



# CARLOW UNIVERSITY

# ACCENT ON PROGRESS

JANUARY 26, 2010

*Tradition, Transition, and Transformation*

**E**very January, we provide our annual assessment of where we are as a University community, and we reaffirm our aspiration for continuous improvement. We acknowledge the good work we have accomplished, the challenges we have encountered, the direction we have defined for our future, and the changes we need to implement. We accept current and future challenges as opportunities for professional and educational growth for ourselves and our students. While we honor our traditions and rejoice in our successes, we also recognize that “the past is not a hammock but a springboard to the future.”

Last year’s State of the University Address provided a perspective on our 80-year history and a prediction about our future. We identified our beliefs and our values as we spoke respectfully of our past and

proudly of our present. We anticipated our future with hope, tinged with caution as the clouds of a recession hovered on the horizon. We committed to good stewardship and conservative management of resources. We embraced the imperative to seek what best served our mission and fulfilled our obligations to students. In the face of an economic downturn, we refused to overreact to examples of drastic fiscal actions, and we dedicated ourselves to careful planning, clear funding priorities, and willingness to make and accept appropriate changes to sustain our institution and its mission. We reflected on Pope Benedict’s message to educators at Catholic institutions to continue their commitment to intellectual charity which “calls the educator to recognize that the profound responsibility to lead the young

to truth is nothing less than an act of love” and which, in practice, “upholds the essential unity of knowledge against the fragmentation which ensues when reason is detached from the pursuit of truth.”

In reviewing that address (published as “Accent on Progress”), I am struck by how easy it would be to repeat it today. I encourage you to reread it since it remains true and consistent with our recent experience. We can thus consider this year’s assessment as a sequel—an update to our story by adding the realities which emerged during the past year, and by recognizing the context of the ‘new normal’ which is emerging in our world, for our students, and at Carlow University.

I ask you to recall three recent events and your experience as you attended them. First, consider the Top Scholars Reception at which we hosted outstanding high school seniors who are considering Carlow as their college choice. What did you think when you met those ideal students who had the interest and potential to become members of the Carlow University learning community? Awe? Respect? Hope? Gratitude for the possible opportunity to educate these engaged and energized students? Next, consider Carlow’s Fall Matriculation Ceremony, when we welcomed First-Year Students to this learning community. What did you think as you saw them gathered in St. Agnes, meeting each other and hearing faculty members express Carlow’s mission, values, and academic expectations? Hope? Pride? Enthusiasm? Finally, consider our recent Winter Commencement when we celebrated with students the completion of their academic program requirements and the achievement of their educational goals. What were your thoughts as those students received their diplomas and became graduates and alumnae of Carlow University? Satisfaction? Joy? Fulfillment? Pride?

In each of these events, our focus was on the students—on the learners of Carlow University. We were totally engaged with them and they were engaged with the possibilities or the outcomes of their learning experience with us. This is how every day should be in our professional lives, in our offices, in our classes: total engagement with students and with each other in the wonder of learning. This reflects our mission, our goals, and our values. This is the tradition entrusted to us by our founding and sponsoring Sisters of Mercy. This is

what we have been paying special attention to in this first year of our current Strategic Plan.

This has been a year of transition from where we were to where we are, on our way to transforming our institution into that which we want it to be. In implementing our Strategic Plan with its three-fold focus on academic quality and student engagement in the context of our multiple identities and mission, we have engaged in study and dialogue to understand trends and best practices to better know and serve our students. We have committed to reframing policies and procedures as needed to ensure student success. We made leadership changes and are adjusting to new styles, experiences, and perspectives. We successfully launched new graduate programs and improved articulation agreements with institutions from which students transfer (or could transfer) to Carlow. We committed to expanding our external partnerships here and abroad. We advanced our technological capacity for systems integration and for instructional delivery. We expanded our course-based service learning opportunities and designed effective coordination of service activities. We have recognized a broader profile of our student body and we are finding better ways to meet their diverse learning needs. We redesigned the organizational structure of the Student Government Association to represent all students. We restructured the Staff Assembly to better engage staff in achieving the goals of the University. Under the leadership of the provost and the co-chairs of the Faculty Assembly and the Faculty Senate, we have experienced a renewed engagement in strategic issues and effective collaborations. In order to achieve an enhanced level of strategic governance of the University, we established the new University Leadership Council and we restructured committees and agendas of the Board of Trustees.

Throughout this year, we explored new approaches to identifying who our students are, what they need to learn, and how we can best educate them to meet 21st-century learning goals, technology applications, employment skills, and critical assessment of what is happening in their world. Last year, the trustees approved a five-year Strategic Plan, and this year we have begun to implement the strategic initiatives and action plans which will move Carlow University to a new level of academic excellence and student engagement in the context of our mission and multiple identities.

What is emerging is an agenda for significant change which builds on our past traditions and successes and which is consistent with our mission and values.

We are positioned to further enhance the quality of our academic culture, curriculum, expectations, and services. Since we recognize that the curriculum is the key to effective learning, we are clarifying the total and unique Carlow experience for every student by focusing on the learner through the curriculum. By aligning the curriculum with this learner-centered focus, we seek a comprehensive approach to student persistence and to their academic achievement of essential learning outcomes. By considering what students actually do in learning, we will find new ways to empower them “to think clearly and creatively and to actively pursue intellectual endeavors.” By focusing on their total learning experience, we will further enable them “to discover, challenge, or affirm cultural and aesthetic values” by applying their learning to new settings and problems they encounter in their 21st-century world and workplace.

As we transition to achieving our first strategic goal of enhanced academic quality at Carlow University, we chose to fully focus on the learner because we know that learning is the essential nature of an institution of higher education. In evaluating our curricular design and delivery for our current and future learners, we have asked the questions: Who are the learners of the 21st century? Whom do we now serve? How could we serve them better? Who could or should Carlow be serving who are not now enrolled here? In answering these questions, we used a culture of evidence derived from meaningful quantitative and qualitative data now more readily available to us in our newly implemented integrated information system. We are examining current successful practices of curricular design and learning theories. We are engaged in structured dialogues on strategic enrollment management. These discussions are increasing our understanding of our learners, their learning styles and educational preferences, and we are identifying challenges regarding their success. We are laying a new groundwork for a singular focus on the development of a student retention and persistence system which will engage students more fully in their learning from first year through graduation. In the process, we are increasing

our capacity for effective assessment of student learning and student services, which we will incorporate into a model of overall institutional effectiveness.

The next component in our focus on our broadly diverse learner population will be to understand the objectives of these learners. What do the learners of the 21st century seek? What are their objectives? How do these objectives change in the course of their lives? Research-based evidence and reviews of best practice have become fundamental components in answering these questions and in designing the overall structure and intent of the curriculum, in providing needed services to ensure student success, and in assessing the achievement of their learning goals.

In advancing Carlow University’s second strategic goal of enhancing students engagement in their total learning experience, we are assessing learner-centered support services. We have asked ourselves: How do we support student learning? Does what we currently provide match what our students need? Again, using evidence and best practices, we are evaluating multiple aspects of our current student support services. We now recognize the need to reengineer many of our processes for greater efficiency and effectiveness in serving the learning needs of our students. We now have the power available to leverage new capabilities provided by an integrated administrative system. We have found that the implementation of Datatel, while challenging, has provided us with the opportunity to re-examine many of our internal processes and has enhanced our ability to collect and exchange information for a more comprehensive understanding of the elements needed to improve student support services and institutional decision making. We have recognized the need to be more cross-functional, inclusive, and inter-dependent in developing and implementing academic and student policies. We have developed a three-year action plan which will significantly improve our services to students. The first major step in that plan is to evaluate our existing advising system in the context of best practices and lessons learned. This will, in turn, lay the foundation for our efforts to retain students and assist them in their persistence to graduation.

We are continuing to expand our use of technology to improve student learning and student services.

Of significance in technological enhancements this year are further implementations of our integrated data system, a new e-mail system, and an upgraded Blackboard learning management system which will result in greater use of technology in teaching. In February, we launched the first phase of a Web portal to provide ease of access to University information, to create better channels of communication for the University community, and to establish a space for electronic collaboration among faculty, staff, students, alumnae, and trustees.

We might ask: Why all this emphasis on *the learner* in our implementation of strategic goals for enhanced academic quality and student engagement? Has not this always been our focus at Carlow University? The answer acknowledges the concept of continuous improvement. However, in the final analysis, the answer is not only found by better use of data and technology and by incorporating successful educational practices about how 21st-century students learn most effectively. These are methods or means to an end, and they answer the question of *how* we will best serve our students. But to answer the *why* question, our answer goes beyond method and means to the actual goal or end of our educational mission. We focus our attention on the learner because justice requires it of us. It answers the question: What do we owe students whom we have admitted to Carlow University? We must continuously think not only about *how* but primarily about *why* we must best serve those who invest in us for a quality education and who believe in our promises. To give students that to which they are entitled in committing their education and some aspects of their future to us, we need to fulfill our duty of stewardship to them. This is accomplished by being steeped in the knowledge of academic and student services disciplines, but also by knowing students' educational needs and how they will learn best, given their learning styles, preferences, and challenges. We then need to teach to how students learn and to provide instructional delivery and support services in the most effective way to enable those students to achieve their educational goals. Our mission obliges us to provide our students with a quality education which will prepare them for their world and the professions they will enter, serve, lead, and change. In the spirit of Catherine McAuley, we must respond to the needs of our time and thus, to the new learning

needs in the marketplace of the 21st century. As educators, we must adapt to changes in our world, in those whom we serve, and in how we teach and serve our students. Our values must become visible in how we transform our structures and practices to accomplish our mission.

The University's third major initiative embedded in our Strategic Plan provides the context for our commitment to academic quality and student engagement. It calls us to a deeper understanding of our sacred mission and multiple identities, and to a more conscious incorporation of the values they represent. Carlow's core values stem from our mission and from these identities, and they underpin the education and experience we provide to our students. In continuing dialogues, we are asking ourselves: What does it mean to be a Catholic institution? a Mercy-sponsored institution? a liberal arts/liberal learning institution? a women-centered institution? We are finding that current answers to questions around these multiple identities vary widely, and we seek a common understanding and context for instruction, service, action, and transformation as an institution which holistically embraces all these identities.

Carlow University launched its current academic year with a focus on the meaning, measures, and methodologies of Catholic social teaching. Through faculty leadership, we have begun community conversations on this topic which will continue through the year. Members of our learning community are engaged in other dialogues on aspects and ambiguities of our identities. Carlow is participating in several national projects, including one on emerging practices linking general education and mission at Catholic colleges and universities, which are grounded on elements of Catholic Social Teaching and the Catholic Intellectual Tradition. Faculty, staff, and students have made presentations at conferences addressing the critical concerns of the Sisters of Mercy, and incorporating the Mercy commitment to justice and service into the culture and curriculum of the University. We continue to espouse our mission imperative: "to respond reverently to God and others, and to embrace an ethic of service for a just and merciful world," and we will do so with greater clarity, consensus, and commitment to what it means to do

this from the base of a common understanding of who we are as educators in this particular institution and what we are called to contribute to our community.

Carlow's commitment to providing an intellectual and ethical understanding of justice has engaged our students this year in reflective and effective political action and courageous service. In responding to the recent G-20 Economic Summit and to participating in the coalition against taxing tuition, our students have put justice theory into practice. Our Mercy tradition of service to others has led us to establish the Center for Mercy Service to coordinate and further foster service activities. Our emerging response to the crisis in Haiti and our Spring Break service trip (this year, to Laredo, Texas) enable us to reach out to those who are suffering and who need a merciful response. The participation of our students in the Bishop's annual Commissioning Liturgy reminds them of the real reason why they engage in service: to respond reverently to God and others wherever they see their sisters and brothers in need.

Thus, we are making significant progress on the three strategic initiatives identified in our Strategic Plan: Academic Quality, Student Engagement, and Embracing our Identities. I am proud of the work of so many to advance this agenda, and I am confident that we will all continue to focus on being a learning community committed to the education and engagement of our students in the fullest expression of our mission, identity, and values. We can be proud of our past record of helping students succeed, but we must address current realities in our ongoing challenge to help students learn.

Return in your mind to those three experiences we identified at the start of this report, and commit with me to fulfilling the aspirations they represented: the opportunity for a great education, the joy of achieving academic goals, and gratitude for having been a part of the futures of these students. But consider once again your memory of the Matriculation Ceremony when we welcomed first-year students into our learning community. What potential group of students might we have missed in our efforts to provide a quality education to those able to benefit from it? Are there students we are not attracting to Carlow, and if so, why? How might we engage them with us? Revisit your memory of our Commencement. What about the students who did not graduate because they ceased their enrollment at

Carlow? Did we meet our obligations to those students whom we admitted to Carlow? Why did those students not persist to graduation, and what can we do differently to enable them to achieve that success?

The transitions we have achieved this year and those which are yet to emerge reflect needed changes within a context of continuous improvement on behalf of those students we serve and could serve. We are transitioning from a place of being good at what we do to a place where we will be better at facilitating our students' educational goals. Through assessment of our programs, services, and student learning outcomes, we will maintain what works and build on it, and we will reject what is not working and replace it with best practices—all the while improving what we do.

Implementing these changes will take courage as we recognize what needs to be transformed and embrace the required changes. 'Courage' derives from the Latin word for heart. We need to take heart in our mission, to commit our hearts to our learners, and to act from our hearts on their behalf. However well we teach and translate our intellectual understanding of our disciplines to our students, we must also recognize that there is much we do not know about these students and about current learning theories and technologies to be best able to help them learn and achieve their educational goals. This is what our own continuous learning should include. We must have the courage to think differently about what we do for students, and about how we engage them in their learning. What would every office of the University look like if we brought to each day that focus on the student which we experienced at the Top Scholars Reception, at Matriculation, at Commencement? What would we do differently in our offices and in developing academic and student policies if we acted daily on our belief that students come first and that their successful learning is our obligation as well as theirs? How can we better make our values visible in every encounter with students and with each other? What does Carlow need to improve to become more fully a learner-centered University? What could we do differently to prepare students for the world of today? Student learning will always be the end we seek in all we do at Carlow. To assist students to fully engage in their learning, we must reconsider the means we use in the process. This is an optimistic view

of our responsibilities: we realize the opportunity we have to reach new heights in our work, and we welcome the challenge to help students reach new heights in their learning. With the courage of our convictions, we may find ways to do better what we already do well. The students who have chosen or who will choose Carlow are the students we have the opportunity to educate. But they are not, in large measure, the students we have taught in the past or perhaps the students we wished had chosen Carlow for their education. In increasing our knowledge of the students who come to us with their abilities and hopes, we will better fulfill our mission.

In considering the need for courage in this task and in our ministry as educators, we reflect on the words of Catherine McAuley: “Speak as your mind directs, and always act with courage.” She faced challenges in her ministry of service—challenges which were the result of the dark times in which she lived. It has been said that “darkness could not dim her spirit nor could uneasiness of the times shake her purpose.” Catherine McAuley demonstrated courage grounded in faith in her God-given mission, hope in her God-given strength, and love of those whom she served.

We, too, are working in difficult times and under often difficult circumstances. We recognize how our times affect our mission of education, and how courage and hope matter in transforming our systems and our students. The economy continues to present external challenges to us over which we have little control, but which influence how we function, what we are able to support, and how students finance their education. They and we continue to feel the effects of unemployment and the recession: on job availability, raises, and security; on ability to enroll and on University enrollments; on budgets, loans and debt—theirs and ours; on financing homes and on facilities improvements; on being current with technology and its applications in an ever-changing electronic world; on needing and soliciting donor funds to support them and us. Predictions are that the economy will not rebound soon, and so we will continue to manage and allocate limited resources carefully, to consider the financial needs of students when we make decisions, and to provide good stewardship of the human and financial gifts that are entrusted to us.

I challenge all of us to be open to new ideas and courageous in developing new processes as we engage

our students of the 21st century at a time of significant economic and societal change. While maintaining fixed institutional mission and values, we must also change. This transitional time of introspection and assessment at the University spurs us to chart a course to transform our institution, our students, and each other in this learning community. The current State of the University is one of transition to transformation in the context of what both our traditions and the times demand of us and of our students. As we consider the transformations we will choose, we are reminded of the saying: “The best time to plant a tree was 10 years ago. The second best time is now.” During our 80-year history, our institution has been transformed in ways directed by mission, designed by values, and dictated by the times. In the spirit of Catherine McAuley, we again have the opportunity “to see what the next great need is,” and to embrace it courageously with a full commitment to those whom we have been called to serve.

In affirming our commitment to fulfilling our sacred mission as educators at this Catholic, Mercy, liberal arts, women-centered institution, I reiterate this final message of the 2009 State of the University Address. I believe in the good will, talent, and commitment of colleagues at every level and in every function of this University. We each have chosen to serve at Carlow, to embrace its mission, and to contribute to its success and the success of our students. We have faith and hope that we will each deliver on our promises. Our sponsoring Sisters of Mercy share in that faith and hope, and have given us the mission we embrace. Our students have placed their faith and hope in us as well: that we will deliver on the promise of a Carlow education grounded in the values and in the freeing effects of a liberal education in the context of the Catholic intellectual tradition. As a learning community, we journey with our students and with each other in our continuing pursuit of wisdom. This is the true state of our University!

*Carlow University, a Catholic, women-centered, liberal arts institution embodying the heritage and values of the Sisters of Mercy, engages its diverse community in a process of life-long learning, scholarship, and research. This engagement empowers individuals to think clearly and creatively; to actively pursue intellectual endeavors; to discover, challenge, or affirm cultural and aesthetic values; to respond reverently to God and others; and to embrace an ethic of service for a just and merciful world.*