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Getz looks back at her first year as Mercyhurst president



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It's not the best time to be a college president.

The prospective student population is declining and tuition dollars are shrinking as a result.

On the job as Mercyhurst University president for almost 18 months, Kathleen Getz says she has been "drinking from the firehose," assessing and addressing the university's strengths and challenges and the best ways to grow enrollment and the bottom line.

"There certainly has been a lot of that, and there are still things that I'm learning," Getz said. "One thing about academics is we love to learn. But it's a tough time for this particular sector, and we face some of the same challenges that a lot of institutions do, even the most well-known, elite institutions."

High on that list, Getz said, is increasing public skepticism about the need for higher education.



"People have become skeptical about the desirability of a bachelor's degree or further education, yet the data continue to show that — in terms of economic outcomes — those who go to college do much better than those who do not," Getz said. "We do a lot to try and counter the skepticism, but it's a moment in time."

In an interview with the Erie Times-News in October 2021, Getz pledged to be "bolder and a little audacious" in leading Mercyhurst University in difficult times. In the first year of her presidency, she laid the groundwork for that leadership, said Joe NeCastro, chairman of the university's board of trustees and interim university president following the retirement of Michael Victor last year.

"Dr. Getz has spent a lot of time focusing on getting her cabinet up to speed. In the transition between the prior president, myself, and President Getz, fully half of the president's cabinet was replaced. She spent a lot of time getting members up to speed and getting them working together," NeCastro said.

"The board of trustees is very, very pleased, first, with the selection of Dr. Getz and the whole process of her appointment and also with what she has done since," NeCastro said. "She has a very high agenda for this second year."

Getz is focusing on analyzing academic programs, partnering with other universities to provide additional opportunities for students, identifying alternate revenue sources, working with the Erie business community to identify needed skills, and increasing staff, student, and program diversity.

And she's earning praise for those efforts.

"At a time when higher education is going through significant changes in the United States, Dr. Getz has set forth strategic objectives to amplify our strengths and to innovate new ways of serving our students and the wider community," said Richard McCarty, professor of religious studies and president of Mercyhurst's Faculty Senate.

Colleges and universities will need to boost fundraising and find new revenue sources so they're not so dependent on tuition dollars as the college-age population declines.

Mercyhurst University had a small budget surplus at the end of the past fiscal year, with some government help. "Quite frankly, we benefitted from (COVID-related relief funds), as did all universities that have PELL Grant students," Getz said.

Getz is "very optimistic" that the university will increase revenues and build its surplus. "We are figuring out ways to diversify our revenue streams, with the primary area for us being an increase in fundraising," she said.

Samuel McCrimmon, the university's vice president for advancement and external relations, is building new relationships to boost fundraising, Getz said.

"And we also have our centennial campaign coming up (for the university's 2026-27 anniversary), and that's an ideal time to raise money," Getz said.

The university additionally plans to expand summer athletic, academic, and performing arts programs for middle school and high school students.

"That will do two things for us," Getz said. "It will bring us revenue immediately over the summer, but more importantly it will expose this wonderful campus to those students and they can interact with our faculty. Many of them will say, 'I want to go to Mercyhurst.'"

The birth rate in the U.S. has been declining since the Great Recession that began in 2007. Fewer babies born then will mean a projected 15% decline in the number of prospective freshmen beginning in 2025.

"That's huge," Getz said. "When universities are asked how they're going to respond to the cliff, more than 80% say they're going to out-compete others, they're going to recruit better. And obviously 80% of us cannot do that. We're going to see an increase in the rate at which colleges either shut down entirely or merge. That's already happening."

Mercyhurst has 3,041 students enrolled this fall and, like other universities, will have to work to match or surpass that number, in part by partnering with other universities, Getz said.

"We're looking at developing a program for what are called three-plus-one or four-plus-one, where a student can do three or four years at a particular undergraduate program and then matriculate directly to a partner graduate institution," Getz said. "We're looking at those kind of partnerships both for our undergraduates to go on to a graduate program somewhere else or for students from another institution to come here for graduate programs."

Mercyhurst is working on a partnership for accounting students, who in most states are required to complete 150 credit hours, or 30 more than required for graduation, before taking the CPA exam. Many schools offer master's programs to provide the additional credits.

"Mercyhurst has not done that, and right now is probably not the right time for us to do that. But we can work with other institutions so that our undergraduates can partake of somebody else's program," said Getz, who was dean of Loyola University Maryland's Sellinger School of Business before coming to Mercyhurst in July 2021 after Michael Victor retired.

The university also is looking at partnerships that would allow Mercyhurst undergraduates to take niche courses online from another university and allow students at other universities to take Mercyhurst courses online.

"It's not about takeovers or mergers. It's about collaborating so we don't have to be the best experts in everything, but our students have access to that high level of expertise and students at other institutions have access to the high level of expertise that we have," Getz said.

And like other schools, Mercyhurst additionally will ratchet up recruiting, particularly internationally.

"Mercyhurst has a relatively small population of international students, and increasing that will help us. The demographics cliff isn't happening in many other countries," Getz said.

Mercyhurst in November began analyzing its graduate programs to determine what new programs might be offered and whether existing programs should be offered in different modes to better meet student needs.

"We've been doing an analysis of all our academic programs but started to focus on the graduate side of it a little more intensely," Getz said.

One graduate program already targeted for growth is the physician's assistant program.

"It essentially sells out each year," Getz said. "We've got more students who want to enroll than we are able to accommodate."

The program accepts 30 students each year and is taught at St. Peter & Paul Byzantine Catholic Church on East 34th Street. The university is looking for a new location for the program so that it can expand labs and other facilities to accommodate more students.

"We've identified a couple places on campus that we could re-do to accommodate that and are now working on financing," Getz said.

Mercyhurst has work to do to attract and retain diverse students and staff, said Getz, who early in her tenure pledged to improve diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice on campus.

"Mercyhurst is not as diverse as we would like it to be," Getz said. "And I should begin by saying that when I talk about diversity, I'm talking about visible and invisible diversity, diversity in all its forms, whether it's racial and ethnic, national origin, gender or gender preference, ableness and diversity of thought."

Getz has convened a president's advisory council for diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice. She also established a bias reporting system that allows students and staff to report bias or perceived bias on campus.

"It might be something like, 'Professor So-and-So in his or her class doesn't call on students of color at the same rate at which he or she calls on students who are white,'" Getz said. "We haven't had a lot of

reports coming through, which is a good thing in that we don't have a lot of those things to report. But they have given us the opportunity to have some very good conversations with people who sometimes don't recognize the impact of their own behavior."

The initiatives are appreciated, said Lily Smith, president of Mercyhurst's Student Government Association.

"President Getz is highlighting DEI initiatives. I am a Black student, and that means a lot to me," said Smith, 21, a senior political science and public history major from Rochester, New York. "There needs to be a better effort to make diverse students feel more welcome here, and Dr. Getz is having more of these conversations."

Neurodiversity has long been a priority at the university, and making the [Autism Initiative at Mercyhurst](#) program more affordable for students on the autism spectrum will help it grow, Getz said.

"We want to double the enrollment in the program and make it more possible for students whose families don't have a lot of excess money to participate," Getz said.

Students pay a surcharge for the program because it's labor-intensive, Getz said. Funding from Wells Fargo, other companies and individuals help families pay the cost.

More broadly, Getz is making an effort to hear student needs and concerns, said Smith, who was a student member of the search committee that in 2021 identified candidates for the Mercyhurst presidency. Getz attends monthly lunches with students, makes time for coffee with students, and often meets informally with students in [The Roost](#), the university's pub-style restaurant and coffee shop, Smith said.

"Right from the beginning, she's made a real effort to get out and interact with students," said Smith, who meets monthly with Getz in her role as student government president. Getz also meets periodically with the student government association as a whole.

"She makes it informal. And right off the bat, because of her energy and approachability, students know they can ask her what's on their minds," Smith said.

Getz has demonstrated a willingness to meet with faculty, staff, and students, opening lines of communication in effective ways, said McCarty, of Mercyhurst's Faculty Senate.

"In this, President Getz offers a collaborative model of leadership," he said.

Getz early in her presidency pledged to build ties between Mercyhurst and the city, especially the Erie business community.

A year later, Getz said that she is working with local businesses to learn what jobs are in demand, jobs that will be in demand in the future, and how to prepare students for employment. Leaders of small- and medium-sized Erie area businesses were invited to campus this month to outline their needs.

"Instead of presuming that we know, we're going to ask: 'What are the skills and knowledge that you're looking for in a graduate? How can we work with you? What's the best way, from your point of view, for students to acquire that knowledge?'" Getz said.

Getz is a member of the Hamot Health Foundation Board of Corporators and is participating in Erie Regional Chamber and Growth Partnership programs. She recently attended a presentation by start-up companies participating in the Chamber's F.I.R.E. Accelerator program.

"I came back with a few that I'm now connecting to faculty in different areas because these small startups want to hire interns and eventually employees. So, there is in some sense a very practical win-win that comes out of these interactions."

Getz is scheduled to address Erie's Manufacturer & Business Association in March about women's leadership and career paths and has worked with Athena Erie, which promotes women's leadership. The university also is working with companies interested in recruiting Autism Initiative at Mercyhurst students.

"We're working with a couple companies to develop this program that will create more opportunities for our own students but also more opportunities for (other) neurodiverse individuals, including those who may be older and don't have a college education," Getz said.

Getz said she will continue to create relationships with Erie businesses and organizations.

"Gone are the days when a university can be successful by having a bunch of PhDs sitting around and thinking about what the world wants," Getz said. "We've actually had to talk to the world."