

***More Than Services: The Ministry of Accompaniment in Marianist Higher Education*, by Jessica González Uhlig, EdD**

Why Student Success Begins With a Community That Knows Its Students

It has been 7 years since my research was completed, and my doctoral dissertation: *Leading Change*, a phenomenological study at three Catholic and Marianist universities, was published. Feeling like a revisit of my work on mission integration at the three universities, I am inspired to reflect on the past few years, focused on enrollment management and students services. This article focuses on how at Marianist universities, student services are not auxiliary to the Marianist educational mission; when designed well, they are one of the principal ways that mission is enacted.

As a new academic year begins, college campuses once again fill with energy and anticipation. Students move into residence halls, faculty prepare syllabi, advisors meet with advisees, administrators review enrollment numbers, and staff across the institution prepare for another year of learning, discovery, challenge, and growth. There is an understandable focus on getting students into the classroom.

But perhaps the beginning of an academic year is also the right time to ask a more fundamental question: What happens after the student arrives?

A student can be admitted, registered, oriented, housed, and sitting in a classroom—and still be profoundly disconnected from the institution. A student can have access to academic advising but not know how to ask for help. A student can receive a financial-aid award but not understand how to manage the financial realities of college. A student can be academically capable but struggling with anxiety, loneliness, family responsibilities, food insecurity, or questions about purpose and belonging. This is where student services become more than services. They become accompaniment.

For Marianist universities, this distinction matters deeply. Marianist education has never been understood simply as the transmission of academic information. It is an educational tradition rooted in the formation of the whole person, community, relationship, faith, service, and responsiveness to changing circumstances. The Association of Marianist Universities identifies five characteristics that shape the Marianist university: formation in faith; integral, quality education; family spirit; service, justice, peace, and the integrity of creation; and adaptation and change (CMU, 2019).

If those characteristics are taken seriously, then student services cannot be viewed as peripheral to the educational mission. They are part of how the mission is lived.

The University Educates the Whole Person

The *Characteristics of Marianist Universities* provides an unusually clear foundation for this argument.

The document states that Marianist universities seek an integral or comprehensive education that “humanizes” the path of knowledge and affirms the dignity of each member of the learning community through both curricular and extracurricular experiences, (p.14). It describes this education as developing the physical, psychological, intellectual, moral, spiritual, and social qualities of the person.

That statement should fundamentally shape how we think about student services.

If students are whole persons, then their education cannot be reduced to what happens between the professor and student in a classroom. Students learn when they wrestle with difficult ideas in a philosophy course.

They also learn when an advisor helps them understand who they are becoming. They learn when a counselor helps them develop resilience; they learn when a career professional helps them connect their academic interests with vocation; they learn when a campus minister helps them explore questions of faith and meaning, or when a residence-life professional helps them navigate conflict with a roommate. They learn when a financial-aid counselor helps them understand the financial decisions that may determine whether they can remain enrolled, and they learn when someone notices that they have stopped attending class and reaches out before a problem becomes a crisis.

These experiences may not appear on a transcript. But they are educational. The whole university participates in educating the whole person.

Student Services Are Not “Auxiliary” to the Mission

Higher education has traditionally organized itself into divisions and departments: academic affairs, student affairs, enrollment management, finance, advancement, athletics, campus ministry, facilities, information technology, and others.

Organizationally, those distinctions are necessary. Educationally, however, they can become dangerous. A student does not experience the university in organizational-chart boxes. The student experiences one institution.

When a student encounters a confusing registration system, they do not think, “This is an Academic Affairs problem.” When their financial aid is delayed, they do not think, “This is a Financial Aid problem.” When they are lonely, they do not think, “This is a Student Affairs problem.” When they are struggling academically because of a personal crisis, they do not distinguish between the academic and nonacademic dimensions of their lives.

They experience all of it as their college experience.

This is why contemporary research increasingly emphasizes holistic student supports. Research for Action defines holistic support as an integrated structure in which academic and nonacademic services are connected and personalized rather than operating as isolated interventions, (RFA, 2025). Its review emphasizes sustained, integrated, proactive, and personalized advising and support.

This approach aligns remarkably well with Marianist educational philosophy.

The *Characteristics of Marianist Universities* calls the university community to attentive presence, genuine community, and competent and loving service (p.16). That is not a description of a collection of offices. It is a description of a community of people accompanying other people.

Family Spirit Is More Than a Feeling

Of the five Marianist characteristics, perhaps none speaks more directly to student services than family spirit.

The CMUs describe family spirit as a community that accepts each person and invites everyone into the challenge of building community (p.19). It emphasizes friendship and genuine presence among faculty, staff, administrators, and students.

This raises an important question for Marianist institutions: How does a student know that we have family spirit?

It cannot be because we have the phrase printed on our website. Students know it because they experience it. Family spirit is experienced when a student is welcomed rather than processed. It is experienced when someone remembers the student's name. It is experienced when a staff member takes the extra five minutes to understand what is really happening, as well as when departments communicate with one another rather than

forcing students to navigate institutional silos. It is experienced when a student who is struggling receives outreach rather than waiting until they know exactly which office to contact. And perhaps most importantly, family spirit is experienced when students believe that asking for help is a sign of belonging rather than a sign of failure.

That is why student services are culture. The way an institution answers a phone call, responds to an email, explains a policy, handles a crisis, welcomes a new student, or follows up with someone who has disappeared communicates something about who the institution believes itself to be.

Students Should Not Have to Become Experts in the Institution

Universities are extraordinarily complex organizations. There are catalogs, policies, degree audits, registration systems, financial-aid requirements, academic progression standards, housing contracts, technology platforms, health forms, orientation requirements, billing procedures, and countless other processes. Most of these systems exist for good reasons.

But complexity that makes sense to an institution can be overwhelming to a student. This is especially true for students who are first-generation college students, students balancing employment and family responsibilities, students navigating financial insecurity, and students who may not yet possess the cultural knowledge or confidence necessary to navigate higher education successfully.

We sometimes tell students: *You need to advocate for yourself*: That is true.

But there is a significant difference between teaching students self-advocacy and expecting students to navigate unnecessary institutional complexity on their own. The goal should not be to make students dependent on the institution. The goal should be to build systems that progressively develop students' confidence, agency, knowledge, and capacity to navigate the world. Good student services do not do everything *for* students. They help students learn how to do things for themselves. That is education.

From Reactive Services to Proactive Accompaniment

Perhaps the most important transformation student services can make is the move from reactive service to proactive accompaniment.

The reactive model says: “We are here if you need us.”

The proactive model asks: “How do we know who needs us—and how do we reach them before they have to ask?” This distinction is critical.

Students most in need of support are not always the students most likely to seek it. Research on holistic student supports emphasizes proactive outreach, personalized support, integration among services, and sustained attention throughout the student's college experience.

This means that a contemporary student-success infrastructure might include:

- early-alert systems that actually generate meaningful intervention;
- coordinated academic and nonacademic advising;
- proactive financial-aid outreach;
- mental-health and wellness resources;
- tutoring and academic coaching;
- career development beginning early rather than during senior year;
- food, transportation, housing, and basic-needs support;
- intentional belonging and engagement initiatives;
- faculty and staff development around recognizing students in distress;
- and cross-divisional communication about students who may be struggling.

But there is an important caution. Technology can tell us which students may be struggling. Data can help us determine where to focus our attention. Systems can make intervention more efficient. But technology cannot replace relationship.

A dashboard can identify a student who has stopped attending class. A person has to decide to call. A system can identify a financial hold. A person has to ask what is happening in the student's life. An early-alert platform can generate a notification. A community has to respond. Data can identify the student. Relationship accompanies the student.

Retention Is a Relationship Issue

This is where the conversation about student services intersects with the conversation about retention. Retention is often treated as an enrollment-management metric. And certainly, institutions must monitor persistence, retention, graduation, and completion.

But if we reduce retention to a percentage, we risk losing sight of the person represented by the percentage. A student who leaves is not simply a lost enrollment. That student may be someone who never found a place to belong. Someone who could not navigate an institutional process, or who experienced a financial crisis. That student is someone who needed academic support but did not know where to find it, or someone who believed that asking for help meant they did not belong in college. That student is someone who simply needed one person to notice.

Research on holistic student support reinforces the relationship between integrated supports, belonging, help-seeking, and degree completion. This does not mean that every student who leaves could have been retained if someone had called.

Nor does it mean that institutions can remove every obstacle from a student's path. Students make choices. Circumstances change. Life happens.

But institutions do have the responsibility to examine the conditions they create. Retention is not merely about convincing students to stay. It is about creating an environment in which students can realistically succeed.

The Five Marianist Characteristics as a Student-Success Framework

The Marianist tradition provides an especially rich framework for thinking about this responsibility.

1. Formation in Faith: Help Students Ask Why

Student success is not only about getting students through college.

It is about helping them understand who they are becoming and what their lives are for. Campus ministry, vocation programs, retreats, reflection opportunities, spiritual direction, service experiences, and meaningful conversations about purpose can all contribute to this formation. A student who knows what they are working toward is often better positioned to persevere when the path becomes difficult.

2. Integral, Quality Education: Care for the Whole Person

If Marianist education seeks to develop the physical, psychological, intellectual, moral, spiritual, and social dimensions of the person, then universities must provide structures that address those dimensions.

Academic advising and tutoring matter. So do counseling, wellness, accessibility, career development, financial education, student engagement, and basic-needs support. These are not competing with academic education. They help make academic education possible.

3. Family Spirit: Build Belonging

Students persist in environments where they experience connection and belonging.

Family spirit challenges institutions to ask whether students have meaningful relationships with faculty, staff, peers, mentors, and the larger community.

A university can have excellent programs and still feel profoundly impersonal. Family spirit requires something more. It requires presence.

4. Service, Justice, Peace, and the Integrity of Creation: Connect Students to Something Larger

Student success cannot be reduced to individual achievement. Marianist education asks students to understand their education in relationship to the common good.

Service learning, civic engagement, social justice initiatives, community partnerships, and opportunities to use one's education in service of others help students see that their education has a purpose beyond themselves.

5. Adaptation and Change: Design Services for the Students We Actually Have

The Marianist tradition does not romanticize the past.

The fifth characteristic calls Marianist educational institutions to adapt methods and structures so that their educational philosophy and spirituality can be transmitted effectively in changing circumstances.

Today's students bring different experiences, expectations, technologies, challenges, and opportunities to the university. Student services therefore cannot remain frozen in models designed for another generation. We must continually ask: What do our students need now? And then we must be willing to change.

What Would a Marianist Student-Success Culture Look Like?

Perhaps the ultimate question is not whether a university has enough student-services offices. It is whether the institution has created a culture of accompaniment.

In such a culture:

Students are known. Not merely by their student ID number, but by name, story, aspirations, strengths, and challenges.

Students are noticed. When attendance changes, engagement drops, grades decline, or financial circumstances shift, someone pays attention.

Students are connected. Academic affairs, student affairs, enrollment, financial aid, campus ministry, athletics, career development, and other areas communicate rather than operate as isolated islands.

Students are supported. The institution recognizes that academic success is affected by the realities of students' lives.

Students are challenged. Accompaniment does not mean lowering expectations. Marianist family spirit creates the security necessary for students to risk failure, grow, and pursue excellence.

Students are formed. The goal is not simply graduation. It is the development of women and men capable of reflection, discernment, service, leadership, faith, and engagement with the world.

The Beginning of a New Academic Year

As we welcome students back to our campuses, perhaps the question we should ask is not simply:

“Are we ready for our students?” Perhaps we should ask: “Are we ready to accompany them?” Are our systems coordinated? Can students find help easily? Do our faculty and staff know what to look for when students begin to struggle? Do our departments communicate? Are our student-support systems proactive? Do we understand that financial stress, mental health, belonging, academic difficulty, family responsibilities, and questions of purpose can all influence a student's ability to learn?

And perhaps most importantly: Does every student have someone at the university who knows them well enough to notice when something has changed?

For a Marianist university, these are not simply operational questions. They are mission questions. The Marianist university has been called to educate the whole person, to build community in family spirit, to serve the common good, and to adapt creatively to changing circumstances. That means student success cannot be someone else's responsibility. It belongs to the entire community. Student services matter because students matter. Advising matters because students matter. Counseling matters because students matter. Financial-aid support matters because students matter. Career development matters

because students matter. Campus ministry matters because students matter. Tutoring matters because students matter. Early intervention matters because students matter.

And the people who provide these services matter because the relationships they create are part of the educational experience itself.

At the beginning of another academic year, specially reflecting on so many years celebrating move-in weekends, I invite my colleagues who get to be in the trenches every day, to commit as Marianist educators to:

Not simply enroll students, but to know them.

Not simply provide services, but to accompany them.

Not simply ask students to persist, but to create the conditions in which persistence and flourishing are possible.

And in doing so, to rediscover something at the heart of the Marianist educational tradition: Student services are not separate from the mission. They are one of the ways the mission becomes visible.

References

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