

CATHOLIC HIGHER EDUCATION: ITS ORIGINS IN THE UNITED STATES AND WESTERN PENNSYLVANIA

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Higher education is one of the most visible ministries of the Catholic Church in the United States. There are over 200 American Catholic colleges and universities, nine of which are located in Western Pennsylvania. Although many of these institutions today are modern, comprehensive universities, their origins were frequently much humbler, and they often came into existence only by overcoming major challenges and obstacles.

The story of Catholic higher education in America is a fascinating one, and the Pittsburgh area played a significant role in its development. Western Pennsylvania's Catholic colleges were typical in many ways, but also played an important role in shaping the Church's approach to higher education nationally. This article will discuss the early history of Catholic higher education in the United States, especially as it influenced (and was influenced by) the Pittsburgh region.

The First American Catholic Colleges

Prior to independence, Catholics could not legally operate colleges in Pennsylvania or any of the thirteen colonies. Despite this, early Jesuit missionaries sponsored a handful of underground grammar schools in Maryland – the one English colony where significant numbers of Catholics had settled. Those humble schools, none of which lasted more than a few years, represented the unofficial and rather subversive origins of Catholic education in this country.¹

It was only after the U.S. Constitution brought an end to the discriminatory laws of the colonial era that Catholics could openly establish schools of any kind. It did not take them long to take advantage of that freedom. In 1789, the Holy See established the Diocese of Baltimore – a single diocese covering the entire new country. John Carroll, a former Jesuit from a prominent Maryland family, was appointed its first bishop and wasted no time in establishing America's first Catholic college – Georgetown – that same year.

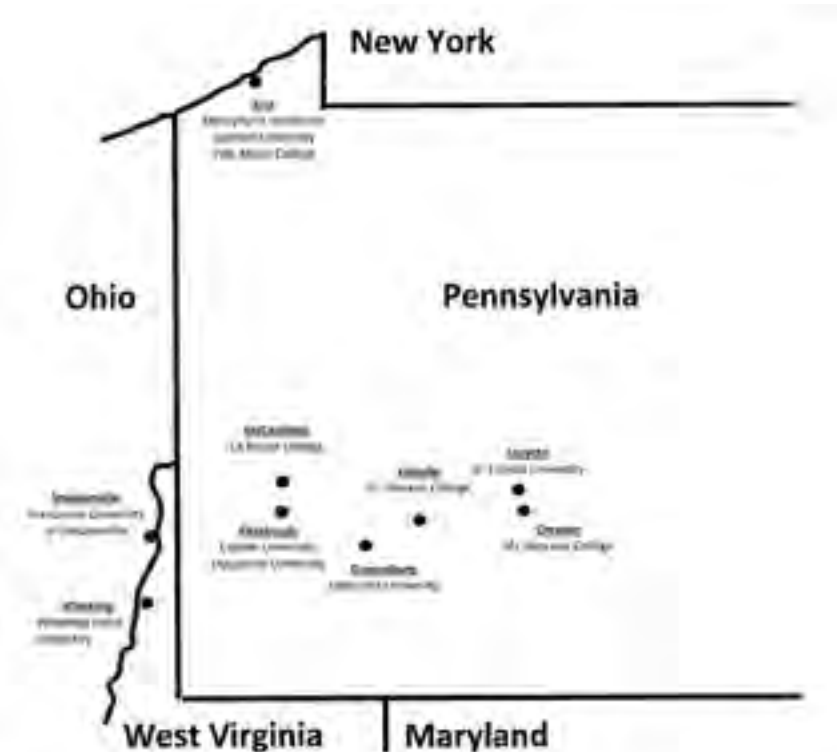
Shortly afterward, in 1791, Carroll established America's first seminary: St. Mary's Seminary in Baltimore. Indirectly, that action would have a major impact on Western Pennsylvania. One of the seminary's first graduates in 1795 was Father Demetrius Gallitzin, known locally as the "Apostle of the Alleghenies"² for his missionary work on the Pennsylvania frontier. Ordained by Carroll himself, Gallitzin was assigned to serve in the "backwoods"²² of Pennsylvania, where he founded the town of Loretto as the first English-speaking Catholic settlement west of the Appala-

chians. In doing so, he planted the seeds of what would eventually become the Diocese of Pittsburgh.

Since the Council of Trent in the sixteenth century, Catholics have always operated some schools specifically to train clergy and others to educate the public.³ This was as true in the United States as it was in Europe. Seminaries like St. Mary's were seen first and foremost as a support system for the Church and were kept separate from colleges like Georgetown that served lay students.⁴ Whereas Protestants founded schools like Yale and Princeton to train ministers,⁵ Catholics were more likely to view their colleges as a community resource, designed primarily to provide access to education. Although it would have been more financially efficient to educate both laypeople and seminarians on a single campus, this generally happened only in places where Catholics lacked the resources to separate the two.⁶ For example, as late as the 1950s, the Holy Ghost Fathers built a seminary from the ground up in Bethel Park, Pennsylvania, despite the fact that they already sponsored a university (Duquesne) less than ten miles away.⁷

Life and Learning at Early Catholic Colleges

Although many early schools used the name "college" from the very beginning, they were not colleges as we understand the term today. Throughout the nineteenth century and into the twentieth,



A map of Catholic colleges and universities in the Pittsburgh area

Source: Michael Rizzi



Georgetown University in Washington, DC, founded 1789, is the oldest Catholic university in the United States. A statue of John Carroll, America's first Catholic bishop, stands on its campus.

Source: Michael Rizzi

Catholic colleges followed a six-year plan of study rather than the four-year plan that is familiar to modern Americans.⁸ As a result, those early “colleges” were like extended high schools or, perhaps more accurately, colleges that operated their own two-year prep programs.⁹ Some even included elementary divisions.

This six-year model was common in continental Europe (especially Germany), but it had its drawbacks. Students could be admitted to the “colleges” as teens or even pre-teens, which meant that grown men were sometimes sitting in class alongside much younger boys.¹⁰ The traditional curriculum of Catholic colleges was known as the *Ratio Studiorum* – a plan of study that had been developed by the Jesuits in the 1600s and had barely been updated since, focusing on Latin, Greek, classical philosophy, and rhetoric.¹¹

By modern standards, early Catholic colleges were exceptionally small – often with just a few hundred students each. By 1907, the combined undergraduate enrollment of all Catholic colleges nationwide was just 7,000.¹² Most often, the “campuses” consisted of a single building where students lived alongside a dozen or so priests who taught them. A single priest might serve as professor by day, registrar in the afternoon, and cook at night.

This tight-knit sense of community – with faculty, staff, and students all living and working under one roof – was a difficult habit to break even as the schools expanded. This is partly why many Catholic schools built their campuses with tightly-packed, interconnected buildings. As new dorms and classroom buildings went up over the years, they were often attached to convents, monasteries, and other existing facilities to make one labyrinthine structure. The oldest parts of the campuses of Mercyhurst University and St. Vincent College are good local examples of this trend.

Experiments in Western Pennsylvania

Irish-born Michael O'Connor became the first bishop of the newly created Diocese of Pittsburgh in 1843. At the time, there

were fewer than 20 Catholic colleges in the United States, and none in Pennsylvania west of Philadelphia. Pittsburghers seeking a college degree had only three local options: the Western University of Pennsylvania (known today as the University of Pittsburgh), or Washington College and Jefferson College (which were still two separate institutions at the time, both with strong ties to Presbyterianism). The nearest Catholic schools were Georgetown, Mount St. Mary's, and Xavier; while slightly farther away, Villanova and Notre Dame were both only one year old.

Like John Carroll in Baltimore, O'Connor clearly prioritized Catholic education – as evidenced by the fact that one of his first acts as bishop in 1844 was the establishment of two schools: one for boys and one for girls.

The girls' school was the more successful of the two. To staff it, O'Connor invited the Sisters of Mercy from Carlow, Ireland to join him on the Pennsylvania frontier, and an intrepid group of seven sisters led by Frances Warde, R.S.M., answered the call. The Sisters of Mercy were themselves a very young religious order at the time, having been established by Catherine McAuley in Ireland just twelve years earlier. However, they had already developed a reputation as devoted educators and, at McAuley's direction, combined their vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience with a unique fourth vow to teach the uneducated. The school they founded in Pittsburgh, St. Mary's Academy, would eventually grow into Carlow University – but more on that later.

The boys' college that O'Connor founded in 1844 was staffed part-time by diocesan clergy and failed after just four years. It was replaced immediately by a second boys' college that fared no bet-



Bishop Michael O'Connor, the first Bishop of Pittsburgh, tried three times to establish a Catholic college in the city but never succeeded.

Source: Diocese of Pittsburgh Archives



A late-1800s view of St. Vincent College – notice the interconnected buildings, a common feature of many early Catholic campuses

Source: St Vincent College Archives

ter, lasting only from 1848 to 1851.¹³ Although it seems strange to modern eyes, the practice of shuttering one Catholic college and then immediately founding another in the same location was not uncommon. There were similar patterns elsewhere, usually when a school was financially insolvent. In Los Angeles, for example, the Vincentian Fathers operated a college from 1865 to 1911, but when that school fell heavily into debt, the Vincentians simply abandoned it and the local bishop invited the Jesuits to open a new college (known today as Loyola Marymount University) with a vastly similar mission but no messy legal or financial obligations.¹⁴

The Diocese of Pittsburgh made a third attempt to establish a school for boys, this time known as the Pittsburgh Catholic Institute, but it, too, closed after just three years.¹⁵ The relative stability of St. Mary's Academy for girls speaks to the leadership of the Sisters of Mercy who ran it, but the persistent failures of the boys' schools do not necessarily indicate any unique problems. As some scholars have pointed out, there was almost no rhyme or reason behind why some Catholic colleges survived and others failed during this time period.¹⁶ The most that can be said is that demand for higher education on the American frontier was fairly



Archabbot Boniface Wimmer, OSB, founder of St. Vincent College

Source: St. Vincent College Archives

low (particularly among working-class Catholic immigrants) and early dioceses were often too poor to finance their grand ambitions. Even the Western University of Pennsylvania (Pitt) suspended operations several times in the 1800s.

Better Luck to the East: St. Vincent and St. Francis

Meanwhile, outside the city limits, two Catholic colleges with which O'Connor had only

minimal direct involvement would find more success, and would introduce two new major religious orders to American higher education. St. Vincent College (1846) in Latrobe and St. Francis University (1847) in Loretto are, respectively, the oldest Benedictine and oldest Franciscan colleges in the United States. Both operated with O'Connor's permission, but their relative isolation and association with established religious orders proved to be a major advantage.

It would be hard to overstate the importance of St. Vincent College to the development of the Catholic Church in Western Pennsylvania. Not only did St. Vincent bring Benedictine monasticism to the United States (becoming the first of a network of 12 Benedictine colleges nationwide), but it also counted among its alumni three of Pittsburgh's first nine bishops: Hugh Boyle, Vincent Leonard, and John Francis Regis Canevin (the first native of the Diocese of Pittsburgh to hold that office). St. Vincent was also a rare example of a college that combined seminary education and lay education on the same campus. Its uniqueness was a reflection of the personality of its headstrong founder, Archabbot Boniface Wimmer, O.S.B., who had a tendency to do things his own way.

Wimmer is a giant in the history of the American Church and deserves a great deal of credit for shaping Catholicism locally and nationally. Born in Bavaria in 1809, Wimmer successfully convinced his Benedictine superiors of the need to send missionaries to the Pennsylvania frontier. He published appeals for support in German newspapers, arguing that German Catholic immigrants in America were doomed to lose their culture (and their faith) unless German priests could teach and preach to them in their own language.¹⁷

From the very beginning, Wimmer's vision for his American mission included a college. He argued that the Jesuits, who had already taken the lead in American Catholic education, too often focused their ministry on the large cities while ignoring the needs of rural areas.¹⁸ Wimmer had read about the missionary work of Demetrius Gallitzin in Pennsylvania and had concluded that, in the Diocese of Pittsburgh, he would find a particularly large number of rural Catholic settlers underserved by the American clergy

and in dire need of his support.¹⁹

The German Archabbot and the Irish Bishop

Although Wimmer came to the Diocese of Pittsburgh with O'Connor's permission, the archabbot and the bishop did not entirely see eye-to-eye, and their relationship became frosty over time. O'Connor supported the American temperance movement and campaigned against consumption of alcoholic beverages, but beer flowed freely at Wimmer's monastery, which also drew income from a pub in Indiana, Pennsylvania.²⁰ In 1847, O'Connor sought to send a small group of English-speaking diocesan seminarians to St. Vincent and to supply an English-speaking priest to supervise and teach them – but Wimmer considered the attempt intrusive and refused to cooperate.²¹

Over time, O'Connor became frustrated with the semi-autonomous Benedictine fiefdom operating within his diocese, and Wimmer became agitated at what he saw as overstretch from the authorities in Pittsburgh seeking to clip his wings. By 1850, the situation had escalated so far that Wimmer found it necessary to leave Latrobe for a lengthy visit to Europe, petitioning the Vatican to exempt his monastery from the Pittsburgh bishop's authority.²²

It must have been frustrating for O'Connor to watch Wimmer's small college in Latrobe chug along steadily while attempt after attempt to found a Catholic college in Pittsburgh failed. However, Wimmer's operation had one major advantage that O'Connor's never could: it was a self-sustaining community, capable of growing its own food and surviving tough financial times through its own self-reliance. It was a monastery first and a college second. The Pittsburgh colleges not only had higher construction and operating costs than did their neighbor in Latrobe, but they had fewer sources of revenue on which to fall back if they could not sustain enrollment.

St. Vincent's influence extends beyond Western Pennsylvania – certainly an outsized impact for such a small college. From their home base at Latrobe, Benedictine missionaries set out to establish several other monasteries/colleges on the model of St. Vincent, including St. John's University in Minnesota (1857), Benedictine College in Kansas (1858), Belmont Abbey College in North Carolina (1876), and Benedictine University in Illinois (1887). In a very real sense, all Benedictine higher education in the United States is modeled on Wimmer's vision and the prototype college he developed in Latrobe.

St. Francis

Likewise, St. Francis University set important precedents for Franciscan education in the United States. Unlike St. Vincent, however, its origin and identity cannot be traced to any one individual or outsized personality. Its early history is a bit more nebulous as a result. Like most early Catholic colleges, St. Francis Academy (as it was originally known) blurred the lines between high school and college, school and monastery. Instruction was taking place there since 1847, but anti-Catholic prejudice in Harrisburg led to some difficulties incorporating the new school. Although it was clearly offering something like college-level education throughout the

1800s, it was not definitively and legally chartered as a “college” until 1911.²³

Demetrius Gallitzin had mused about establishing a college in Loretto decades earlier, but it was not until Bishop O'Connor convinced a group of Irish Franciscans to establish their American base of operations in Loretto that such a dream was feasible. From the start, O'Connor seems to have had a warmer relationship with his Irish countrymen in Loretto than with the German Benedictines in Latrobe. The original facilities of St. Francis Academy were deeded in O'Connor's name and leased to the Franciscans who, unlike Wimmer, did little to challenge O'Connor's authority.²⁴

The close proximity between St. Francis and St. Vincent inevitably led to competition for students, but it is unlikely that either school would have developed drastically differently if the other had not existed. Today, almost all Benedictine and Franciscan colleges in the United States are small liberal arts institutions similar to these two prototypes from Western Pennsylvania. Their rural character and small size reflects the asceticism of their founding religious orders.

Other religious orders had different philosophies. Some, like the Jesuits, embraced and engaged the outside world; as a result, Jesuit schools were more likely to be urban, and more likely to grow into large cosmopolitan research universities. It is no surprise, therefore, that when the need arose for a comprehensive Catholic research university in downtown Pittsburgh, it was neither the Benedictines nor the Franciscans but a more cosmopolitan order of missionary priests – the Spiritans – that proved itself up to the task.

Duquesne

Bishop O'Connor resigned in 1860, having never fulfilled his vision for a successful Catholic men's college in the city of Pittsburgh. However, that vision would get new life eighteen years later under O'Connor's successor, Bishop Michael Domenec.

After the previous failures, the prospect of experimenting with yet another Catholic school in Pittsburgh must have seemed daunting. However, Bishop Domenec saw a target of opportunity in the 1870s when large numbers of German Catholics were being expelled from that country due to Otto von Bismarck's *Kulturkampf* and persecution of Catholic clergy. One of the groups that fled Germany and settled in Pittsburgh was the Holy Ghost Fathers, known today informally as the Spiritans.²⁵

Best known for their work as missionaries in east Africa and as educators in France and Ireland, the Holy Ghost Fathers at the time had only minimal activity in the United States. Newly exiled from their home country, the German members of the order perceived a need for their services among German-speaking Americans, and many were drawn to Allegheny City (now Pittsburgh's North Side) because of its large immigrant population. Bishop Domenec invited one of these exiles, Father Joseph Strub, C.S.Sp., to become pastor of St. Mary's Church in Sharpsburg, and expressed his desire that the parish eventually start a school. Four years later,

in 1878, Father Strub opened that school in rented facilities on Wylie Avenue – and Pittsburgh’s fourth (and final) Catholic men’s college was born.

The new school experimented with several different names. Legally, it was incorporated as “Pittsburgh Catholic College,”²⁶ but many versions of that name seem to have been used in casual conversation. An early drawing of the school’s first home on Wylie Avenue includes a sign that says, simply, “Catholic College.” Commencement programs from the early 1900s (when Pittsburgh briefly dropped the “h” from its name) refer to it as “Pittsburg College of the Holy Ghost” with the words “Pittsburg College” in bold letters and “of the Holy Ghost” written in small type underneath, almost as an afterthought. (It was not uncommon for Catholics to name their schools after the cities in which they are located; Seattle University, the University of San Francisco, and Boston College are all examples.)

Had history developed differently, it is not hard to imagine that “Pittsburgh College” might someday have become known as “Pittsburgh University” or even “the University of Pittsburgh.” Unfortunately, another institution claimed that name first. The Western University of Pennsylvania embarked on a major expansion in the early twentieth century, changing its name to the “University of Pittsburgh” in 1908 and moving its campus from the North Side to Oakland in 1909.

The similarity in the names of the two institutions obviously would have caused confusion. Not coincidentally, just two years after Pitt adopted its current name, “Pittsburgh College” rechristened itself “Duquesne University of the Holy Ghost.” This was significant on two levels. First, it meant that the school was boldly laying claim to the name of the French fort that gave birth to Pittsburgh – a reminder to all Pittsburghers that the first successful European settlers in their city were, in fact, French Catholics. Second, it meant that Duquesne was the first Catholic school in Pennsylvania to achieve university status. That accomplish-

ment was the result of a hard-fought legal battle with regulators in Harrisburg, and it made Duquesne, in 1911, the only Catholic “university” for 600 miles between Georgetown and Notre Dame.²⁷

Expansion

Timing was on Duquesne’s side. The Catholic population of Pittsburgh was on the verge of exploding when the new college was founded. Industrialization would bring Croatian, Irish, Italian, Polish, Slovak, Lithuanian, and other immigrants to the city in droves, and Duquesne fulfilled the mission of most great Catholic colleges by offering an accessible education to those first-generation Americans who otherwise could not afford to leave the city.

Because of the higher construction and maintenance costs associated with its urban location, Duquesne was under added pressure to maintain its enrollment to pay its bills. Unfortunately, the traditional six-year Catholic curriculum proved to be a hard sell. Duquesne (like many Catholic colleges) would discover that an esoteric education based on Latin, Greek, and philosophy was not in high demand among American working-class students, even in the nineteenth century. In the 1890s, Duquesne President William Tohil Murphy, C.S.Sp., summed up the dilemma, noting that:



The Wylie Avenue building that served as the first home of Pittsburgh Catholic College, now known as Duquesne University. The college rented this facility from its founding in 1878 to 1886.

Source: Duquesne University Archives



A 1920s photograph of Duquesne University, showing portions of the gritty industrial city it served

Source: Duquesne University Archives

Catholic colleges could not enforce meaningful entrance requirements because they were too dependent on tuition. Their financial weakness, and the clerical make-up of the teaching staff, meant that little could be offered but the traditional classical course.²⁸

The problem became especially acute when Carnegie Tech opened across town in 1900, offering more career-oriented degrees in a shorter timeframe. Like other Catholic schools of the era, Duquesne understood that a large part of its mission was to help first-generation Catholic immigrants establish themselves economically in American society – and one way to do so was to train students for well-paying professional fields like law and business. Catholic universities felt a need to expand beyond their traditional liberal arts curriculum and develop their own professional schools.²⁹

Duquesne Law School was founded in 1911 – the first Catholic law school in Pennsylvania. By 1912, Duquesne was offering summer and evening courses to boost enrollment and better serve its working-class constituents.³⁰ A forerunner to the School of Business was founded in 1913, and professional schools of pharmacy, music, and education were all established between 1925 and 1929. A School of Drama also briefly came into existence in 1913,³¹ but would not survive competition from the better-known program across town at Carnegie Tech.

To offer these diverse fields of study, Duquesne faced a challenge that was, by then, common at universities like Georgetown, Notre Dame, and Fordham: it had to hire large numbers of lay faculty. Small, resident communities of priests were no longer sufficient to staff the schools, resulting in even higher operating costs and a greater dependence on tuition.

Duquesne and its Spiritan presidents deserve a great deal of credit for their visionary leadership during this time period. Duquesne's School of Pharmacy is the oldest of only ten Catholic pharmacy programs in the country.³² Duquesne is also an early example of coeducation, having admitted its first female student (a Sister of Mercy named Mary Fides Shepperson, R.S.M.) in 1909. Marquette University is generally credited with being the first all-male Catholic college to admit women, but it achieved that milestone mere months ahead of Duquesne.³³

Duquesne's College of Arts, the last all-male holdout, began admitting women in 1927. Even that is remarkably early. Villanova was not fully coeducational until 1968, Georgetown until 1969, and Notre Dame until 1972. In Latrobe, St. Vincent College did not begin admitting women until 1983 (exceptionally late by national standards). In addition, Duquesne's longstanding policy of openness to all races – which, it has been argued, stems in part from the Spiritans' history as missionaries in Africa³⁴ – also sets it apart, not just among Catholic schools, but among all private colleges.

In all of these ways, Duquesne was a pioneer among Catholic universities, and it perhaps does not trumpet these achievements as often as it should. Part of the reason for its humility may be

that, while it was ahead of the curve among Catholic universities nationally, it was always playing catch-up to its local, secular rivals. Duquesne's School of Pharmacy may be the oldest such school at a Catholic university, but it is more than 40 years younger than the School of Pharmacy at Pitt. Duquesne's decision to admit women was very early for a Catholic school, but it came 14 years after Pitt enrolled its first female students and three years after Carnegie Tech established its Margaret Morrison Carnegie College for women. None of this, however, detracts from the major precedents Duquesne helped to set for Catholic education.

Separating from the Prep Divisions

It was during the 1910s and 1920s that the traditional six-year plan of study at Catholic universities officially began to fall out of favor. Accrediting bodies were starting to standardize the four-year college curriculum, and Catholic schools were forced to comply or lose accreditation.³⁵ This resulted in an awkward dilemma: what to do with the younger, high-school age students already enrolled on the campuses?

In most cases, Catholic colleges simply spun off their prep divisions into separate, loosely affiliated high schools. Examples of these include Georgetown Preparatory School in Maryland, Boston College High School in Massachusetts, and LaSalle College High School near Philadelphia. Some, like Fordham Prep in New York, are still tucked into corners of the college campuses. Today, although they are no longer legally affiliated, these high schools typically maintain mutually respectful, cooperative relationships with the colleges of which they were once an integral part.³⁶ Many even use the same athletic monikers (like Georgetown Prep's "Little Hoyas.")

The same phenomenon took place in Western Pennsylvania, but almost none of the spinoff high schools survive today. Duquesne Prep existed from 1911 to 1941. Although it enrolled hundreds of students at its peak, it was unable to compete with the dozens of parish high schools that were popping up around the city. As the concept of a four-year high school became more standardized, the Diocese of Pittsburgh also started to invest in its own stand-alone high schools, including Central Catholic (1927) and North Catholic (1939). Both had better facilities than Duquesne Prep, and the older Spiritan institution soon became redundant.³⁷

St. Vincent Prep thrived in Westmoreland County for more than fifty years until a fire in 1963 destroyed many of its facilities. It stopped enrolling lay students after 1964, but continued to enroll prospective Benedictines until 1974.³⁸ Its legacy is still visible on the St. Vincent campus in the form of Prep Hall, its former home, now repurposed as faculty offices.

Today, the only surviving prep school in Western Pennsylvania that was originally affiliated with a university is Mercyhurst Prep in Erie.³⁹ Tucked into a corner of the Mercyhurst campus, it is the last local vestige of what used to be a common characteristic of Catholic education: educating students at all levels, up to and including college, at a single institution.



Villa Maria College in Erie. Although the women's college was older than the all-male Gannon University, it was Gannon that would absorb Villa Maria in a 1989 merger.

Source: Gannon University Archives

The Latecomers: Gannon, Franciscan, and Wheeling Jesuit

The only Catholic men's college in Western Pennsylvania never to have its own prep division was Gannon University in Erie, which was founded after the six-year curriculum had already gone out of favor. Its origins took shape gradually between the 1920s and 1930s. Originally known as Cathedral College (a kind of counterpart to Erie Cathedral Prep, but not formally affiliated with it), Gannon at first operated essentially as a branch campus of other Catholic colleges, awarding degrees in their name.

Gannon is exceptional in many respects. Not only is it quite young for a men's college, but it is also one of the few Catholic colleges founded by a diocese rather than a religious order. Today, only ten of the more than 200 Catholic colleges in the United States are directly sponsored by a diocese.⁴⁰ Most dioceses have always lacked the clerical personnel to staff an institution of higher education, so whenever a bishop sought to establish a new college, he often had no choice but to invite the Jesuits, Franciscans, or others to assume its day-to-day management. Gannon is different; it is and always has been sponsored directly by the Diocese of Erie.

Erie is also one of the few cities in which a Catholic college for women predates a college for men. The Sisters of St. Joseph founded the now-defunct Villa Maria College in 1925, and Gannon at first operated effectively as an all-male branch campus of Villa Maria, awarding degrees under Villa's charter (and later under St. Vincent's). Gannon would not achieve its own accreditation until 1941. Villa Maria no longer exists as an independent college, but due to a 1989 merger, it is now known as the Villa Maria College of Nursing within Gannon University.⁴¹

Nationally, there was a small boom in new Catholic men's colleges in the era immediately after World War II. This was a period of rapid growth for Catholic education generally, as the total enrollment in Catholic colleges exploded from 16,000 in 1916 to more

than 400,000 by 1965.⁴² Two factors were directly responsible for this growth: the G.I. Bill, which made a college education affordable for millions of former servicemen, and the postwar baby boom.

It was in this context that the College of Steubenville (now the Franciscan University of Steubenville) was founded in 1946. It was followed shortly after by Wheeling College (now Wheeling Jesuit University) in 1954, belatedly giving the Pittsburgh area its first Jesuit college. Although the Diocese of Pittsburgh was finished building colleges by that time, the same demographic pressures caused it to build a number of new high schools, including Canev-in (1959), Serra (1961), and Quigley (1967), as well as South Hills Catholic (1956—later to merge into Seton-LaSalle) and the now-defunct Bishop Boyle (1962) and Bishop's Latin School (1961).

Women's Colleges

Catholic sisters have been involved in education since the days of John Carroll, and often operated girls' boarding schools in close proximity to men's colleges. The first such school was Georgetown Visitation Preparatory School, founded in 1799 and still located adjacent to Georgetown University. However, while the men's colleges were accredited to grant bachelor's degrees, the women's schools were essentially high schools with no pretense of higher education.⁴³

This changed in the late 1890s and early 1900s, when some Catholic girls' schools began to seek their own accreditation to grant college degrees. Often, they started by adding two-year associate's degree options to the end of their high school curricula, which allowed them to advertise themselves as junior colleges. The first Catholic girls' school to evolve into a four-year college and confer a bachelor's degree upon a female student was the College of Notre Dame in Baltimore, Maryland in 1899.⁴⁴

Because of this complicated history, the exact founding date of many Catholic women's colleges can be hard to determine. Virtually all of the earliest Catholic women's colleges were actually extensions of existing girls' high schools. For example, St. Mary's College of Notre Dame claims 1844 as its founding date, because in that year the Sisters of the Holy Cross opened a school for girls near the all-male University of Notre Dame (established two years earlier). However, St. Mary's was not actually accredited to grant collegiate degrees until more than six decades later in 1908.⁴⁵

In Western Pennsylvania, Carlow University claims 1929 as its founding date. In that year, it began to offer undergraduate degrees and became a "college" for all practical purposes. However, the high school from which Carlow emerged can trace its roots to 1844 – to St. Mary's Academy, the very first Catholic girls' school founded by Bishop O'Connor and the Sisters of Mercy in the Diocese of Pittsburgh.⁴⁶ This arguably makes Carlow one of the 20 oldest Catholic colleges in the country and the second-oldest college of any kind in the City of Pittsburgh.

Most Catholic women's colleges, like Carlow, trace their "founding" to the date they began offering undergraduate degrees. However, a sizable minority – including St.-Mary-of-the-Woods College in Indiana, Spalding University in Kentucky, and the aforementioned St. Mary's College of Notre Dame – claim a founding date based on the origins of their antecedent high schools. Carlow could theoretically do so as well, which would extend its history by over 80 years.

Carlow

Carlow was not the first Mercy-affiliated school to offer undergraduate degrees. In fact, it was not even the first in Western Pennsylvania, having been beaten to that milestone by Mercyhurst University by three years.⁴⁷ However, it is arguably the oldest

institution continuously operated by the Sisters of Mercy in this country, and as such, its history is inseparable from that of the sisters and the Diocese of Pittsburgh as a whole.

St. Mary's Academy (which was renamed Mount Mercy Academy and then Our Lady of Mercy Academy), operated in several different locations downtown before moving to the present-day Carlow campus in Oakland in 1895. After opening their college division in 1929 (originally under the name Mount Mercy College), the sisters continued to sponsor both college and prep divisions on the grounds of their Oakland motherhouse until grades 7-12 were moved to Monroeville in 1963. The Monroeville branch of Our Lady of Mercy Academy would ultimately close in 1979, bringing to an end the longest-running girls' high school in Pittsburgh.⁴⁸ However, the elementary division still exists and shares the Carlow campus to this day; it is now known as the Campus School of Carlow University and enrolls students in grades pre-kindergarten through eighth grade. This makes Carlow one of the few Catholic universities that still maintains its own elementary school.

Carlow's growth as a women's college was limited by the fact that Duquesne was already admitting women by the time Carlow was founded. However, it provided a welcome Catholic alternative to the all-female education available at Chatham University and, like many Catholic schools, enrolled many first-generation college students for whom it was the only convenient option.

Seton Hill, Mercyhurst, and Mount Aloysius

Most other women's colleges in the Pittsburgh region followed the same archetype. Seton Hill University traces its roots to Greensburg's St. Joseph Academy, founded by the Sisters of Charity in 1883 and elevated to collegiate status in 1914.⁴⁹ A similarly named but separate high school, St. Joseph Academy, was founded in Titusville by the Sisters of Mercy in 1871; after moving to Erie in



Students in the prep division of Mount Mercy Academy (forerunner of Carlow University) in 1959. Most Catholic women's colleges originated as girls' high schools and Carlow was no exception.

Source: Diocese of Pittsburgh Archives



The Motherhouse of the Sisters of Mercy dominates the campus of Carlow University

Source: Michael Rizzi

1926, it eventually became known as Mercyhurst University.⁵⁰

The transition from high school to college took place most recently in the case of Mount Aloysius College near Loretto, established by the Sisters of Mercy in 1853 as a female counterpart to the boys' school at St. Francis. It was known by several names (including Young Ladies Academy of Our Lady of Loretto, St. Aloysius Academy, and Mount Aloysius Academy) before it became Mount Aloysius Junior College in 1939.⁵¹ It remained a "junior college" for over fifty years until it began to offer four-year bachelor's degrees, dropping the word "Junior" from its name in 1991 and becoming the third Mercy-affiliated baccalaureate college in Western Pennsylvania. As recently as 2000 it expanded its offerings to include graduate education.⁵² However, like its sister institution in Erie (Mercyhurst), it still offers its historic two-year associate's degree programs.

Of course, not all of the region's girls' high schools evolved into colleges; some simply remained high schools.⁵³ The most prominent of these was probably Mount de Chantal Visitation Academy in nearby Wheeling, which closed its doors in 2008 after a remarkable 160-year history that predated the State of West Virginia itself. (Its sponsoring congregation, the Sisters of the Visitation, also sponsored America's oldest Catholic girls' school in Georgetown – but as was the case in the nation's capital, they chose to focus on high school ministry rather than found a college.) Nonetheless, Mount de Chantal did play an important role in the region's higher education, since a portion of its vast property in Wheeling was sold in the 1950s and became the campus of Wheeling Jesuit University.⁵⁴

La Roche

A small handful of Catholic women's colleges nationwide originated not as girls' high schools, but as "sister's colleges" – that is, colleges founded by a religious order of sisters to train its own members.⁵⁵ Often, in addition to preparing postulants and novices to take their religious vows, these colleges offered degrees in nursing, education, or other fields in which the prospective sisters could expect to work. Many later expanded their enrollment to

include women who were not seeking to take religious vows.

The only local example of this phenomenon is La Roche College in McCandless, founded by the Sisters of Divine Providence in 1963. A mere three years later, it had already expanded to enroll laywomen. By the 1970s, men were attending the college.⁵⁶

Women's Colleges Today

Today, all five of the Catholic women's colleges in Western Pennsylvania are fully coeducational. Carlow maintained its single-sex character slightly longer than the others, still describing itself as a "woman-centered" institution well into the early 2000s (even though it has enrolled men in small numbers since the postwar era of the 1940s).⁵⁷ This shift toward coeducation is typical; nationwide, only ten Catholic colleges still identify themselves as women's institutions.⁵⁸ The closest to Pittsburgh is Ursuline College (which is also the only remaining women's college in the state of Ohio) in the Cleveland suburbs. All other Catholic women's colleges, including all 13 in Pennsylvania, are now officially coeducational.⁵⁹

The women's colleges in Western Pennsylvania are unique, however, in the degree to which they have maintained their independence. In Detroit, Chicago, Baltimore, Los Angeles, and elsewhere, large numbers of Catholic women's schools either closed, merged, or returned to their roots as high schools over the past half-century. Many simply lacked the resources to survive as



A 1920s-era view of Mercyhurst in Erie

Source: Mercyhurst University Archives

independent institutions and were absorbed into men's colleges, if not shuttered completely. Locally, the only women's college to experience such a fate was Villa Maria College, which merged with the younger Gannon University (although Villa Maria Academy still exists in Erie and educates girls in grades 9-12). All others have maintained their status as independent institutions, which speaks to the quality of their leadership.

Conclusion

Western Pennsylvania's Catholic colleges include a number of firsts: the first Benedictine college, the first Franciscan college, (nearly) the first coeducational Catholic university, and (arguably) the first Mercy-affiliated women's college. The story of how these

various institutions came into being is, in many ways, the story of Catholicism in the region. They helped to shape the people and the culture of Western Pennsylvania just as they helped to shape the direction of Catholic higher education nationwide.

The region's nine Catholic colleges (eleven, counting those in Steubenville and Wheeling) have grown dramatically since their humble beginnings and continue to be a driving force in Pittsburgh's culture, economy, and booming intellectual scene. By adapting to the needs of each generation, what were once essentially high schools with a few dozen students have become major centers of undergraduate and graduate education. All have achieved university status with the exception of La Roche, Mount Aloysius, and St. Vincent – but even those colleges now enroll more student in more fields of study than their founders likely ever could have imagined.

The future of these institutions is not without challenges. Like virtually every other Catholic college in the country, they have seen significant declines in the numbers of priests, sisters, and brothers who sustained them for so many decades. Of the eleven Catholic colleges discussed in this article, seven are now led by lay presidents – a proportion similar to that of the rest of the country (and one that is only likely to increase in the future). They also lack the sizeable endowments of their secular peers, having been slow to fundraise after relying for generations on the free labor of their founding religious orders.

Perhaps most importantly, they must learn to adapt to the needs of an era that is demographically very different than the one in which they were founded. As is common in the northeastern and Midwestern United States, the school-age population (as well as the Catholic population) of Western Pennsylvania is today declin-

Founding Date	Name	Original Students	Former Names	Location	Canonical Sponsor
1844	First of three failed boys' academies	Men	Pittsburgh Catholic Institute	Pittsburgh	Diocese of Pittsburgh
1844 (Academy) 1929 (College)	Carlow University	Women	St. Mary's Academy Our Lady of Mercy Academy Mt. Mercy Academy Mt. Mercy College Carlow College	Pittsburgh	Sisters of Mercy
1846	St. Vincent College	Men		Latrobe	Benedictines
1847	St. Francis University	Men	St. Francis Academy St. Francis College	Loretto	Franciscans
1853 (Academy) 1939 (College)	Mt. Aloysius College	Women	St. Aloysius Academy Young Ladies Academy of Our Lady of Loretto Mt. Aloysius Academy Mt. Aloysius Junior College	Loretto/ Cresson	Sisters of Mercy
1878	Duquesne University of the Holy Spirit	Men	Pittsburgh Catholic College Holy Ghost College Pittsburg College of the Holy Ghost Duquesne University of the Holy Ghost	Pittsburgh	Spiritans
1883 (Academy) 1914 (College)	Seton Hill University	Women	St. Joseph's Academy Seton Hill College	Greensburg	Sisters of Charity
1871 (Academy) 1926 (College)	Mercyhurst University	Women	St. Joseph Academy Mercyhurst College	Titusville/ Erie	Sisters of Mercy
1925 (Merge with Gannon, 1989)	Villa Maria College	Women		Erie	Sisters of St. Joseph
1933	Gannon University	Men	Cathedral College Gannon College	Erie	Diocese of Erie
1946	Franciscan University of Steubenville	Men	College of Steubenville	Steubenville, Ohio	Franciscans
1954	Wheeling Jesuit University	Men	Wheeling College	Wheeling, West Virginia	Jesuits
1963	La Roche College	Women		McCandless	Sisters of Divine Providence



Detail from a 1910 photo of St. Joseph's Academy in Greensburg, a girls' high school that would grow into Seton Hill College eight years later

Source: Seton Hill University Archives

ing.⁶⁰ When Duquesne, Carlow, and other schools were founded, they served a booming market of first-generation American Catholics who had few other educational options in the region. Since the 1960s, however, Western Pennsylvania has seen the establishment of five public community college systems, six Penn State branch campuses, three Pitt branch campuses,⁶¹ and the rapid expansion of secular schools like Robert Morris, Point Park, Pitt, and Carnegie Mellon. Today, there is arguably an over-supply of higher education in the region, forcing schools to be creative in their attempts to compete with each other and with extensive online degree options around the country. They must rethink the audiences they serve as the Catholic population of the United States shifts to the South and West, and as the neediest first-generation students in Pennsylvania are often members of other religious groups.

One thing, though, is certain. The Catholic colleges' future, like their past, will be closely intertwined with the Church and the region they have supported for over 170 years. Their story will continue to be influenced by the legacy of the Sisters of Mercy, Benedictines, Franciscans, Spiritans, Sisters of Charity, Sisters of St. Joseph, Jesuits, Sisters of Divine Providence, diocesan clergy, and laypeople who have shaped Catholic higher education in this region for generations. The next chapters in their lives will be just as fascinating as the first.

Endnotes:

¹ Even the name "Maryland" was cheekily subversive to English authority. Officially, the colony was named after Henrietta Maria, wife of King Charles I — but if that connection seems spurious, it was. The English Catholics who founded Maryland arguably named it in honor of the Virgin Mary, and their queen's second name may have been an awkward excuse.

² Augustine Gallitzin, "Father Gallitzin Relates to Archbishop Carroll: The Beginning of the Church at Loretto, PA.," *The American Catholic*

Historical Researches, Vol. I, No. 4 (New Series) (October 1905), 298.

³ Michael T. Rizzi, "We've Been Here Before: A Brief History of Catholic Higher Education in America," *Journal of Catholic Higher Education* (in press).

⁴ Edward J. Power, *Catholic Higher Education in America: A History* (New York: Appleton-Century Crofts, 1972), 54.

⁵ George Marsden, *The Soul of the American University* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1994).

⁶ Rizzi, "We've Been Here Before."

⁷ James K. Hanna, "History of the Immaculate Heart of Mary Collegiate Seminary," *Gathered Fragments*, Vol. XXVII (Fall 2017), 43-55.

⁸ Rizzi, "We've Been Here Before."

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Power, *Catholic Higher Education in America*, 129.

¹¹ Rizzi, "We've Been Here Before."

¹² Marsden, *The Soul of the American University*, 99, 270.

¹³ Joseph F. Rishel, "The Spirit that Gives Life:" *The History of Duquesne University, 1878-1996* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1997), 301 n.7.

¹⁴ Jay Berman, "The School the City Forgot," *Los Angeles Downtown News*, December 24, 2017, accessed March 21, 2018, www.ladown-townnews.com/news/the-school-the-city-forgot/article_d7d0b4ce-ef9f-57b3-8bb5-702a33b35ec7.html.

¹⁵ Rishel, "The Spirit that Gives Life," 301 n. 7.

¹⁶ Power, *Catholic Higher Education in America*, 60-62.

¹⁷ Boniface Wimmer, "Concerning the Missions" in *Boniface Wimmer: Visions of a Founder* (Latrobe, PA: St. Vincent College, n.d.), 7-8.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Jerome Oetgen, *An American Abbot: Boniface Wimmer, O.S.B., 1809-1887*, rev. ed. (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1997), 63.

²⁰ Ibid., 115.

²¹ Ibid., 85-86.

- ²² Ibid., 114-115.
- ²³ Bonaventure Kiley, "The Loretto Franciscans: The Franciscan Friars of Loretto, Pennsylvania" in Joseph J. Bentivegna (ed.), *Bicentennial Commemorative History of Loretto, Pennsylvania* (Ebensburg, PA: Damin Printing Co., 1976), 94-126.
- ²⁴ Ibid.
- ²⁵ Rishel, "The Spirit that Gives Life," 1.
- ²⁶ Ibid., 7.
- ²⁷ Ibid., 12-15.
- ²⁸ Philip Gleason, *Contending with Modernity: Catholic Higher Education in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 22.
- ²⁹ See Kathleen A. Mahoney, *Catholic Education in Protestant America: The Jesuits and Harvard in the Age of the University* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003); Rizzi, "We've Been Here Before."
- ³⁰ Rishel, "The Spirit that Gives Life," 16, 19.
- ³¹ Anthony J. Amadio, *Duquesne University: School of Pharmacy Golden Anniversary 1925-1975* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University, 1975).
- ³² "Health Sciences Programs" in "Distinctive Academic Programs," Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities, accessed May 11, 2018, <http://www.accunet.org/About-Catholic-Higher-Ed-Distinctive-Academic-Programs-Health-Sciences>.
- ³³ Rishel, "The Spirit that Gives Life," 32, Illustration 27 following 38; Power, *Catholic Higher Education in America*, 275-277.
- ³⁴ Rishel, "The Spirit that Gives Life," 114.
- ³⁵ Rizzi, "We've Been Here Before."
- ³⁶ Ibid.
- ³⁷ Rishel, "The Spirit that Gives Life," 79.
- ³⁸ "A History of the Prep School," Saint Vincent College, accessed May 11, 2018, www.stvincent.edu/alumni/prep-school.
- ³⁹ Vincentian Academy in McCandless was briefly affiliated with Duquesne in the 1990s and early 2000s, but that relationship was fundamentally different than the historical relationship of most Catholic colleges to their high schools. Villa Maria Academy in Erie had some connections to the former Villa Maria College, but the college no longer exists.
- ⁴⁰ "Catholic College and University Founding Orders," Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities, accessed May 11, 2018, <http://www.accunet.org/About-Catholic-Higher-Ed-Founding-Orders>.
- ⁴¹ "Villa Maria College" Gannon University, Alumni & Friends, accessed May 11, 2018, www.gannonalumni.org/s/740/index.aspx?pgid=1199.
- ⁴² Gleason, *Contending with Modernity*, 82; "Frequently Requested Church Statistics," Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, accessed May 11, 2018, <http://cara.georgetown.edu/frequently-requested-church-statistics/>.
- ⁴³ Rizzi, "We've Been Here Before."
- ⁴⁴ Power, *Catholic Higher Education in America*, 303-304; "Notre Dame of Maryland University," *The Baltimore Sun*, accessed May 30, 2018, www.baltimoresun.com/topic/education/colleges-universities/notre-dame-of-maryland-university-OREDU000095-topic.html.
- ⁴⁵ "The History of Saint Mary's College," Saint Mary's College, accessed May 11, 2018, <https://www.saintmarys.edu/about/who-we-are/history>.
- ⁴⁶ "Our History," The Campus School of Carlow University, accessed May 11, 2018, <https://campusschool.carlow.edu/Page/251>.
- ⁴⁷ "History of MPS," Mercyhurst Preparatory School, accessed May 11, 2018, www.mpslakers.com/history-of-mps.
- ⁴⁸ "Our Lady of Mercy Academy," Diocese of Pittsburgh, accessed December 27, 2016, <http://diopitt.org/catholic-education/schools/our-lady-mercy-academy>.
- ⁴⁹ "Seton Hill Then & Now," Seton Hill University, accessed May 11, 2018, www.setonhill.edu/about/identity-traditions/seton-hill-then-now/.
- ⁵⁰ "History of MPS," Mercyhurst Preparatory School, accessed May 11, 2018, www.mpslakers.com/history-of-mps.
- ⁵¹ Frances Little Shields, "Loretto through the Years" in Bentivegna, *Bicentennial Commemorative History of Loretto, Pennsylvania*, 45-82; Elizabeth Ann Brandreth, "Sisters of Mercy in Loretto" in *ibid.*, 171-184.
- ⁵² "About Mount Aloysius," Mount Aloysius College, accessed May 11, 2018, www.mtaloy.edu/about-mac/.
- ⁵³ Some of the girls' high schools in the Diocese of Pittsburgh that never made the jump to collegiate status included Fontbonne Academy in Bethel Park, Our Lady of the Sacred Heart High School in Coraopolis, St. Francis Academy in Whitehall, and Vincentian Academy in McCandless. The Sisters of Mercy operated St. Xavier Academy in Latrobe from 1845 to 1972, when it was destroyed by fire.
- ⁵⁴ John C. Bates, "Rev. Clifford M. Lewis, S.J. — Journalist, Husband, Priest, College Co-Founder, and Historian," *Gathered Fragments*, Vol. XXVII (Fall 2017), 65-77.
- ⁵⁵ Rizzi, "We've Been Here Before."
- ⁵⁶ "History of La Roche College," La Roche College, accessed May 11, 2018, https://www.laroche.edu/About/Mission_and_History/History/.
- ⁵⁷ References to Carlow's status as a "woman-centered" institution were de-emphasized following the most recent round of strategic planning. Carlow University, *Mission Accountability Self-study and Peer Review* (Pittsburgh, 2015).
- ⁵⁸ The list includes: Alverno College in Milwaukee, Wisconsin; College of St. Mary in Omaha, Nebraska; Mount Mary University in Milwaukee, Wisconsin; Mount St. Mary's University in Los Angeles, California; Notre Dame of Maryland University in Baltimore, Maryland; St. Catherine University in St. Paul, Minnesota; St. Mary's College in Notre Dame, Indiana; Trinity Washington University in Washington, D.C.; and Ursuline College near Cleveland, Ohio, as well as the College of St. Benedict in Minnesota, which is actually a coordinate college with nearby all-male St. John's University.
- ⁵⁹ Nor was this a uniquely Catholic phenomenon. Chatham University and Wilson College are among the Western Pennsylvania women's schools that recently went co-ed.
- ⁶⁰ Paul Fain, "Enrollment Declines Steepest in Midwest and Northeast," *Inside Higher Ed* (May 22, 2018), accessed May 11, 2018, <https://www.insidehighered.com/quicktakes/2018/05/22/enrollment-declines-steepest-midwest-and-northeast>; Peter Smith, "For U.S. Catholics: Growing Numbers, Fading Rites," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, September 6, 2015, A-1, A-7.
- ⁶¹ The community colleges are: Community College of Allegheny County, Beaver County Community College, Butler County Community College, Westmoreland County Community College, and Pennsylvania Highlands Community College. New Penn State branch campuses were located in Beaver, Dubois, Uniontown (Fayette), New Kensington, Sharon (Shenango), and White Oak (Greater Allegheny). Pitt branch campuses were located in Bradford, Greensburg, and Titusville. Other campuses, including Penn State-Altoona, Penn State-Erie, and Pitt-Johnstown, predate the 1960s.