

President wants NDMU mission to grow

By Paul McMullen

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Dr. James F. Conneely will be inaugurated as the 12th president of Notre Dame of Maryland University in Baltimore April 5. The first male to hold the position in the 118-year history of the first Catholic college for women in the U.S. to grant four-year degrees, Conneely came to Baltimore last July from Eastern Kentucky University, where he was vice president for student affairs.

His previous stops include Villanova University and St. Bonaventure, where he did his undergraduate work. He and his wife, Becky, are parishioners of the Cathedral of Mary Our Queen in Homeland, and the younger of their two daughters is a junior at Notre Dame Preparatory School.

The Catholic Review interviewed Conneely March 21.

Q. Has your vision for the institution changed since you began the job last summer?

A. It's crystallizing. I spent the first six, seven months asking a lot of questions. There are a couple of things we're doing differently. We have a planning council, for the next reiteration of our strategic plan, the next four to five years. We have academics, faculty from each of the colleges and schools, student representation.

We will grow the enrollment in the women's college. The classroom experience is second to none, and I want to build upon that by giving the students in our women's college experiential opportunities through internships, co-ops, study abroad, and continue with service and undergraduate research opportunities.

I want them to have international experience, because I think it's crucial. We want to grow our international enrollment; that adds richness to the discussions in the classroom and to the ability of our U.S. students to think globally and to be successful in a global environment.

Look at our center for Health Sciences. We have a great school of Pharmacy, a school of Nursing. How do we continue to advance in the Health Sciences area? It's a way to serve Baltimore, a way to serve Maryland, a way to serve nationally.

Q. In regard to the experiential aspect, have you forged any new partnerships in Baltimore?

A. We have 15 to 16 partnerships with hospitals and with some other health care providers. We are looking at our School of Education. We are the No. 1 provider of teachers in Maryland among private schools. We've been a leader in STEM

education, and we're looking at short-term academies for students, faculty and others during the summer through our education schools. That's still in the formative stages.

Q. Are there any new research possibilities in the works?

A. We have some very talented faculty who have great research agendas. Graduate programs want to know: can you apply what you have learned to research? I love to see our undergraduate students have more research opportunities. Think about the relationship when teacher and student are collaborating on research projects, that synergy and learning are second to none.

Q. Where does enrollment stand, and is there a goal there?

A. About 2,700 FTE (full-time equivalent) students, 1,350 for graduate, 1,350 undergraduate. The women's (undergraduate) college, in the next four years, we can grow a hundred or so students.

Q. What is it like to be at a college where students are known by their name, and not their student ID number?

A. That is the reason I came here. One of the reasons I went back to a small private institution, you are able to make an impact in a larger way. I think the students appreciate that. I think they like the fact that they can get to know me. I see them, maybe sometimes when they don't want me to.

Q. What has been your biggest adjustment to Baltimore?

A. It has not been a tough adjustment at all. The thing I kid about, I have not had to eat at a chain restaurant since I moved here, there are so many different places, varieties, my wife and I enjoy that. Having lived in Atlanta, Philly, New York, this (traffic) is nothing.

This is my last move. I wanted to president at a small Catholic college, and I've gotten that dream fulfilled

Q. How do you adjust to being leader of all-female college?

A. It would have been very easy for the senior class to blow me off. They were here with Dr. (Mary Pat) Seurkamp and had a lot of love for her, but the senior class has embraced me. They've invited me to their functions, it's like we were together since their freshman year. Growing up with sisters and having two teenaged daughters, I think I had a fairly good understanding of the female psyche.

Q. How are the School Sisters of Notre Dame an asset to the mission?

A. They have been the greatest cheerleaders, in their support for the mission. My mission training was with Sister Eileen O'Dea; she helped me understand the charism of the School Sisters and the mission of the institution.

The School Sisters will push. They're innovative, they're creative, they love this institution. They also give me a historical perspective, not just what's on paper, so much history, they can give you the ins and outs of what is not in writing.

It's nice for me to live my faith through my vocation. I want our students to recognize there is a standard of personal satisfaction they need to strive for, not just a standard for living.

Q. This is a pivotal moment in the global push for women's rights. How important is it that the School Sisters have a track record there?

A. It reaffirms that a women's college is still relevant. The experiences our students have are empowering. They realize they can make a difference, not just here on campus, but by being a leader, an advocate, for those issues globally.

Q. Besides the global perspective, how do you address the need right here in Baltimore?

A. One of our core values is service and giving back. Besides our School of Pharmacy, our School of Nursing, we have a whole area of service learning run through campus ministry. Our students work in inner city schools, charities, Head Start. The world is getting smaller. Our students can have an impact globally now, because of technology, but they still have a responsibility to the community in which they live. Wherever you are located, you have an obligation to serve that community. We're supposed to be agents of change, promote institutional discussion and solve problems. We can't do that in isolation

For a complete listing of inauguration events, [click here](#).

Also see:

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