News



Fontbonne University is pictured in a July 2017 photo. (Wikimedia Commons/LittleT889, CC BY-SA 4.0 deed)

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Fontbonne University, the 100-year-old school in Clayton, Missouri — one of the nation's most diverse Catholic institutions of higher education — has announced it will close after the summer 2025 term, citing "many years of declining enrollments and a shrinking endowment."

The school, founded in St. Louis as a women's college by the Sisters of St. Joseph in 1923, will not admit a new freshman class this fall. Its property will be sold to Washington University in St. Louis, an elite private school nearby.

"This difficult decision was not made lightly. Despite the best efforts of faculty, staff, administration and our faithful supporters, we have faced challenges," Fontbonne president Nancy Blattner told faculty and staff on Monday, "including more than 15 years of enrollment decline heading into the enrollment cliff, the impact of COVID, and many other financial struggles impacting small, private institutions like ours across the nation."

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Founded as Carondelet College following World War I, the school has graduated more than 20,000 students over its history, serving an increasingly diverse student population over the years. As of 2021, more than a quarter of Fontbonne's 656 undergraduates were Black, but its share of Missouri's college population overall has fallen by more than half since 2009.

Even prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the university faced a number of financial struggles, some of which were made public in 2020. That year, a recently purchased expansion property was put up for sale shortly after the departure of J. Michael Pressimone as president. Blattner, the former dean for academic affairs at Fontbonne, was hired shortly thereafter.

Fontbonne is one of several Catholic colleges and universities serving significantly Black student populations to announce closure in recent years. One came in February, Ohio's Notre Dame College — which was also led by Pressimone, from 2020 until his abrupt departure last fall.

Under Blattner and amid celebrations of its centennial year, Fontbonne announced major budget cuts in November, including the loss of 21 programs and 19 jobs as part of a "retrenchment plan" meant to reduce expenses. The move was ultimately unsuccessful, with the board voting on Monday to cease operations.

"Despite our best efforts to cut costs, create new academic programs and launch athletic teams, the university is unable to recover from years of declining enrollments and budget deficits," Blattner said in a public video message.

"I appreciate your understanding during this most difficult time and request your prayers for members of our university community. "

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Current students at Fontbonne will be able to continue their studies at the school through summer 2025, as part of the purchase agreement with Washington University. Teach-out agreements with other schools are still being finalized, according to a university news release.

Given the troubling trends in small-college liberal arts education, local onlookers in the St. Louis region say they saw both the university closure and the Washington University acquisition as all but a fait accompli.

"We all knew it was just a matter of time before Fontbonne University closed," said higher education scholar Jonathan W. Solomon on social media. "We also knew that WashU was going to purchase the land."

"Tuition was lower than almost every college in the St. Louis Metro and smaller class sizes were beneficial to learning more," added Chris Stritzel, a St. Louis native and Fontbonne alum.

"Knowing it'll close and be eaten up by Washington University is depressing."