


# Chapter 8

## A Case Study in Closing a University With Order and Dignity by Upholding Core Values

**Nancy H. Blattner**

 <https://orcid.org/0009-0005-2639-1227>

*Fontbonne University, USA*

**Meaghan Ong**

 <https://orcid.org/0009-0002-5483-5882>


*Fontbonne University, USA*

**Ann Spall**

 <https://orcid.org/0009-0004-6782-6656>

*Fontbonne University, USA*

**Adam Weyhaupt**

 <https://orcid.org/0009-0009-7296-7134>

*Mount Saint Mary's University, USA*

### ABSTRACT

*Fontbonne University, a small, Catholic university in suburban St. Louis, has struggled, like many similar tuition-dependent universities, with years of financial challenges. After attempts to either grow enrollment independently or partner with or merge into another university, the university announced in March 2024 that it no longer had the financial resources to continue its mission and would close in August 2025. The authors, who comprise the planning team for the closure, offer a glimpse into a university closure that was intentionally planned to provide the best*

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*possible outcomes for students and employees in alignment with the institution's mission. In this chapter, the authors share the background that brought Fontbonne University to the point of closure and provide a timeline of the process, highlighting the importance of early planning if closure is a possibility. The authors also describe the communication plan and the efforts taken to support students and employees. The chapter concludes with the lessons learned while closing a university with order and dignity.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Fontbonne University is a private, Catholic, co-educational liberal arts university located in suburban St. Louis. Founded in 1923 by the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet (CSJs), Fontbonne embraces the mission and values of its founders, opening its doors to all and encouraging personal concern for each member of the university community. Around the turn of the millennium, Fontbonne enrolled just under 3000 students, but by 2020 served approximately 1000 students.

On March 11, 2024, Fontbonne University announced its intention to cease operations in August 2025. After 102 years of serving the greater St. Louis area, the university recognized that it no longer had the financial ability to provide the excellent academic experience for which it had become known. During the months leading up to the final decision to close Fontbonne, members of the university's executive leadership team recognized several foundational principles that guided their work: the importance of early and complete planning of a potential closure well before it became a certainty; the necessity of providing care and support for the unique needs of students, staff, faculty and other affected parties from the time the announcement was made and throughout the time leading up to the university's closure, and the importance of operating with a sense of urgency once an institution recognizes that its financial fragility is unlikely to be offset by reductions in budgets and cannot be balanced by enrollment growth.

The story of Fontbonne's closure began, however, years before the announcement in March 2024. Fontbonne, like many other tuition-dependent private universities, had been financially challenged for decades, and in many ways, the story begins in the 1960s, when the university was primarily graduating women with degrees in the "helping" professions and when the university was staffed mostly by vowed religious women from its founding order. As the number of sisters declined, labor costs rose and there were too few wealthy alumni to philanthropically support the institution. Many attempts were made to bolster enrollment through the years: becoming a co-ed campus in 1971, offering graduate programs in 1975, growing athletic programming and adding an adult degree completion program in the 1990s. Archival

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