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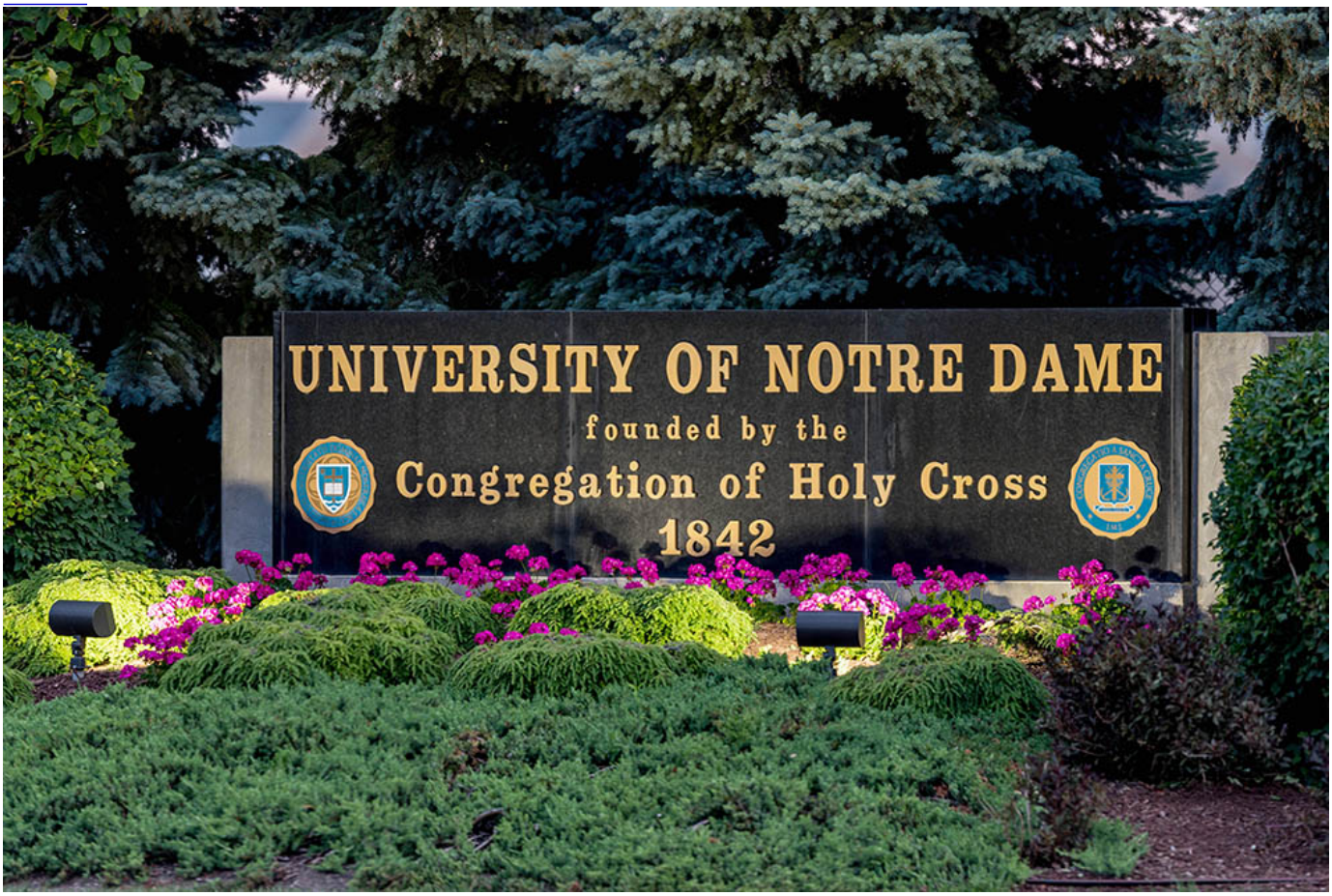

A 2017 photo shows the sign at the Douglas Road entrance to the University of Notre Dame in Indiana. (OSV News/University of Notre Dame/Matt Cashore)

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The University of Notre Dame announced on Jan. 23 that it will be launching a new academic initiative focused on studying and combating poverty. The new Poverty Initiative is supported by a $100 million gift from an alumni couple, the largest donation to an academic priority in Notre Dame's history, according to the university.

In a press release, the university said that the initiative will focus on three areas:

- Research on poverty;
- Student programming focused on forming graduates dedicated to anti-poverty efforts;
- Turning research into action "with partners in government and the nonprofit and corporate sectors to replicate proven programs."

Notre Dame already works on poverty research and program implementation through two academic centers, the Wilson Sheehan Lab for Economic Opportunities in the College of Arts and Letters and the Pulte Institute for Global Development at the Keough School of Global Affairs.

"It makes sense for Notre Dame to invest in being more impactful on issues related to poverty simply because we already have this strong foundation," Jim Sullivan, an economist who co-founded and directs the Wilson Sheehan Lab for Economic Opportunities, told NCR. Sullivan will lead the new Poverty Initiative.

The Lab for Economic Opportunities and the Pulte Institute have a history of partnering with service providers, including Goodwill Industries, Catholic Charities USA, Catholic Relief Services and the U.S. Agency for International Development.

Sullivan said that service providers often have two key questions for Notre Dame researchers: How are the needs of the people we serve best addressed and how can we build a body of evidence to demonstrate how effective our program is?

Without evidence, programs have a "substantial barrier to scaling the program and therefore scaling impact," Sullivan said.

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For Goodwill Industries' Excel Centers in Indiana, data from the Lab for Economic Opportunities was crucial for securing more funding and expanding. The tuition-free high schools that also provide support services for adults led to "a 40% increase in earnings even five years after graduation," Sullivan said.

With that evidence, the Lab for Economic Opportunities and the Excel Centers convinced the Arizona state legislature to change state law to allow the centers to operate in Arizona and secured $50 million from the state of Indiana to expand the centers there.

With the launch of the Poverty Initiative and the new funding, Sullivan said Notre Dame hopes to increase the number of nonprofits and funding agencies that the Lab for Economic Opportunities and the Pulte Institute can support. Notre Dame also hopes the Poverty Initiative can scale up the university's ability to disseminate the results of research to policymakers, service providers and foundations.

The new funding will also increase student engagement with anti-poverty work, including creating opportunities for students to work with the university's research and with nonprofit partners, Sullivan said.

He said there are also plans to build a curriculum to complement the initiative's other work.

"Students can take the courses that will give them the skills, so that ultimately they're the future leaders in the nonprofit sector, and as the future leaders of the nonprofit sector in providing these services to the poor, they understand the role of evidence," he said.

While Notre Dame is one of few U.S. universities to meet 100% of every student's demonstrated financial need through their financial aid and loans, the university enrolls disproportionately fewer low-income students than the general population of U.S. college students.

Thirteen percent of Notre Dame undergraduate students in the 2021-22 school year were awarded Pell grants, while 32% of U.S. undergraduate students in the same academic year received Pell grants.

The Poverty Initiative is part of Notre Dame's strategic framework, coming from goals articulated through its 10-year strategic planning process with an eye toward

2033.

The university also identifies financial accessibility as another goal. "To sustain the successes of the last generation, Notre Dame must consider financial aid strategies that will make it even more accessible to applicants from low-income backgrounds," the framework says.

"Notre Dame's Catholic mission gives a distinctive orientation to all we do, including our research, and nothing reflects that mission more powerfully than the Poverty Initiative," Holy Cross Fr. John Jenkins, the university's president, said in a statement.

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