

From reflection to informed action

Refreshing the Mount Mary strategic plan 2011 - 2016

In August I asked our Mount Mary community to join me in exploring how to update, refresh, and extend our strategic plan. And I shared a reflective essay considering some of the challenges and opportunities that Mount Mary today faces. You'll also recall that I urged everyone in our community to ask challenging, even uncomfortable questions about the future; to be tough-minded and clear-eyed about our strengths and also about our shortcomings; and to be open. What did I hope would emerge? An actionable set of aspirations anchored by achievable goals and objectives.

I took this call to action very much to heart. I have asked myself some of the hard questions and been open to facing not only where Mount Mary stands today but the "what-ifs" and the "why-nots" that can expand thinking about the future. Now I want to share with you some of that thinking and also the outcomes of our strategic planning discussions so far through the process that we've dubbed *Operation Refresh*.

To give you insight into what follows, here is some of my vision for our Mount Mary. I believe passionately in the College's mission, and I envision for us a trajectory that over the coming years takes Mount Mary from good to great. I will work with partners throughout the College to integrate leadership for social justice throughout the undergraduate and graduate curriculums and student life. Our College will serve as a living example of transforming lives in pursuit of social justice. We will be recognized as a national example of producing values-based graduates and servant-leaders for the 21st century. We will emerge as a model for balancing access to higher education with academic rigor that holds to a true north of excellence and achievement.

The Starting Point

Over the past two years Mount Mary College built significant momentum with tangible success: enrollment gains, financial reserves, and new academic programming. While we celebrate that success and the hard work of all those that contributed to it, we also are cognizant of the challenges ahead.

- How can we extend and enlarge that momentum?
- What will define success that moves us forward on mission?
- Where do we see opportunities and the potential to answer some of the pressing questions facing higher education today?

Mindful of these questions – and aware of the need to strongly position the College both for the Higher Learning Commission review over the next two years and for a comprehensive campaign to address resource demands – in July we began *Operation Refresh* to update our 2007 strategic plan. We launched a number of interactive, participatory platforms, bringing stakeholders together to review the College's challenges as well as its strengths and to put forward aspirations for Mount Mary's future. *Operation Refresh* has enabled us to identify strategic initiatives that align with

our mission and that actively shape the College as a leader for the Milwaukee region and for Catholic, women's education.

In sharing *Operation Refresh* outcomes to date, I want to begin by restating our unchanged Mount Mary values. Then I will summarize the major input themes and key findings that lead to strongly recommended strategic initiatives that can best guide our efforts over the next six years.

Enduring Values

Informally referred to as our "four C's," these core principles have – and will continue – to anchor our work. They delineate the character of Mount Mary at all levels from students to faculty, administrators, and staff. They are endorsed by our alumnae base and external stakeholders. Clearly they must stand as the bedrock of our refreshed strategic plan.

COMPETENCE

- Committing to excellence in teaching and learning with an emphasis on critical thinking.
- Integrating the liberal arts with career preparation.
- Enhancing professional excellence at the graduate level.

COMMUNITY

- Developing a learning environment founded on the spirit of the School Sisters of Notre Dame (SSND), a community of women rooted in the Catholic tradition.
- Promoting a diverse learning community, which is inspired by the SSND witness to unity in a divided world.
- Working in partnership with local, national and global organizations.

COMPASSION

- Promoting a deep sense of social justice arising from sensitivity to moral values and Christian principles, since the SSND legacy is one which confronts with the gospel message those elements which impede human development and unity.

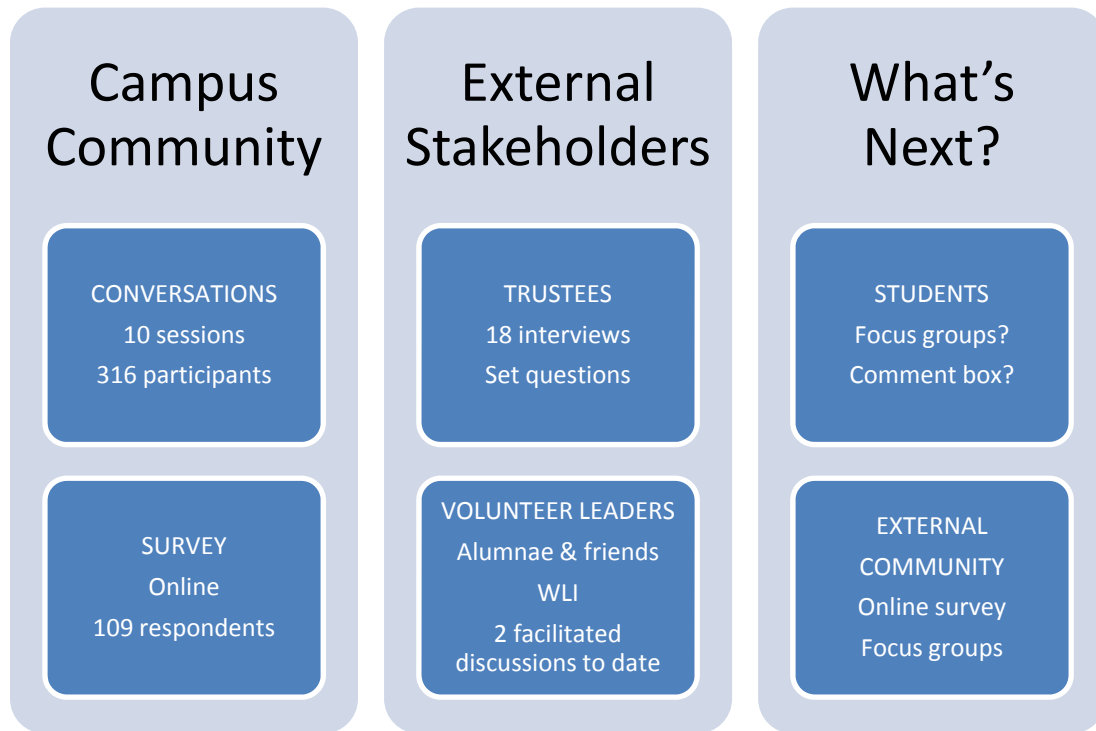
COMMITMENT

- Encouraging leadership and integrity because of the conviction that each individual is created in God's image and thus a person of dignity.
- Providing an environment for the development of the whole person because the SSND educational stance is grounded in a Christian vision of who the person is called to be and what the world is destined to become.

Operation Refresh – Process

Words, of course, are empty without action. Our four core principles served as unchanging touchstones while the dialogue of *Operation Refresh* enabled us to explore how, in the context of higher education in the 21st century, we can best enact those values and realize the vision they frame.

The chart below indicates the communication channels that informed our review and planning.



While, as the chart suggests, we will continue to seek input on Mount Mary's plan for the future, significant insights already are in hand.

What did we learn?

And, where should we be heading?

Operation Refresh – Common Themes across Stakeholder Groups

Across segments – trustees, faculty, administrators, staff – common focal points emerged:

- Addressing deferred maintenance. We heard repeatedly a call to initiate facilities' repair and upkeep in ways that are sustainable.
- Raising the visibility and recognition of the College. One respondent commented that "*we cannot be as modest as we were.*" We understand that we need to market Mount Mary – to tell our stories – far more vigorously and persuasively.
- Improving technology infrastructure. Stakeholders see such improvements, in tandem with training, as essential to excellence in teaching and learning rather than an amenity.

In reviewing the collated input – as well as attending many community conversations – I was struck by the positive energy and by an authentic mandate to "think big." In their interviews, a number of trustees challenged us to start planning now for where we want to be in 20 or 25 years.

Finally, all of our stakeholders shared a desire to focus on excellence at all levels: cleaning the classrooms as well as common areas and work spaces; how we deliver education; how we recruit students; and more. The campus survey confirmed this – 77.2% of the respondents indicated that excellence and quality of the educational experience were most important in terms of what they want for the College. Trustees spoke about a perceived “tug” between access and excellence, the fear that enabling one somehow compromises the other. We are more aware than ever of the need to demonstrate that our approach is not one of tradeoffs but rather one of excellence drawing in individuals and opening up their full potential.

Operation Refresh – Major Themes from Stakeholders

Six thematic areas emerged, five seen in earlier plans and one new area. For each, I will offer relevant framing in terms of larger trends (“the wide angle”), key insights from *Operation Refresh* (“what came into focus”), and recommendations on strategic initiatives that respond to both these (“visualizing our future”).

Academic Excellence

The wide angle –

The 21st century presents a dramatically new landscape for higher education: population shifts affecting college-age demographics, innovations that permeate rapidly evolving information modes and delivery, high schools struggling to adequately prepare a new generation for college-level work. We ignore this new world at our own peril. It is imperative to find ways to turn these changes and challenges to our advantage rather than allowing them to determine our future.

What came into focus –

Faculty quality and numbers were the dominant themes. Comments referred to the need to support professional development and to train and integrate part-time faculty into the Mount Mary community. We also heard a call to increase the percentage of full-time faculty and to manage workloads in ways that enable a focus on teaching.

Trustee, as well as survey, responses pointed to an additional theme – concern about the challenge of meeting the needs of a bimodal student population, that is, both high achievers and those who are underprepared for college coursework.

Visualizing our future –

We will demand educational excellence grounded in academic rigor that works in concert with enlarging access to higher learning for every individual with the potential and desire to succeed whatever the socioeconomic background.

As goals and objectives to support this strategic initiative, we recommend:

1. Become a national model for the conversion of academic access into academic excellence.
 - a. Fully implement the TRIO grant.
 - b. Grow the Honors program.
 - c. Increase scholarship support.

2. Build and support a strong faculty who embody and instill the highest academic standards and values.
 - a. Increase the percentage of credits taught by full-time faculty to 60%.
 - b. Maintain a high standard for the caliber of part-time faculty.
 - c. Create a compensation review process that examines both AAUP data and the Mount Mary environment and that ultimately positions the College to recruit and retain teacher-scholars.
3. Leverage the academic strengths of the institution with signature programs at both the undergraduate and graduate levels.
 - a. Build on the strength and recognized stature of Art & Design programs via state-of-the-art facilities, programs and techniques.
 - i. New Center for Art & Design
 - ii. Endowed chair in Art Therapy
 - b. Develop and expand other signature programs, e.g., Health Sciences, Business, and Education.
4. Expand experiential learning efforts that enable students to both gain “real world” experience and broaden their sense of self.
 - a. Expand study abroad opportunities.
 - b. Increase internships.
 - c. Offer more service learning opportunities.
 - d. Grow undergraduate research efforts.
5. Provide our teaching and learning community with state-of-the-art techniques and tools.
 - a. Expand online or hybrid curriculum.
 - b. Create “smart” classrooms.
 - c. Improve back office functions.
6. Explore extending the boundaries of the main campus by forming partnerships with other higher education institutions.

Student Success

The wide angle –

As noted above, the changing face of the college-age population coupled with the lack of quality preparation for post-secondary learning cannot be ignored as we determine how best to continue to realize the SSND mandate of transforming lives through education. Moreover, growing calls for outcome accountability place greater pressure on colleges to demonstrate value that cuts across socioeconomic lines while clearly leading to degree-completion and career outcomes.

What came into focus –

The dominant focus was support services for students – such as advising, career counseling, mentoring, and attention to development of the whole person. Many comments focused on how we might support educational access, both financially and academically and on creating vibrant experiences for our students with the core being a faith-based experience, both in and outside the classroom. One participant commented that “*if we can build success in all parts of their lives, academic success will follow.*”

Visualizing our future –

We will strengthen programs, services and support that foster growth – intellectual, spiritual, experiential – and that move individuals toward lives and careers of purposeful accomplishment and service.

As goals and objectives to support this strategic initiative, we recommend:

1. Expand academic advising and career services.
2. Grow scholarship resources – not merely aid to help recruit students but to ensure support that keeps pace over the course of an individual’s undergraduate or graduate career.
3. Ensure we have supportive – and appropriate – infrastructure such as housing and other facilities that are clean and learning-ready.
 - a. Explore housing opportunities for students attracted to academic programs with national reach/stature (e.g., art students who may want combined residential/studio space).
 - b. Consider graduate student housing.
4. Promote stronger student engagement through campus life, social opportunities, service, athletics, and experiential learning.
 - a. Enhance athletic facilities, particularly for tennis, softball, and soccer.
5. Imbue the precepts and practice of leadership for social justice throughout the student experience.
6. Create meaningful, viable protocols to assess our programs in terms of impact on student success and outcomes.
 - a. Develop the means to support our claim that we prepare individuals for leadership (how should we be assessing this?).
7. Integrate retention efforts throughout our programs and processes to increase graduation rates.
 - a. Assure that we admit students who have real potential for success with the appropriate support.
8. Support ethnic diversity.

Financial Vitality

The wide angle –

The volatile economic environment of recent years elevated concerns around the traditional higher education business model. Competition in the educational marketplace increased with a new range of educational options, from heavily marketed for-profit colleges to online courses. College tuition and fees more than quadrupled in comparison to inflation rates over the last quarter century. At the same time, we saw students’ financial needs increase and endowment values decline during a deep economic recession. In many ways the perfect storm – reduced prospective student means, external constraints on endowment growth, and public scrutiny around college degree costs – has been brewing over the past five years. Reliance primarily on tuition revenues no long will be a tenable approach for the balance sheets of colleges and universities.

What came into focus –

Survey results indicated a widespread awareness that our needs now – and most likely far into the future – outpace available resources. In fact, the top concern identified by survey respondents was a “lack of resources for what needs to be done.” Overall the

majority of comments focused on how we might diversify revenue sources through such initiatives as broadening the donor base, facilities' rentals, and continuing education programs. The campus community also wants, and will support, accountability and assessment measures around the financial viability of programs; support also was evident for building reserves to maintain any new buildings and for unforeseen expenses, including emergency scholarship aid to students.

Visualizing our future –

We will generate resource growth across a diversified portfolio that is stewarded in line with mission and that balances near-term demands with long-term viability.

As goals and objectives to support this strategic initiative, we recommend:

1. Grow and diversify our resources.
 - a. Grow charitable support.
 - i. Undertake a comprehensive campaign with priorities drawn from this strategic plan.
 - ii. Build a sustainable base of charitable support that continues post-campaign.
 - b. Grow revenues gained through continuing education, facilities' rental, and other auxiliary enterprises.
2. Strategically grow our enrollment.
3. Develop a business model that enables us to evaluate programs and make resource commitments based on objective criteria.

Campus Renewal

The wide angle –

Our business environment is global, interconnected, and “24 – 7.” Increasingly the educational environment must shape itself to those same parameters. Moreover, we recognize the responsibility to steward the campus envisioned and built by the SSNDs in ways that extend and animate their vision well into the future. In the competitive landscape of college options as well as for hiring and faculty retention, our infrastructure can either be a positive incentive to join the Mount Mary family or a deterrent.

What came into focus –

Deferred maintenance and ongoing upkeep emerged as top themes across campus community conversations, trustee interviews, and online survey responses. There are, certainly, many additional issues in terms of space utilization and appropriate infrastructure improvement. We heard a number of comments about child care facilities, the theater's future, and space that is not merely functional near-term but flexible over the long horizon.

Visualizing our future –

We will build an environment that maximizes physical resources in a mission-focused, sustainable way that facilitates the work of today's Mount Mary community & optimizes the right opportunities for future growth.

As goals and objectives to support this strategic initiative, we recommend:

1. Address deferred/ongoing maintenance and issues around the daily upkeep of facilities in ways that improve living and learning spaces.

2. Improve technology to enhance teaching and learning as well as to support the work of administration and staff.
 - a. Expand wireless capacity across the institution.
 - b. Increase the number of “smart” classrooms.
 - c. Improve phone system.
3. Repurpose spaces as needed.
 - a. Relocate and expand child care facilities.
 - b. Relocate and improve bookstore and other retail venues.

Community Impact

The wide angle –

The global, interconnected world alluded to above is changing not only how we build knowledge and deliver information – altering the physical needs of classrooms and campuses – but also the dynamics of organizational relations. Collaborative work – not merely within the academy but among nonprofits, colleges, the corporate sector, and government – now is the norm; and those collaborations often exhibit an entrepreneurial edge, drawing in expertise and ideas from nontraditional clusters of individuals and institutions.

What came into focus –

The top theme was finding ways to realize greater visibility and recognition for Mount Mary College. When asked what Mount Mary does less well than its competitors, the majority of trustees chose promoting the College and telling our story. Similarly during the campus community conversations the need to raise our visibility came up from many different perspectives. We need to build on and leverage our strengths, but we also need to be more ambitious. We should change our internal dialogue to be positive and focus on successes and “export” that success story vigorously. We also absolutely need to “get our own house in order” and “ready for guests,” another reference to deferred maintenance and upkeep.

Visualizing our future –

We will participate actively in greater Milwaukee’s social and economic renaissance in ways that align with the needs and aspirations of the community and reflect the mission of the College.

As goals and objectives to support this strategic initiative, we recommend:

1. Identify and implement ways to raise the visibility of Mount Mary in the community.
 - a. Increase marketing efforts to tell our story (more and better).
 - i. Develop website, print and other media (including emerging social media).
 - ii. Improve campus signage.
 - b. Build on what we are doing well, such as the Women’s Leadership Institute.
 - c. Appropriately acknowledge and celebrate the milestone of our 100th anniversary.
2. Create and promote platforms that bring people to campus.
 - a. Position the college as a place where people come to participate in important community conversations.

- b. Expand continuing education programs.
 - c. Increase summer camps.
 - d. Expand pre-college relationships, especially for high schools and middle schools that might be cultivated as “feeder” schools for Mount Mary.
3. Design and deploy “win win” projects with community partners in ways that integrate our curriculum with research and service learning and offer direct deliverables to the community.

Vibrant Community

The wide angle –

In today’s workplace, supporting the well-being and the development of employees is seen as essential both for organizational productivity and for recruitment and retention of a skilled work force. A high-quality environment and career support increasingly are far more than amenities; they can be critical factors in retaining a workforce that consistently meets key performance indicator targets.

What came into focus –

A new strategic area emerged in the *Operation Refresh* online survey, one focused on the workplace environment but also on the Mount Mary culture that sets a tenor and tone for all aspects of teaching and learning on our campus. The top themes were improving communication, internally as well as externally, and investing in people (e.g., compensation, professional development, adequate staffing).

Visualizing our future –

We will create an exemplary workplace and community of scholars and learners which at all levels actively promotes a deeply held understanding of social justice and the SSND charism.

As goals and objectives to support this strategic initiative, we recommend:

1. Enhance communication mechanisms across all levels of the College.
2. Launch wellness initiatives.
3. Supplement professional development opportunities.
4. Review and update salaries.
5. Identify and implement innovative ways to sustain and extend the SSND charism.

Conclusion

Have we answered all the questions? No.

But I am confident the Mount Mary community has identified that top tier so important for a strategic plan. The initiatives recommended are bold but achievable, responsive to Mount Mary stakeholders and designed for a long, successful future.

I welcome your feedback and continued input.

We have much work ahead of us. But I know that, together, we can build a shining future for Mount Mary College.