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Maureen Fay O.P.

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## University of Detroit and Mercy College

# How Two Schools Grew Together

By Maureen Fay, O.P.

**A** few years ago, Professor David O'Brien and I were presented the Arrupe Award at the University of Scranton. As part of that convocation, we were asked to speak about our experience of Jesuit mission and identity ... an experience usually interesting, sometimes funny, but always serious. We decided that the informal title of our presentation would be "Jesuits and the Rest of Us." The rest of us, of course, are the significant number of lay women and men as well as some religious, like myself, who are collaborators in this ministry of Jesuit (and in my case Jesuit and Mercy) Catholic higher education.

Allow me to share how the place we call the University of Detroit Mercy began. I must admit the beginning of the idea to join the University of Detroit and Mercy College of Detroit was rather casual. My partner in this important endeavor was Fr. Robert Mitchell, S.J., then president of the University of Detroit. I was president of Mercy College. We were both attending a meeting of Detroit Catholic college and university presidents. During the luncheon break he began talking about things that our two institutions might do together. Why, he asked, should we be competing for students rather than collaborating on programs as one institution? I must admit that during the remainder of that meeting I was more than distracted by his question. We agreed to meet later in that week to explore what such a collaboration might mean. I do not intend to describe in detail the work

that went on for the next two and a half years, only to write that after extensive study and planning undertaken by the two boards, the faculties, the administrators, and the staff the University of Detroit Mercy came into being in June 1990. I was elected to become UDM's first president, a position I held for the next 14 years.

An old Jesuit proverb goes something like this: Bernard loved the valleys, Benedict the mountains, Francis the towns; Ignatius loved great cities. I think I could safely assert that Catherine McAuley, the foundress of the Sisters of Mercy, also loved the cities. Both founders, Ignatius and Catherine, discovered the heart of their ministries in the great cities of the world. In 1990 the questions before us were: How does commitment to a place influence the shape and success of our ministry? How can the University of Detroit Mercy legitimately integrate the justice of solidarity and compassionate service in a globalizing world into its academic and educational mission?

Part of the answer to those questions depended on an understanding of the choices that the two legacy institutions made during their histories. Those histories represent not a

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*Maureen Fay, O.P., was president of Mercy College of Detroit (1983-1990) and president of the University of Detroit Mercy (1990-2004); she was also the director of the AJCU seminar on Jesuit higher education.*



University of Detroit Mercy.

single choice but rather a series of choices. The University of Detroit was a foundation that responded to the call of the Church in a growing urban center. When Bp. Casper Borgess invited the Jesuits to open the College of Detroit in 1877, the population of the city was close to 100,000, and industry had begun to flourish, moving Detroit towards the industrial giant it would later become. The Church in the city was predominantly made up of foreign-born people not long removed from Europe. Bishop Borgess hoped that those first Jesuits would create a Catholic university that “would produce people who would give a healthy tone to society, to defend and practice the noble virtues of honor, justice and truth.” (Herman Muller, S.J., *The University of Detroit 1877-1977*, p. xi) When Sister Carmelita Manning, the founding provincial of the Detroit Province of the Sisters of Mercy, opened Mercy College in 1941, her vision was to prepare women for careers of useful service to the Church and the community through an education that combined excellent professional preparation with a rigorous foundation in the arts and sciences, inspired always by the Mercy dedication to compassionate service to those in need.

Those were their beginnings. But as we examined their history over time, we observed that they both continued to

contribute to the educational demands of the city around them. In addition to the liberal arts, we noted the establishment of a law school, a dental school, advanced nursing and health programs, social work, science, technology, colleges of engineering, business, and architecture, graduate programs in religious studies, education, and other disciplines in the humanities and sciences – all responses to the needs of the civic, business, and faith communities.

During the turmoil of the 1960s, both institutions remained committed to Detroit, once more affirming their commitment to the city and its needs. As the population of the city began to change, as the phenomenon of “white flight” became a reality, both institutions chose to stay even as the city of Detroit faced more and more problems.

But staying, despite enormous pressure to move, was not enough. It was clear to both institutions that if they were to be responsive to new groups of students other strategies must be undertaken. Hence initiatives like Project 100 were begun – efforts to successfully incorporate these new students into college and university life. There were many choices that were made during the tumultuous years of the 60’s and 70’s – choices that demonstrated once again an unwavering sense that Detroit was the place that would

remain home and its future would directly impact both institutions. Many contributions were made during those years, contributions both educational and civic, that demonstrated this commitment.

What difference does this University of Detroit Mercy make for Detroit and the region at the front edge of the 21st century? How does it, through the academic programs, educate students to live, work, and contribute in a world that is far different from the world of 1887, 1941, or even 1990? How are students prepared to grasp issues such as globalization, immigration of people and jobs, the evolution of technology, and the phenomenon of “shrinking cities?” As other urban universities address difficult times, here are a few examples of how Detroit Mercy responds.

### ***Immigration***

Detroit is situated on an international border. Scores of immigrants, particularly from countries of the former Soviet Union, are making their way into Detroit looking for refuge and stability. The Immigration Clinic sponsored by the Archdiocese of Detroit and the university’s School of Law assists these men and women in clarifying their legal status as well as in acting as a reference to other agencies that will assist them in finding shelter and employment. These efforts are more than service, for they expose students to the grim realities of international migration and its social and economic impact. The Detroit region provides UDM with an opportunity to participate both in understanding the challenge and in contributing to the solution – drawing deeply from religious convictions rooted in a dedication to justice, solidarity, and compassion.

### ***Shrinking Cities***

Detroit, like many cities in the industrial crescent, is plagued with migration, deteriorating infrastructures, and poverty. Revitalizing the city is a task of enormous proportion. How has the university assisted in this task? One response is the Detroit Collaborative Design Center – a center situated in the School of Architecture which works with community groups and other not-for-profit organizations in designing structures that reflect both beauty and utility, contributing to the revitalization of the city and its neighborhoods.

### ***Health and Wellness***

No one needs to be reminded of the crisis in health care particularly for the poor and the uninsured. The challenge is both a local and national one. The UDM College of Health Professions is reaching out with students and faculty in establishing clinics throughout the city in an attempt to provide basic services in health education and disease prevention. Similarly, the School of Dentistry continues its work at the clinics it operates both at the university and in the core city. The dental school is one of only two in the state of

Michigan, and many of its graduates serve people in the greater Detroit area.

### ***Community Involvement***

There are so many examples that illustrate the university’s commitment to its urban location, examples that demonstrate how the city affects the university and how the university has an impact on the city. The faculty and students of the College of Engineering and Science work with hundreds of inner-city children in a recognized program that encourages these young students to consider careers in engineering and science – encouragement that gives testimony to their dignity, their possibilities, and their hopes. The honors program in the College of Liberal Arts and Education and the Leadership Development Institute both demand that students volunteer significant time in various areas of need. Finally, the Institute for Leadership and Service is an initiative whose mission is to “provide opportunities for all members of the UDM community to engage in social change for the common good.”

All of these efforts demonstrate ways in which UDM acts out its faith-inspired mission of justice, solidarity, and compassionate service. These initiatives include opportunities that integrate the theoretical dimensions of the various experiences. Consistent analyses enable students to learn how these local conditions have ramifications regionally, nationally, and internationally. These activities, in or out of the classrooms and labs, are supported by research and teaching that searches for a deeper understanding of the complexities of this world, thus enabling the university to continue educating students who will lead and serve in their communities. Creating the University of Detroit Mercy meant that its educators in the Mercy and Jesuit traditions would be serious about the university’s commitment to educate men and women of justice and compassion. They continue to summon their talents as philosophers, theologians, historians, and writers to assist the students – in the words of the poet Dana Gioia – “to rise out of their self-referential world” and offer their talents in a wider context that demands consistent participation in the larger society. (Dana Gioia, “Can Poetry Matter?” *Atlantic Monthly*, May 1991). They must continue to be courageous enough to rise out of their own self-referential world in order to fulfill the mission given to them by Ignatius and Catherine. It is only in taking to heart the mission of the University of Detroit Mercy that all its people can have an impact on Detroit.

There is no doubt in my mind that the city has had an impact on UDM; its needs have helped shape its programs, its directions, and its future. And in this time of new issues for Detroit, the UDM community surely renews its resolve to continue having an influence on the city by its understanding of and participation in a tradition rooted in faith and committed to justice and compassion. UDM’s founders would ask for no less. ■