

**CONFERENCE *for* MERCY  
HIGHER EDUCATION**

**MERCY HIGHER EDUCATION:  
CULTURE AND CHARACTERISTICS**

**WHITE PAPER  
FOR DISCUSSION**

**PENTECOST 2003**

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## CONFERENCE *for* MERCY HIGHER EDUCATION MERCY HIGHER EDUCATIONAL MINISTRY: CULTURE AND CHARACTERISTICS

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An invitation

At the request of the planning committee for the Mission Integration Gathering hosted by Mercyhurst College, Erie, PA, in the Spring of 2003, Maryanne Stevens, RSM, PhD, president of the College of Saint Mary, Omaha, NE, was invited to present a paper which addressed the persistent questions: What does it mean to be a Mercy college/university? And how will we know if we are truly faithful to this vision?

In organizing her thoughts, Dr. Stevens presented four assumptions regarding Mercy colleges/universities and a sample of tangible evidences of these characteristics. She invited the participants to engage in dialogue with her about the assumptions, the four interdependent characteristics, and the sampling of behavioral examples. An active, thoughtful discussion and working session followed.

What is presented here is the result of that intense and focused reflection on the core identity of a Mercy higher education institution. It is unfinished, truly *a work in progress*. It is being disseminated now to invite your input into the three areas: the assumptions, the four interlocking characteristics, and the behavioral characteristics.

We now invite you to reflect on the following questions:

- ❖ Having reviewed the working assumptions, to what extent do you support each of the four assumptions? What could be strengthened? Modified? Reconsidered?
- ❖ With the understanding that the four characteristics are inseparable, do you believe they truly capture the essence of the culture of a Mercy campus? Why or why not? What would you change? Add? Emphasize differently?
- ❖ Making the abstract qualities tangible is a creative, discerning process. Do you support the process itself? How might it be used in the future?

- ❖ Many of the cells are deliberately left blank, inviting contributions from boards, administration, faculty, students, and staff. Please feel free to offer your suggestions and comments to the on-going work of creating a living document.

It is our hope that by Pentecost of 2004, each campus and regional community will have had a chance for input into the finalization of this work. It will serve as a platform for other tasks that lie ahead as we strive to ensure our institutions are viable, vital expressions of the Mercy education charism.

Please send your comments to [mercyhighered@aol.com](mailto:mercyhighered@aol.com) (or fax to 773-783-2673) by March 1, 2004.

Judith A. Carey, RSM, Ph.D.

Chair

Mary Kathryn Grant., Ph.D.

Executive Director

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Pentecost 2003

## BACKGROUND

Inspired by the Gospel and moved by compassion for the plight of the poor in Dublin, especially the plight of women who were poor and outcast, Catherine McAuley took action in the early 1800s to remedy the situation. With a selfless spirit and her new found inheritance, she not only envisioned a way to raise up the status of women through education and training, but in doing so she also launched one of the grandest social services in the world.

Catherine opened the House of Mercy in 1827 as a school for young women, imparting to them the skills needed to earn a living and to provide for themselves, thereby lifting themselves out of poverty. The first year alone the school enrolled over 200 young girls. So significant and respected was her work in the field of education, that in the 1990s the Irish five pound note featured Catherine McAuley on one side and a school scene on the other. But, Catherine's work did not stop there; ever the entrepreneur, she also opened a laundry where the women could be employed as well as learn skills, and laundry itself would be a source of income to support some of her other works. Later, as other needs were identified, the "walking nuns" as the first Sisters of Mercy were called, branched out to serve the sick and dying.

Today Sisters of Mercy are found in almost all arenas of human services from housing and homeless shelters, to hospitals and hospices, to pastoral ministries and diocesan offices—to name but a few of the arenas where they minister. And the women and men who have been taught in Sisters of Mercy educational institutions carry this same commitment to service and social transformation, a hallmark of Mercy education.

From the first House of Mercy in Dublin where the Sisters of Mercy were founded, an international congregation of women religious committed to serving the poor, the sick, and uneducated eventually came into existence. The vision of Catherine McAuley inspired others in her day and once established, the congregation of the Sisters of Mercy literally spread throughout the world serving the needy and the uneducated in the spirit of the Gospel. In the United States alone, there are almost 5000 Sisters of Mercy and throughout the world there are approximately 15,000 Mercys engaged in healthcare, education, and social ministries.

Mercys serve in every continent and in almost every academic setting conceivable from village schools and pastoral centers in Peru, Argentina, the Philippines, Guam, Honduras—to name but a few of the locations where Sisters of Mercy together with

Mercy associates and Volunteer Corps serve. The Sisters of Mercy have NGO status in the United Nations; they have spearheaded migrant education and health services in the United States and education for the indigenous peoples in Australia and New Zealand. With a special concern for women and children, they sponsor shelters and training centers aimed at rescuing women and their families from poverty through education and social services.

They are no strangers to self-sacrifice and boldness when it comes to identifying and remedying need. While it would not have been common to use the language of systemic change in her day, Catherine's approach to social problems was two-fold: address the need and its cause. No history of social work would be complete without mention of Catherine McAuley and her vision to empower the poor through education as well as social services. Nor would any history of private education or healthcare in the United States be complete without recognizing the pioneering work in these fields by the Sisters of Mercy.

From the time they set foot on American shores in 1843, Sisters of Mercy established institutions of learning. Prominent among these educational institutions are 18 colleges and universities in 12 states; today Mercy higher education reaches 40,000 women and men. Courses of studies run the gamut from the more traditional studies, liberal arts, and professional preparation in education, nursing, social work, and health science to such areas of study as Peace and Justice, Profiling, Hospitality and Restaurant Management, Gerontology, Criminal Justice.

Among the first schools of nursing in the United States, many Mercy colleges are strong in the health sciences. Tracing back to the friendship of Florence Nightingale and Sister Mary Clare Moore, the profession of nursing owes much to the Sisters of Mercy and today that tradition is carried on in academic settings across the United States. Moreover, many Sisters of Mercy continue this educational mission in public and private colleges and universities in the United States and abroad. Additionally the Sisters of Mercy sponsor more than 40 secondary and elementary schools.

Bringing together faculty, administration, and sponsors to implement ways of working together to strengthen and insure the future of this educational ministry, the Conference for Mercy Higher Education was established in 2002 as the direct response to a needs assessment which surveyed the leadership of Mercy colleges and universities as well as the leadership of the sponsoring Sisters of Mercy Regional Communities. The creation of the Conference was a culmination of years of collaborative efforts such as the Mercy Higher Education Colloquium, Mercy Association of Scripture and Theologians, and various gatherings and interest groups.

As early as 1993, the Institute Leadership Conference, comprised of the presidents of all the Regional Communities, endorsed the following statement:

**The Institute of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas recognizes that higher education is integral to the mission of the Church and is an effective expression of our Mercy mission. This ministry expresses our commitment to the pursuit of truth and knowledge and to the furtherance of the social, political, economic and spiritual well being of the human community. We encourage collaboration among Mercy institutions, regional communities and sisters in this ministry.**

While each Mercy college and university has its own mission statement and articulated core values, four characteristics (respect, academic excellence/life long learning, compassion and justice, and body-mind-spirit) unmistakably define the formative culture of a Mercy campus.

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**WHITE PAPER FOR DISCUSSION**  
**BY**  
**MARYANN STEVENS, RSM, PHD**  
**PRESIDENT, COLLEGE OF SAINT MARY**

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**T**he ideas in this paper were formulated for the April 6, 2003 meeting of those responsible for mission integration in the colleges/universities sponsored by or affiliated with the Institute of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas. The purpose of the meeting was to identify whether and how we might assess the Mercy identity of the institutions. Those in attendance at the meeting helped to refine the insights.

The paper is divided into three parts: first, a series of assumptions; second, a set of characteristics that must be present in order to permit an institution to claim the name “Mercy;” and, third, a spectrum of behaviors that might evidence the characteristics. The latter is offered to help in assessment.

## ASSUMPTIONS

**Assumption #1:** Mercy Colleges/Universities will be sustained into the future in the Catholic tradition and the legacy of Mercy by dedicated men and women who have been resourced in the legacy of Catherine McAuley and the Sisters of Mercy and who are annealed in Catholic belief and practice in their personal and professional lives

**Assumption #2:** The imprint of Catherine McAuley and the Sisters of Mercy upon the Mercy Colleges/Universities will endure into the future only if the prevailing values of the Mercy charism are written into the continuing charter documents of the institutions monitored by a governing body dedicated to the alignment of Mercy values with behavioral indicators, policies, and integrated into decision making.

**Assumption #3:** The institutions collectively will have a better chance of sustaining their Mercy legacy as well as their Catholic identity if a model of sponsorship –that is, a model of governance providing for significant influence over the institutions— can be developed to encompass all the institutions.

Such a model embracing all the institutions will provide the synergy necessary to:

- a) Increase opportunities to deepen the understandings of mercy and justice for faculty and staff of all the institutions;
- b) Provide the power of moral suasion that comes from belonging to something greater than oneself;
- c) Provide a sense of identity as *Mercy* Colleges/Universities;
- d) Foster collaboration and shared use of resources across the “system”

**Assumption #4:** We must be very clear and concise about the values we want the institutions to embody. We cannot say we are about everything (motherhood and apple pie problem) but we must say we are about something!

## CULTURE MUST BE CATHOLIC

The culture of an institution of higher education associated with the Sisters of Mercy must first of all be Catholic. Catherine McAuley, the foundress of the Sisters of Mercy, was dedicated first to the mission of the church. *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* and other contemporary church documents can assist Catholic colleges and /universities with an understanding of that which must be present for the culture to be Catholic.

I would suggest the following as that which must be present for an entity to consider itself Catholic.<sup>1</sup> We must be careful here. The following characteristics are certainly present in some form in many of the world’s religions; the distinctiveness comes from the particular confluence of the characteristics, not the characteristics themselves. [A good example of such confluence is the flag: many flags are red, white, and blue and have stars or stripes; the U.S. flag, however, is distinctive not because of the elements themselves but because of the way these elements interact with one another.]

a) A Catholic institution must claim Jesus as the reason for its ministry. Catholicism claims Jesus as its beginning and continuing *raison de etre*. Jesus is about the “kingdom or reign of God.” There are many metaphors in the Scripture to describe the “kingdom or reign of God,” but the basic message is that following Jesus necessitates contributing to a world of no more war, no more tears, a new heaven and a new earth where all the tears are wiped away. Our education must be about calling people forth to examine their gifts and talents and calling forth a response in faithfulness to Jesus the Christ.

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<sup>1</sup> I am indebted to theologian Bernard Cooke’s early writings for many of these ideas.

- b) A Catholic institution must evidence a radical openness to truth. This is underscored in *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* and is essential to an institution of higher education. *Ex Corde* states, "Freedom in research and teaching is recognized and respected... so long as the rights of the individual and of the community are preserved within the confines of the truth and the common good..."
- c) A Catholic institution must evidence a "both/and" culture rather than an "either/or" culture. Catholicism has always claimed both scripture and tradition, both faith and good works, both conscience and law, etc. This stance can make life difficult because the stance can blur what is being asked or demanded by faithfulness. However, such a stance is the historical intuition of Catholicism.
- d) A Catholic institution must be attentive to sacrament and symbol and the normative prescriptions of the Church as Christ in time regarding the worlds of thought and action (e.g. the "sanctity of life" issues in health care professions programs).
- e) Finally, the Catholic institution must be attentive to the unity of the church. Church guidelines, the local bishop, etc and give public witness and primacy of place to the practices, liturgies, and rituals of the Church.

Anyone who says that Catholic and university are two antithetical terms has not done their historical homework.

### **For the culture to be *Mercy*....**

Within the culture of being Catholic then, what does *Mercy* add? That which is distinctive about the Sisters of Mercy within the church is their fourth vow obligating them to "service to the poor, sick, and ignorant."

The question becomes, "how does the fourth vow become operative and evident within an educational institution? There could be a variety of ways, e.g. ensuring that the very process of education encourages voice, no "banking" education, <sup>2</sup>ensuring just wages and benefits for every employee; ensuring service learning and attention to what systemic changes are necessary in society for all to thrive; ensuring scholarship opportunities for those on welfare, single mothers, those with no resources for educational financing; ensuring consciousness raising opportunities for faculty and staff to help them become more aware of those who have less, etc. However, this laundry list can become exhaustive and fuzzy. Rather, we need to develop specific characteristics of the culture of a Mercy institution and then provide a way to assess those characteristics.

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<sup>2</sup> Brazilian educator, Paulo Freire, juxtaposes "liberating education" with "banking education" in his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 1983), 67ff. In short, banking education resists dialogue and resists assisting students to become critical thinkers.



The following is offered as a beginning template.<sup>3</sup>

There are four characteristics of the culture of a Mercy institution of higher education beyond ensuring that the culture is Catholic. These are:

1. Regard for the dignity of the person
2. Academic Excellence and Life Long Learning
3. Education of the whole person: body, mind, spirit
4. Compassion and justice towards those with less, especially women and children.

Limiting the list to four or five elements allows for shaper focus. Additionally, it is critical to see these four characteristics as interdependent and interlocking. The first three would define any higher education institution; the extent to which compassion and mercy are viewed as integral components of the other three is in large measure what distinguishes the Mercy educational ministry. To assess the presence of these characteristics, we need very clear behavioral indicators of the characteristics.<sup>4</sup>

We invite you to reflect on these as expressions of the formative culture of a Mercy campus and to join in the dialogue to refine this effort.

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<sup>3</sup> The idea for a template and the initial contours of the one developed here was taken from the Core Values Assessment document of Catholic Health Initiatives, Denver, Colorado, 2002.

<sup>4</sup> A suggestion at the Erie Conference of those responsible for mission integration was to develop behavioral indicators of the characteristics and then to initiate a formal assessment of some kind resulting in a formal certification of an institution as a "Mercy institution," analogous to the kind of assessment colleges/universities do for accreditation of programs. The following adapted from the Baldrige Criteria for Assessment, provides a set of identifiers for each characteristic and a means of assessing the identifier

# REGARD FOR THE DIGNITY OF THE HUMAN PERSON WILL BE EVIDENCED BY

1. A culture in which a diversity of people and a diversity of points of view are welcomed, respected, and celebrated.
2. Honest, multi-directional communication
3. A spirit of collaboration and teamwork that is cultivated throughout the institution
4. Decision making that promotes the voice of those to be most affected by the decision.

*5 represents the highest level of fulfillment, 1 minimum.*

Identifier	5	4	3	2	1
<b>Diversity</b>	The College/ University has a systematic process in place for recruiting, selecting, retaining, educating and celebrating a diverse community including students, board members, faculty and staff. Leaders model that processes for integrating diverse perspectives are embedded in the culture and result in excellence and innovation.	<p>Focused efforts to recruit for diversity have resulted in a diverse student body and faculty/staff.</p> <p>Diversity education is a requirement for all students and for faculty/staff.</p> <p>Sensitivity to the cultural and religious needs of students has been integrated into the core curriculum.</p> <p>The college has a defined process for gathering insights and diverse perspectives.</p> <p>Celebrations of diversity are held regularly.</p>	<p>Focused efforts to recruit for diversity are underway.</p> <p>Diversity recognized as an asset and diversity education is planned. Events held at least annually.</p> <p>Leaders actively solicit diverse points of view from faculty, staff, students, wider community</p>	<p>Campus leaders affirm the value of diversity but few texts/speakers/ Faculty/staff evidence diverse points of view or backgrounds.</p> <p>Events to celebrate diversity not embedded in culture. Some processes to solicit diverse perspectives are evident but typically this is after decisions are made.</p>	<p>The college/ university community does not reflect the diversity of the community it serves and no focused effort has been made to recruit for diversity beyond entry-level jobs. Diversity celebrations are rare. Decisions are made without seeking out perspectives other than those from the dominant culture on campus.</p>
<b>Communication</b>	As a result of developing systematic communication processes and open, candid and truthful communication, staff, faculty, board members, alums and students have developed a high level of trust in the administration of the college.				There is little evidence that the college/university invests in ongoing communication with its constituents.

<b>Collaboration &amp; teamwork</b>	The college/ University has systems and processes in place to assure that collaboration and teamwork are understood and practiced as the norm for all activities in planning and decision-making.	Feedback from students, faculty, staff, board members and alumnae attest to successful implementation of plans resulting in quality education and some collaborative efforts in the community.	The college/ university has developed and communicated comprehensive plans to facilitate collaboration and teamwork among students, faculty, administration, staff, board members and alums.	College/university staff, students, faculty, alums, and board members can articulate how they and their input are at times included in decisions that affect their scope of responsibility	There is little evidence of collaboration and teamwork among departments and with students. Partnerships within the community have not been formed.
<b>Decision making</b>	Processes are in place to identify, solicit and incorporate the voices of those most affected by decisions and policies.				

# ACADEMIC EXCELLENCE/LIFE LONG LEARNING WILL BE EVIDENCED BY:

1. Regional accreditation and appropriate course of study accreditation

## 2. Continuous Assessment and Improvement Processes throughout the institution

3. A spirit of innovation throughout the institution

Identifier	5	4	3	2	1
<b>Accreditation</b>	The college/university displays a healthy synergy with the regional accreditation body. Faculty and staff are active participants in the improvement of higher education regionally and nationally.				Accreditation is looked upon as a tedious process, something to be endured and "passed," but not important to the overall educational enterprise.
<b>Continuous Assessment and Improvement</b>	The college/university enjoys pride in being known as a desirable place to work and study due to its attention to the signs of the times. Student satisfaction across the board is at the highest percentile.	Continuous improvement is guided by analysis of benchmark data, derived from surveys of students, faculty, staff, alums, board members and attention to the educational needs of the community.			There is little awareness of the dynamics and necessity of change within the college or university. There is resistance to change.
<b>Innovation</b>	The college/university demonstrates a spirit of innovation in effectively leading the campus to a total community model of learning. Leadership on the campus effectively leads to new opportunities and models of learning.	The college/university faculty, staff and administration demonstrate ingenuity in meeting the needs of the student community by creating opportunities and resources for new initiatives to promote learning. New initiatives are measured, evaluated, and are foundational to subsequent innovation.	Administration and faculty demonstrate a spirit of innovation by implementing new ideas, taking appropriate risks and making unpopular decisions when necessary to effect necessary change or improvement.	Administration and faculty intentionally work to create an environment in which all employees are encouraged to think innovatively and to try new ways of improving the education provided.	Administration, staff and faculty reflect an attitude of satisfaction and complacency with their current performance in the classroom environment and with the indicators of staff, student and faculty satisfaction.

## EDUCATION OF THE WHOLE PERSON: MIND, BODY, SPIRIT WILL BE EVIDENCED BY:

1. A culture recognized as one in which God is claimed as available and faithful
  
2. Integrity/ ethics
  
3. An understanding of the importance of relationships to one's education and to the meaning of work
  
4. The health consciousness of all engaged with the institution.

	5	4	3	2	1
<b>SPIRITUALITY</b>	Student and alum feedback provide evidence that attention to the spiritual dimension of persons and dedication to education of the whole person is perceived to be as important to education as professional program accreditation.	Students, faculty, staff, alums and board members experience an environment characterized by sensitivity and an understanding that persons are more than their work.			There is some evidence that meetings begin with prayer or reflective exercises. Existing religious symbols and artwork are not particularly striking nor inspiring.
<b>INTEGRITY/ COMMUNITY ETHICS</b>	Ethics is integrated into all courses as appropriate.				One course in professional ethics is a requirement within each major.
<b>MEANINGFUL WORK</b>					

<p><b>HEALTH CONSCIOUSNESS</b></p>	<p>Student, faculty, staff and alum feedback indicate that health consciousness permeates the institution; the fitness center is well used by more than the athletic teams; the dining service provides healthy meals and snacks. Safety is stressed throughout the campus.</p>		<p>Policies and processes are in place to assist students/faculty and staff with work/life balance. Safety policies in laboratories, maintenance areas, etc. are available.</p>		<p>No one talks about or seems particularly concerned about the health of the next generation. Safety policies or procedures are not evident.</p>
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**MERCY AND JUSTICE ESPECIALLY TOWARDS  
THOSE MOST MARGINALIZED BY SOCIETY WILL  
BE EVIDENT THROUGH**

1. Scholarship Programs that reach out to the disenfranchised
2. Service Learning as characteristic of courses in all disciplines
3. A culture in which all resources – human, financial and material – are treated as gifts to be treasured

	5	4	3	2	1
<b>SCHOLARSHIP OUTREACH TO THE DISENFRANCHISED</b>			All faculty are engaged in identifying and resourcing students needing assistance of any sort to successfully complete academic programs.		Appropriate assistance in student aid, placement and academic advising of disenfranchised students is successful in ensuring academic success.
<b>SERVICE LEARNING</b>	There is a systemic approach to service learning throughout the curriculum and over all four years.		All students must participate in a minimum of one service learning course a semester.		Community service days have been converted into service learning experiences.
<b>STEWARDSHIP</b>					Recycling and reduction in use of scarce and valuable resources is promoted and encouraged.

## CONFERENCE *for* MERCY HIGHER EDUCATION

*Please complete the following feedback form and return to the address below so that your input may shape the final version of this white paper.*

### Questions for Reflection and Feedback

Having reviewed the working assumptions, to what extent do you support each of the four assumptions? What could be strengthened? Modified? Reconsidered?

With the understanding that the four characteristics are inseparable, do you believe they truly capture the essence of the culture of a Mercy campus? Why or why not? What would you change? Add? Emphasize differently?

Making the abstract qualities tangible is a creative, discerning process. Do you support the process itself? How might it be used in the future?

Many of the cells are deliberately left blank, inviting contributions from boards, administration, faculty, students, and staff. Please feel free to offer your suggestions and comments to the on-going work of creating a living document.

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