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**November 14, 2024**

## **Tri-Alpha Inauguration**

**President Kathleen A. Getz, Ph.D.**

Good afternoon, everyone!

“On behalf of the university, I am pleased and honored to accept this charter, and to support the establishment of this organization here and for other institutions to follow.”

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What an honor it is to stand before and with you today as we celebrate the inaugural induction of our First-Generation students and employees in the Tri-Alpha Honor Society. This is a moment of pride, joy, and shared accomplishment.

Like you, I was a First-Gen college student, as were my four sisters. We were raised by loving working-class parents who believed in the promise of a college education for their children, but – and I know I’m dating myself here – their rationale for us getting that education was “**just in case you ever have to work.**” If you’re too young to understand that notion – they just assumed that, as girls, we would all be stay-at-home mothers whose husbands would “bring home the bacon.” Back then, this was not an uncommon sentiment in rural Pennsylvania.

Times have changed, but my parents were right about the promise of a college education. Three of my sisters went on to pursue rewarding careers in teaching; one is vice president of a children’s hospital; and then there’s me – president of this wonderful university. Who would have thought? My octogenarian parents are still amazed!

To our First-Generation students, I want to offer my heartfelt congratulations. You are trailblazers. You have overcome challenges, defied expectations, and embraced an opportunity that will shape your futures. Your journey is not just your own; it is part of a larger narrative — one that spans generations and inspires those who come after you.

To the First-Generation employees who are here today, thank you. You are role models, guides, mentors, and a testament to the power of perseverance. You show our students that no dream is too big, and no goal is too distant.

Being the first in your family to attend college is not an easy feat, but you certainly are not alone. The National Center for Education Statistics estimates that 1 in 3 college students in the United States are First-Generation. Further, the percentage of First-Gen students has steadily increased over the past decade as universities like ours have made concerted efforts to improve access and inclusion, to truly democratize education.

This mission aligns with the reasons the Sisters of Mercy came together in the first place: to improve the lives of women through access to education and the basic resources needed for a happy life.

Even though we've made progress in expanding access to higher education, research tells us that First-Gen students tend to have lower graduation rates compared to their peers. There are clear reasons for this. For one, First-Gen students often enter college with less academic preparation because they typically have fewer opportunities for advanced coursework, tutoring, and college counseling. These issues are particularly prevalent in rural areas.

So, when First-Gen students arrive at college, they may be surprised at the way that college life is structured; sometimes they question whether they are up to the task. They lack the networks that second- or third-generation students often have, making it more difficult for them to access internships and similar opportunities.

It is our charge at Mercyhurst to fill those gaps and to do everything we can to give our students the resources they need to succeed. And I'm not just talking about practical skills, but also fundamental human needs, like a sense of belonging.

Belonging is the feeling of security and support you get when you are met with acceptance and inclusion. It is when you can bring your authentic self to college. When students feel like they don't belong, their performance and their personal lives suffer. On the flip side, students who feel supported and not alone are more resilient and can cope better with difficult times.

We also recognize that some First-Gen students face a unique and complex set of challenges in navigating two distinct cultural worlds: your home culture and the academic or campus culture at school. You may feel out of place when you return home, where your families and friends are not college-educated and may very well question your decision to go to college.

This tension can create internal and external struggles, leading to feelings of isolation, identity conflict, and pressure to choose between your family's expectations and the expectations of your school environment.

And I'm here, as a proud First-Generation college student myself, to say that you can see this through. So many around you already have. I also want to assure you that Mercyhurst is dedicated to helping all our First-Gen students navigate these challenges, big or small, because we value you and we want you here.

You bring diverse cultural, social, and economic perspectives that enrich classroom discussions and expand the viewpoints of us all.

Often, First-Gen students are deeply committed to improving their communities. They are frequently involved in social justice initiatives, service-learning projects, and other volunteer activities, a hallmark of our own Mercy mission. I see many of our employees in the audience today who fit that bill to a tee.

So, this ceremony is more than an induction — it is a celebration of the resilience, hope, and promise that each of you represents. We look forward to the incredible things you will accomplish in the years to come. Together, we will continue to make Mercyhurst University a place where every student, regardless of background, has the chance to succeed.

Carpe Diem!