

**PRESIDENTIAL
PERSPECTIVES**



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2009/2010 SERIES: **LEADERSHIP IN THE GREAT RECESSION**

CHAPTER THREE

**TRANSFORMING
A COLLEGE INTO A UNIVERSITY**

Transforming a College into a University

Dr. Rosemary Jeffries: President, Georgian Court University

Georgian Court University is one of approximately 77 higher education institutions in the past six years to move from the status of college to university¹. We became Georgian Court University in 2004, but transforming to Georgian Court University, The Mercy University of New Jersey is still a work in progress.

This article will outline the steps that helped us reach the goal of attaining university status and point toward key phases of our continual growth becoming The Mercy University of New Jersey with all the challenge that the name implies for the campus. The transition from college to university needs to be one part of a history that embraces change; requires processes to engage many stakeholders; and demands investment of time, talent, and treasure. In February 2004, Georgian Court College was granted the status of university by the state of New Jersey.

The state decision to grant Georgian Court University status was a cause for celebration on campus and by alumnae. It was the impetus to change the logo and develop new marketing tools and memorabilia. Six years later, the Georgian Court Campus Community continues to plan how we will become a more comprehensive university in our region serving new generations of students in our Catholic Mercy tradition.

Georgian Court's story of becoming a university is rooted in a tradition of embracing change to meet new and emerging societal needs over a long history. The school started in 1908 as Mount Saint Mary College, a liberal arts school for women, granting degrees to women before they even had the right to vote. Then the college relocated to another town in South Jersey and changed its name to Georgian Court College before a silver anniversary—all steps that represented major changes. Change continued with the addition of professional degrees in education, business, and nursing, as well as graduate programs open to men and women. Each transformation challenged the administration, faculty, and staff to embrace new challenges and adapt structures.

Visioning and planning set us on the path together as board, faculty, staff, students, and administration.

FOOTNOTES

¹ Source: IPEDS 2004–2009

In 2001, as the eighth president of Georgian Court, I inherited an institution ready for revisioning itself once again. It was an institution with a broad program of educational offerings at both the bachelor and master level, and it was an institution with enormous potential.

“Walking the Path Together” was the theme of my inauguration ceremonies, designed as a celebration of the mission and the Mercy core values of Georgian Court. The Mercy values of respect, integrity, compassion, justice, and service were foundational elements for creating a plan for the future. Highlighting their importance in inaugural events set the stage for the process of visioning and planning. In the first months of my term, I invited the whole Georgian Court community to vision with me. I asked simply, “Where will Georgian Court be in the next five years?” I received input from every sector of the campus and then invited a group of key administrators, staff, students, and faculty to participate in a visioning retreat. We drafted a vision statement and then returned to campus to test it, revise it, and embrace a version that worked for everyone. The vision was enthusiastically embraced by the trustees who saw it as forwarding the mission of Georgian Court.

Here is the vision statement we boldly proclaimed in those initial months:

Georgian Court University is a Mercy university distinguished by a special concern for women. We are committed to academic excellence and Mercy Core values. We educate and empower students to succeed, serve and lead in a diverse local and global community.² (November, 2001)

That three-sentence vision became the work of the ensuing months and focused everyone on clear goals. Energized through the visioning process, the campus community engaged in creating a strategic plan to make the vision a reality. Visioning and planning set us on the path together as board, faculty, staff, students, and administration.

Many members of the community stepped forward to serve on the seven committees: University Status, Academic Excellence, Community Engagement, Concern for Women, Mercy Core Values, Student Empowerment—Leadership and Success, and Global Character. Those 78 members then began the work of identifying and assessing the environment, developing a direction, and working with the college community at large to create a plan to transform the college. The plan was aimed at meeting the vision, namely: enhanced academic excellence and student empowerment; increased civic engagement, celebrating our Mercy heritage; and becoming a university.

FOOTNOTES

² We wrote this statement in the present tense to be truly active. The mission of Georgian Court delineates clearly the parameters that complement the vision. It reads:

“Georgian Court University, founded and sponsored by the Sisters of Mercy, provides a comprehensive liberal arts education in the Roman Catholic tradition. The University has a special concern for women and is a dynamic community committed to the core values of justice, respect, integrity, compassion, and service, locally and globally.

Georgian Court University provides students with: a curriculum broad enough to be truly liberal, yet specialized enough to support further study and future careers; an environment for the entire community to grow through shared educational, cultural, social and spiritual experiences; and the will to translate concern for social justice into action.”

Between November 2001 and April 2002, committees, discussion groups, and forums met at breakfast, lunch, and dinner in the dining hall and across campus. Groups explored, surveyed, researched, and drafted reports. The plans were periodically shared with yet larger groups at campus-wide conversations. From that process, an integrated strategic plan was developed to make the future of Georgian Court College the reality of Georgian Court University. The plan had some high hopes along with some very practical steps for moving the vision along. Though not all of the initial plans created in this process came to fruition, at least 75 percent of the plan became reality in the ensuing years. More importantly, the plan and vision involved a wide range of stakeholders and it did move the institution toward critical improvements and new directions.

To spearhead the specific effort to seek university status, I appointed a special assistant to the president for university status. This individual coordinated the development of a formal petition to the state and gathered all the appropriate documentation needed to confirm our demographics and statistics.

When first considering the transition from a college to a university, I knew Georgian Court suffered from low visibility, low brand recognition, and an outdated image as a girls' finishing school. We were the best-kept secret in New Jersey. The need for comprehensive marketing and a refreshed image was critical to the future of the college and essential if we were to transition to university status. In fact, the name change offered a unique opportunity to transform our image.

Branding and image were new concepts to Georgian Court. We asked ourselves, "What makes Georgian Court stand out in the crowded marketplace of New Jersey?" "What experience can we give students that no one else can?" Starting the process of getting the right message points, image and marketing strategy needed to begin well in advance of achieving university status. We needed to be ready to announce our good news with a totally new look and a clear sense of our image.

Higher education branding always begins with research. Branding requires shifting from an institutional perspective to a marketplace perspective. According to research, these are Georgian Court's distinctive attributes:

- Mercy core values as number one
- Small class size—a 1:14 faculty/student ratio
- Caring faculty members who deliver student-centered learning
- A safe and historic campus steeped in tradition
- Leadership in education
- Access and success for diverse students

We invested in a \$1.2 million, 18-month integrated multimedia marketing plan inclusive of all enrollment, special events, and public relations efforts in order to coordinate a unified message in support of the position of Georgian Court as The Mercy University of New Jersey. We also set a goal to expand our market statewide and to selected national markets in nearby New York and Philadelphia.

We positioned ourselves as The Mercy University of New Jersey, highlighting key distinctive attributes and claiming our unique place as the newest University in the state and only the second Catholic University in the state. Our name change was accompanied by a new logo that immediately conveyed tradition in the form of a column, and it was enhanced by a new tagline: “A tradition of excellence...a future of success.” This plan included all print, online, and electronic media and extended to everything from stationery and business cards to external signage on campus.

We established our visual identity, changing the college colors to a bold gold and electric blue. We worked on visual distinctiveness, consistency in voice and graphics, and clarity of message points. The preliminary work to ready our message and image helped us to launch a full media campaign to announce our new status as Georgian Court University on the day the state granted us the title.

Lessons from the quest to become a university are still guidelines for the ongoing development of Georgian Court. Our story from 2001 through our attainment of university status included launching and successfully completing our first comprehensive fundraising campaign, building six new structures, adding ten new degree offerings, realigning our core curriculum, and developing an integrated plan for academic and student life. Change continues at Georgian Court and adapting to new needs requires new solutions. So while we pursued our goal of becoming a university, we remained focused on becoming a better and better college.

For example, we revised our vision statement again in 2006 to set a new challenge for ourselves. That statement reads:

Georgian Court University (GCU) is a thriving Mercy university in the Catholic tradition contributing to the local and world communities through its merciful competent graduates who lead and serve. GCU includes both an outstanding Women’s College and the coeducational University College educating women and men in undergraduate and graduate degree programs (November 2006).

To develop this refreshed statement, we engaged the campus once again in a process and in 2007 revised the strategic plan to include new initiatives to achieve the new vision and better respond to emerging trends and needs of students. Again there is investment of time, talent, and treasure in the ongoing quest to become more and more worthy of the title Georgian Court University, The Mercy University of New Jersey.

Our most recent centennial celebration in 2008 gave us a great opportunity to position the university through events that highlight our core values once again. Major events included:

- Academic symposia focusing on student faculty research
 - Community service marathons that included 1,200 hours of contributed service by faculty, staff, and students
 - A women’s conference, including nationally renowned speakers
 - Opportunities for quiet reflection and meaningful rituals to mark 100 years of history and dream of the next 100 years
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For Georgian Court, becoming a university is more than a name change, new logo, and great press coverage. It is a process that has milestones that must begin long before the name change, and it needs to continue long after.

Becoming a university is one part of a goal; the more important goal is determining what kind of university the institution intends to become. For a college to be a comprehensive university requires ongoing adaptation to new needs. To thrive, there must be ongoing focus on stewardship and persistent attention to core values.

The transformation of a college to a university is a story, a process, and an investment that does not really end if the university is invested in transforming student lives. Both current and future higher education students deserve an institution with a proud history and a tradition that becomes theirs. Students deserve an institution that is anxious to include them in developing the future with faculty and staff through new visioning and planning processes. New and future students deserve an institution that continues to invest in becoming an ever-improving and adapting thriving university.



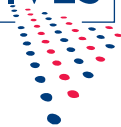
About the Author

Dr. Rosemary E. Jeffries, RSM, became the eighth president of Georgian Court University in Lakewood, New Jersey on July 1, 2001. Dr. Jeffries brought with her an understanding of higher education and both secular and religious leadership experience and has led the university through unprecedented growth since she took the helm.

Dr. Jeffries shepherded the 100-year-old institution through the awarding of university status in February 2004. Since her inauguration, Dr. Jeffries spearheaded the highly successful campaign for Georgian Court, which raised \$17.2 million and transformed the campus with \$54 million in renovation and new construction, including six new buildings and a strong vision based on the Mercy core values. She has championed a leadership program for the Women's College of Georgian Court, and diversified and expanded academic offerings by establishing the Georgian Court Meridian Health School of Nursing and adding new majors, such as dance; exercise science, wellness, and sports; and tourism, hospitality, and recreation management.

Dr. Jeffries, a native of Ocean City, New Jersey, holds a Ph.D. in sociology from Fordham University, an M.A. in religious studies from Princeton Theological Seminary, an M.A. in public communications from Fordham, and a B.A. in art education from Georgian Court College.

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