

Erie Times-News

Inauguration Story on President Getz

Oct. 1, 2021

Kathleen Getz inaugurated as Mercyhurst's 13th president

The inauguration of Kathleen Getz, the 13th president of [Mercyhurst University](#) and the first woman to hold that post in nearly 50 years, will be held Saturday.

By the time that moment arrives, Getz will have been on the job for more than 12 weeks and has spent a lot of time thinking about what works, what doesn't and what should change at the university founded in 1926 by the Sisters of Mercy.

Getz, who sat earlier this week for an interview with the Erie Times-News, said she was looking forward to formalizing her position at Mercyhurst.

"It's a great place. I'm happy to be here," said Getz, who is 62.

She also made one thing clear during the interview: She's not afraid of change and looks forward to surprising some in the campus and Erie community.

"I do feel as though I have had a chance to get the lay of the land in a lot of ways, but there is still so much to learn in how we move forward," she said. "We have identified some challenges; we have identified some strengths."

Fewer incoming freshmen

Perhaps the biggest challenge facing Mercyhurst is one shared by a large share of the nation's four-year colleges and universities.

Often referred to as the demographic cliff, many of the nation's colleges anticipate a decline of up to 15% in the number of incoming freshmen, beginning in 2025, thanks in part to the 2008 recession, which analysts say began a years-long trend of fewer births in the United States.

Getz, who served previously as the dean of [Loyola University Maryland's Sellinger School of Business](#), said inaction won't address the challenge that's coming Mercyhurst's way.

"We have to figure out what our response to that (will be) instead of accepting it as is," she said. "How are we going to remake ourselves so that we have a steady stream of new students coming in?"

Getz isn't ready just yet to say what her plan for Mercyhurst will look like. But inaction isn't an option, she said.

"We can't just roll over and say, 'This stinks.' If I do that, they better fire me," she said.

Getz earned her MBA at Gannon University, which five years ago opened a satellite campus in the fast-growing area of Ruskin, Florida.

Does a similar move make sense for Mercyhurst?

"I am not in a good position to answer," she said. "I would not rule something like that out, but I would not say we are looking for something like that."

She does raise another possibility.

"Personally, I think we have too many universities in our country. I do think there is room for a lot of consolidation," Getz said. "If Mercyhurst gets involved in that consolidation, I want us to be on the acquiring side, not the acquired side."

Getz didn't mention by name her predecessor, President Michael T. Victor, who served Mercyhurst for five years before announcing his retirement in October 2020.

She does, however, offer tacit approval for some of the moves put in motion before her arrival that were aimed at putting Mercyhurst on a solid financial footing.

"Many, many things are in place to get us where we want to be," she said. "The sale of the North East campus was the right step for us. The purchase of the Motherhouse was the right step for us. These are all things that are going to (improve) our financial well-being."

Fiscal challenges, and room for improvement

But there is still work to be done on this front, Getz said.

"I wish I could say we have substantial surplus at the end of every fiscal year. We do not," she said. "We do have a surplus, but not a substantial surplus. We have work to be done to get to the place where we can say we are a strong institution financially."

For whatever concerns she might have, Getz has found a lot to like in the past few weeks.

"I start with the people," she said. "We have really good people on this campus, people who are dedicated and who understand the mission and are willing to roll up their sleeves, even if it's not technically in their job description."

That's left her feeling optimistic.

"With good people, almost anything can be done," she said.

Getz, who has returned to Erie along with her husband, Gary, after working at Mellon Bank here from 1981 to 1986, is finding plenty to celebrate at Mercyhurst, starting with what she calls a beautiful campus.

But there is a little in her words to suggest complacency or a tendency to steep contentedly in the sunny glow of her office in Old Main.

In one sentence, she talks about the beauty of the campus and its buildings. A moment later, she talks about the need to catch up on maintenance.

The pattern is the same when she assesses the school's academic programs, highlighting the success stories, but also the need to improve.

"We have some stellar academic programs — intelligence studies, cybersecurity, forensic studies. Most of our allied health is very, very good," Getz said. "In each of our four colleges, we have programs that stand out and we have some programs that need some work."

She also hopes to build the national reputation of some of the school's programs.

"Intelligence studies is an exemplar of what we would like to be," she said. "It's all good and can be better."

Getz seems to see and welcome challenges everywhere she looks.

Improving diversity, leadership in academic fields of study

She's hoping, for instance, to bring a new, more pronounced focus to the areas of diversity, equity inclusion, and justice.

A recent march for anti-racism on campus speaks to the heart of the campus community, but Getz said she's looking for tangible changes.

"We do not have a highly diverse student body or a highly diverse employee base. That is going to change," said Getz, who recently formed a new advisory council to begin tackling some of those issues.

"We are going to be leaders in education, research, and action," she said, paraphrasing a letter she wrote recently to Joe NeCastro, chairman of the board of trustees. "We have a lot of good words and a lot of good hearts. What we haven't seen, from my point of view, is a lot of results."

Getz, who has pledged to build ties between Mercyhurst and the city, especially the business community, said the focus on diversity will be part of a larger strategic plan that she and her nine-member cabinet are working to develop.

Asked about her management style as she works with that cabinet or more broadly with faculty and staff, Getz said, "I am very collaborative and I try to build consensus. I am not reluctant to make a decision when consensus isn't forming."

As Mercyhurst edges toward its 100th anniversary in 2026, Getz said she and her cabinet will be paying a lot of attention to crafting a message that will resonate both on campus and with donors.

"A key thing is spicing up our strategic plan," she said. "I would like it to be bolder and just a little bit audacious."

What does she mean by that?

"It means something that people will say, 'Wow. Can Mercyhurst really do that?' Inside Mercyhurst, we will know that we really can. We know what to do. It's just a matter of sitting down and doing it."

Kathleen Getz

Will be inaugurated as the 13th president of Mercyhurst University Saturday at 1:30 p.m. in the Mary D'Angelo Performing Arts Center.

Contact Jim Martin at 814-870-1668 or jmartin@timesnews.com. Follow him on Twitter [@ETNMartin](https://twitter.com/ETNMartin).