

MEMBER SCHOOLS AND THEIR MISSION

“St. Mary’s University — What it means to be Marianist and Catholic in the Southwest”

by

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St. Mary’s University, as a Catholic Marianist University,
fosters the formation of people in faith and educates leaders
for the common good
through community, integrated liberal arts
and professional education, and academic excellence.

The St. Mary’s University mission statement is a reflection of the Characteristics of Marianist Universities. St. Mary’s University (StMU) shares these characteristics in the service of the Catholic and Marianist mission and identity with Chaminade University and the University of Dayton. At StMU, living out our mission happens intentionally and unintentionally everyday on our campus. Faculty and students work in concert with each other through classes and co-curricular experiences, many of which provide opportunities for simultaneous spiritual, emotional, and intellectual growth. We can provide several examples of how our mission is embodied on a daily basis, but for the sake of brevity, we offer our Core Curriculum, Continuing the Heritage, Marianist Leadership Program, and the Study in Leadership Course as examples.

As background, StMU is a small, regional, Catholic and Marianist liberal and professional arts university in San Antonio, Texas, with an enrollment of slightly under 4,000 students. One might go as far as describing St. Mary’s as a small, Catholic and Marianist and *Hispanic* undergraduate university. We serve a niche market that has long been underrepresented in the nation’s colleges and universities. StMU is designated as a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI)--a U.S. Department of Education designation of colleges and universities in the United States that assist first generation, low-income Hispanic students and have at least 25% Hispanic enrollment. At StMU, over 7 in 10 undergraduate students identify as of Hispanic origin, 3.5% African American; only 14% of the undergraduates identify as Non-Hispanic Whites.

At StMU we exist to serve the church and world in the educational tradition of our founder, Blessed William Joseph Chaminade. There are five components that characterize our Marianist approach to education: educating for formation in

faith, providing an integral quality education, educating in family spirit, for service, justice and peace. Our last essential element entails educating for adaption and change.

First, we educate for formation in faith. As a higher education institution, StMU has kept, along with education in the disciplines, a commitment to the development of the whole person, which includes the dimension of religious faith and its personal appropriation and practice. Faith and culture are taken seriously. An emphasis on the formation of character and growth in faith enables us to send into civic communities distinctive graduates who understand what it is to act ethically and respect diversity. Important here is to form students not only professionally, but also within a cultural, religious, and civic context that reaches far beyond the immediate advantage of one’s own individual persons, families, corporations, or even nations.

At StMU, the focus on formation in faith is important throughout the university. Interestingly, 70% percent of undergraduate students who self-identify a religion indicate that they are Catholic. Nonetheless, in 2013, the number of Theology majors had dwindled to less than 1% of the total undergraduate enrollments. So as a university, we must think about how to engage students in considerations of faith through their majors as well as the Core Curriculum. In terms of majors, 46% of the undergraduates are enrolled in the School of Humanities and Social Sciences, 34% in the School of Science, Engineering and Technology, and 20% in the School of Business. The most popular majors (Biology, Psychology, Political Science, Criminal Justice, Exercise and Sports and English and Communications) account for 4 in 10 undergraduates.

The second component that characterizes our mission is that we strive to provide an integral quality education. We

consider this value as fostering “excellence in education.” Excellence includes students’ curricular and extra-curricular experiences as well as their intellectual and spiritual development, understood and supported best in and through community. In other words, students and faculty are expected not only to study the ambivalent achievements of technology, but to actively engage and become involved in the development and use of those technologies that most truly benefit the whole human community.

One way we emphasize “excellence in education” is through our Core Curriculum, the first introduction that students have to the Marianist Characteristics of Education. Every St. Mary’s student engages in nine developmental courses (divided into reflection based courses and practice focused courses) plus one capstone course that integrate faith formation, community, justice, service, peace, adaptation, and change in a challenging environment that requires excellence from both students and faculty. At StMU, we continue this integrated educational experience in specific disciplines completing the holistic educational process. What makes the St. Mary’s Core Curriculum unique is the ability for courses to focus on God’s intention for us as human beings. For example, when students take the Foundations of Reflection: Self course, they contemplate questions such as who am I, what is real, does God exist, does history have meaning, and what is justice. In a student’s senior year, he or she will take the capstone course. In this course, students are asked to bridge all their learning across the prior core courses to answer the question about how a specific world issue affects the common good. Throughout the entire Core Curriculum experience, students are challenged to identify how they can translate their learning experience into a meaningful transformation in their faith and development in their contribution to something greater than themselves.

The third component is embedded within a family spirit that we call “community.” Essential here is creating a climate of acceptance and respect. Here is where community support for scholarship, friendship among faculty, staff and students, and participation in university governance characterize the Marianist University. In reality, this component is what challenges us to a family of families that embraces mutual acceptance. Here is where as members of families accept theirs, acknowledging a bond and an obligation deeper than the voluntary. We strongly believe that family spirit enables our institution to challenge our students, faculty and staff to excellence and maturity, because the acceptance and love of a community give its members the courage to risk failure and the joy of sharing success. Community helps us respect and educate, love and serve one another.

The Marianist Leadership Program is a clear example of how StMU lives out this characteristic of educating in the family spirit. The Marianist Leadership Program provides co-curricular experience for 65 students who want to deepen their understanding about the Marianist charism through a community-based program. These students live

and serve together on campus. They complete required program components such as weekly gatherings based on a curriculum challenging students with scripture, leadership development, Marianist values, and social justice beyond their educational endeavors. They learn what it means to truly live out faith formation and academic excellence while serving God. This program is a specific example at St. Mary’s of how students learn consensus-building, teamwork, and communication skills while loving and accepting others’ perspectives and needs while living with each other on a daily basis.

Educating for service, justice and peace is at the heart of our fourth Characteristic of Marianist Education. Our mission is deeply committed to the common good. We see intellectual life itself as a form of service in the interest of justice and peace, and the university curriculum is designed to connect the classroom with the wider world. In addition, at StMU, we extend a special concern for the poor and marginalized and promote the dignity, rights and responsibilities of all peoples. Awareness of local and global concerns with regard to the common good awakens students to the potential impact of the university’s mission. Administrators, faculty, staff and students strive always to be aware of the ways in which their work is and can be of service to others. Through service, the discovery and transmission of knowledge deepens the understanding of God’s creation.

One example of how the university enacts educating for service, justice, and peace is through Marianist beliefs that serving others is a life-long vocation. At St. Mary’s, service to others is a cornerstone of co-curricular activities. One such opportunity is the Continuing the Heritage Day of Service. Our entire community comes together for one day at the beginning of each semester to offer our abilities to different organizations, neighborhoods, and individuals within San Antonio. This past August, over 3,600 hours by 750 volunteers were given in serving the San Antonio and Dallas communities. We explicitly live out our mission throughout the year, but this day gives faculty, staff, alumni, students, and Marianists the opportunity to bond together by learning and serving together. It is an institutional commitment to being bold about the Marianist vocation.

Our fifth component acknowledges education for the sake of adaptation and change. In the midst of rapid social and technological change, we want to shape our communities of faculty, staff, and students to readily adapt and change their methods and structures so that the wisdom of our Marianist educational philosophy and spirituality may be transmitted more fully. We strive to educate and prepare students to live authentically in a pluralistic world. We hope our Marianist educational enterprise provides the tools so that our students can craft the skills required for dialogue, consensus, and teamwork that depend on the virtues of loving acceptance of others, and the discipline required for responsible, rigorous analysis, and faithful dedication to a collaborative, honest, and hopeful search for truth.

Many St. Mary's faculty members integrate the Marianist Educational Principles into the specific courses taught each semester. There are great examples of this commitment to the learning process in every corner of our campus.

One such example is a leadership course taught in the Bill Greehey School of Business. Patterned after a Harvard Business School graduate course and adapted to include a focus on faith formation, adaptation, and change, this undergraduate course asks students to deeply analyze aspects of morality. Students never read a business press book or discuss how to lead a meeting. Instead, they read works of fiction and non-fiction, plays, and historical accounts and analyze whether protagonists' actions are moral or not. They then use their analysis to develop personal definitions of moral leadership. This course creates a trusting, honest, personal dialogue among students and the teacher epitomizing the family spirit of the Marianist charism. This course asks each person to examine how he or she embodies his or her faith formation when living out life in an excellent, God-directed manner.

In large part because of the mission-driven education provided, StMU maintains a high retention rate (78%) and high graduation rates (55% graduate within six years). The university was recently recognized by *The Education Trusts* as having one of the smallest graduation gaps. At StMU, the graduation rate for non-Hispanic whites is 58% while for Hispanics it is 57%; nationally, 60 percent of non-Hispanic white students graduate within six years but only 49 percent of Hispanics.

In conclusion, when one pulls together the uniqueness of our Marianist charism, our Catholic mission, and HSI status St. Mary's University forms global ethical leaders. Not surprisingly, when Hispanics in San Antonio and South Texas begin the process of thinking of institutions of higher education, both parents and students think of St. Mary's not only for its geographic location but also for its success in creating a welcoming, academically rigorous and faith-based community.

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As a regular feature in Collegium News, we plan each issue to focus on one member school and its mission. We are grateful to Rudy Vela, S.M., Stephanie Ward and Arturo Vega for taking the time to write about the particular mission of Saint Mary's University, Texas.