America’s longest serving college president, Dr. Norman C. Francis, celebrates his 44th Anniversary as the president of Xavier University of Louisiana in 2012.

On June 26, 1968, two months after the death of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Dr. Francis was appointed as the first lay president of Xavier University. At his presidential inauguration, the budget was under $20 million and enrollment fewer than 800 students. Today, Xavier’s student enrollment has surpassed the 3,400 mark, the operating budget exceeds $90 million, and the New Orleans skyline has been transformed thanks to the new Xavier buildings constructed during his tenure.

As president of the nation’s only historically Black and Catholic University, Xavier University has become nationally recognized as a leader in higher education. A born leader, he has received 40 honorary degrees from other universities, and at least 20 major awards in recognition of his leadership as well as his unselfish service to New Orleans and to the nation. Norman Francis has served as an advisor to eight U.S. presidential administrations - not only on education issues, but civil rights as well - in addition to serving on 54 boards and commissions. In 2006, he was recognized with the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the nation’s highest civilian award.

In 2009, he was named one of “America’s Best Leaders” by U.S. News Media Group and the Center for Public Leadership at Harvard’s Kennedy School of Government. He has served as host to presidents, popes, generals, heads of state, corporate executives, and world leaders. Named by his peers as one of the 100 most effective college and university leaders, Francis is often cited for his involvement in the community and his work to improve education.