academic offerings in cybersecurity and other fields tied directly to national workforce and security needs. More than 60 percent of our alumni base are veterans or active-duty military. We believe a university's patriotism is best expressed by producing graduates who strengthen the country's institutions, its workforce, and its civic life – and that has been Saint Leo's mission since 1889.

Secretary McMahon, I personally extend an invitation to you to visit Saint Leo's Tampa-area campus, meet with our faculty, staff, students, and Trustees, and experience not only what makes Saint Leo special but consider how we can collectively rethink the model, rebuild trust in American higher education, root our institutions in values of true intellectual diversity and critical thinking, and better contribute to the country's well-being. We are eager to work arm-in-arm with you to do so.

We appreciate the Department's decision to invite a genuine conversation rather than impose a single template, and we recognize that restoring public trust in higher education is a shared responsibility. Saint Leo looks forward to being judged by the outcomes described above, and we stand ready to be a constructive partner to the Department as this national dialogue continues.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Jim Burkee", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Jim Burkee, Ph.D.

President, Saint Leo University