



501 East 38th Street
Erie, PA 16546
814-824-2000
800-825-1926
mercyhurst.edu

June 10, 2023
Reunion Weekend Address
By President Kathleen A. Getz, Ph.D.

Good evening alumni and friends ... and welcome home!

I extend a special welcome to those of you who are celebrating landmark anniversaries - and to our Distinguished Alumni recipients and Athletics Hall of Fame inductees – congratulations.

I know how important it is for all of you to reconnect, so I won't take up too much of your time. But I do want to give you a snapshot of where we are as I complete my second year as president.

Much of my first year was spent drinking from the fire hose, as they say, taking everything in and assessing our strengths and challenges. This past year has been spent strategizing and positioning for success.

Across the country, universities large and small, prestigious and ordinary, are facing formidable threats. There are fewer people in the traditional student age group; the decline has already started in the tri-state region where we recruit most of our students, and the so-called “demographic cliff” is coming in 2025-26.

Making matters worse, a lower proportion of those students is choosing college. Our society is no longer convinced that college is right for everyone – and some think it's not right for anyone.

And of course, the pandemic added stress to the higher ed system. But, in a way, the pandemic gave us a test run. Mercyhurst rose to meet the COVID challenge with an innovative resolve that, looking back now, was extraordinary. And, let me assure you, we are bringing that same sense of commitment and innovation to navigating today's higher education challenges.

We have a strong enrollment outlook for fall 2024, with 910 new students (traditional, graduate, and professional) confirmed. This results from exceptional work by our enrollment and admissions team, with strong contributions from faculty and staff as well.

It contrasts with some of the dire problems other colleges are having. Since 2016, 91 colleges in the US have closed – including 13 announced so far in 2023.

To quote Dr. E. Gordon Gee, president of West Virginia University:

“We are at a point in the life of universities where we are either going to be architects of change, or we are going to be its victim. It's just that simple. There is no middle ground, and if you do not like change, you're going to have to really love your irrelevance.”

At Mercyhurst, we will be architects of change. We've already begun a transformative journey and are taking actions akin to the bold steps that others at Mercyhurst have taken before us.

I often point to the early Sisters who completed work on Old Main so that the College could open as scheduled in September 1926.

And I point to Sr. Carolyn Herrmann who had the wisdom and courage to admit men to the college in 1969.

More recent initiatives were launching the intel program in 1993 – though some feared we would become “the spy school” – and, in 2012, rebranding the college as a university to signify our broader reach and ambition.

Let me just tell you a few actions we are taking, starting with a deep **analysis in academics**. Some programs have been identified as needing improvement, including curricular changes that would help to make them more appealing to potential students. As well, we are considering how best to support our high-performing programs, perhaps by hiring or otherwise expanding capacity.

In terms of new academic programs, we are considering many factors:

- Demonstrated or anticipated student interest
- Industry growth and employment opportunities
- Opportunities to connect with business, government, or non-profit organizations
- Competition from other universities, especially in the tristate region
- Potential to benefit society
- Grant opportunities

One such program is **Esports**: one of the fastest growing entertainment choices for people under the age of 40. In 2022, Esports generated over \$1.3 billion in revenue, with related businesses generating another \$3.5 billion. We will soft launch the Esports program this fall, with a full bachelor’s degree offering next year. Even before we brought this forward, a large group of students organized an Esports Club and they hosted a tournament in May.

We’re expanding in other areas as well. In the fall, we will have an **NCAA Women’s Stunt Team**. **We are the first university in Pennsylvania to offer Stunt**, although the sport has become extremely popular at the high school level. We’ve already recruited 15 students who were not considering Mercyhurst until they learned of this opportunity. Importantly, we recruited these students using very little scholarship money.

We are also looking at areas where we can capitalize on our distinctiveness: programs like the Autism Initiative at Mercyhurst. We are unquestionably one of the best universities in the country in supporting **neurodiverse** students. We have already begun to add new dimensions to this work.

Last summer, we established the Brad McGarry Center for Neurodiversity, with a first-stage goal of providing consulting, education, and training to employers who want to hire, integrate, and retain neurodiverse employees.

Another good example of distinctive excellence, and a future flagship program, is **Sustainability** – an area of strong interest and success at Mercyhurst. Besides our visible commitment, including the Sister Maura Smith Peace Garden, the installation of the Zurn Hall Ceramics Lab Green Roof – to which a greenhouse will be added this summer - and the thriving Mercyhurst Tiny Forest on the front lawn of the CAE, we are reinvigorating and expanding the curriculum by supplementing our Environmental Sciences program with a Sustainability Studies degree. The degree will focus on leadership across what Pope Francis refers to as “integral ecology” – that is, the interlinked challenges of ecology, environmental protection, and poverty alleviation.

What I've shared with you today is just the beginning. I hope these examples assure you that we are proactively addressing the challenges we face in higher education. I hope these examples excite you, as they do me and my colleagues. In this climate at this time, we need the support of our friends and alumni more than ever.

We are what we are. In the simplest of terms: a tuition-dependent small college in the liberal arts tradition with a modest endowment.

But you – better than anyone else – know we are so much more than that. We are a community of learners that thrives on living the Mission of our beloved Sisters of Mercy, whose campus is beautiful and safe, an institution that boldly embraces innovation while honoring tradition, where our faculty engage one-on-one with our students and encourage them to be the best they can be.

We're immensely grateful for your willingness to give of your time, experience, and financial support. I know that you do this out of love for Mercyhurst, from warm memories of your student days here, and from pride in belonging to a world-class university.

It won't be long before we are celebrating 100 years. We want you by our side.

Thank you. Enjoy your weekend. And Carpe Diem.