



Signage at St. John's University in the Queens borough of New York City (Wikimedia Commons/StJohnHall, CC BY-SA 4.0)

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A partnership between St. John's University in Queens, New York, and United States Customs and Border Protection to inaugurate an immigration enforcement training center has sparked tensions among the university community.

A group of faculty, students and alumni argued in a May 16 petition that the collaboration threatens "the university's Catholic and Vincentian mission." As of May 29, it had 901 signers, including 93 faculty across six schools and university libraries. Many signatories remained anonymous.

The project, announced on May 6, will establish the Institute for Border Security and Intelligence studies at the university's Collins College of Professional Studies in coordination with CBP's New York Field Office. The center will train homeland security professionals and focus on "intelligence gathering and threats to the homeland."

The petition, delivered on May 28 to the university's president, the Rev. Brian J. Shanley, and Simon G. Møller, senior vice president for academic affairs, argues the partnership poses "grave ethical, legal and cultural concerns — especially in light of St. John's University's Catholic and Vincentian mission to serve poor, immigrant and socially marginalized people."

It argues Customs and Border Protection has a record of "harmful and unlawful enforcement practices" against immigrants and racially profiled communities and that the presence of CBP agents on campus could endanger the community.

"Refugees and migrants are our colleagues, classmates, neighbors, friends and family members. THEY are US, not abstractions or objects for careless academic study," reads the petition.

The petition lists recent high-profile arrests of international students by immigration officers over political speech and warns the partnership could undermine academic freedom and free speech on St. John's campus.

The petition also denounces a lack of transparency surrounding the establishment of the institute.

The signers demand the "immediate termination of the partnership" and the creation of a committee of students, staff and faculty charged with overseeing relationships between the university and the federal government.

On April 30, representatives of St. John's and New York's Customs and Border Protection office met to inaugurate the partnership in the university's St. Augustine Hall. The event was attended by Keith Cozine, university chair of the department of criminal justice and homeland security, who initiated the partnership.

"Education is an essential element for future and current CBP officers because it is the unknown problems that CBP officers deal with every day," he said during the event, according to St. John's website. "Our duty as an institute is to educate the current and future officers."

Through the new institute, students will work through real-time scenarios with New York's Customs and Border Protection officers, according to the university's website. The facility will also develop Customs and Border Protection internship pipelines for students, and CBP officers will have access to the university's Homeland Security Lab. The federal agency will also send border security and intelligence professionals to serve as speakers, mentors and faculty advisers at St. John's.

The partnership aims to equip students with "a prestigious industry partnership and provides faculty and students with an academic and professional space to advance knowledge in a critical domain for the security and well-being of the country," said Luca Landoli, dean of the Collins College of Professional Studies, during the event.

The program is the newest addition to St. John's lineup of law enforcement programs. The university offers a bachelor's degree in homeland security and a master's degree in homeland security and criminal justice leadership.

But for the petition signatories, the partnership clashes with St. John's efforts to uphold Catholic values on its campus.

"What does collaboration with border patrol say about our values?" said Raj Chetty, an associate professor at St. John's English department, in a press release.

"Especially with the Catholic Church electing Pope Leo. This pope and the late Pope Francis have both challenged anti-migrant cultures."

St. John's, a Catholic private college founded in 1870, aligns itself with the teachings of St. Vincent de Paul, a 16th-century French Catholic priest known for his dedication to the poor. In 1994, the university opened a Vincentian Center for Church and Society, encouraging academic projects related to social justice.

Though the partnership was probably in the works before the Trump administration took office, its announcement prompted anxiety among non-citizen members of the community in light of recent immigration policies, said Gary Mongiovi, a professor of economics who was part of the delegation that delivered the petition to the administration on May 28.

"We have students who are immigrants. We have faculty who are immigrants. ... I am sure that since Donald Trump got elected, they have been feeling a little bit anxious, and the announcement of this partnership can only be adding to their anxiety," he said.

For Afaf Nasher, a graduate of St. John's Collins College of Professional Studies who studied criminal justice and attended the university's law school, the collaboration contradicts St. John's faith-based mission and the Catholic Church's mission regarding marginalized populations.

"It's really a slap in the face in terms of the values that I was attracted to and that have always been at the center of my respect for the university," said Nasher, who is Muslim.

Nasher, who is the head of the Council on American-Islamic Relations' New York chapter, said she is concerned students will be taught to perpetuate CBP methods.

"CBP is directly responsible for the separation of families. It devastates lives, and St John's University purports to always stand on the side of those that are marginalized," she said. "Now St John's is going to be an institution which serves and even teaches people to take these actions."

Brian Browne, the St. John's University spokesperson, indicated in an email statement to Religion News Service that discussions for the partnership began under the "Biden Administration and continued during the Trump Administration."

Claims that the university would deviate from its mission through the partnership are "illogical and unfounded," wrote Browne. "This MOU [Memorandum of Understanding] is no different than countless others that St. John's pursues with public, private, and non-profit organizations to enhance the 200 diverse programs of study offered by the University," reads the statement. "The Institute aims to create a more proficient current and future border security workforce through innovative education and training."

Cozine did not respond to Religion News Service's request for comment.

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