

Case Study: Mount Saint Mary's University ***Confronting Failed Leadership, Mobilization for COVID, Addressing DEI Issues,*** ***and Setting the Stage for a More Promising Future***

Case Summary. The Leadership of Mount Saint Mary's University ("The Mount") confronted the challenges posed by failed leadership in 2016, by COVID in 2020, and by major DEI concerns this year. In each instance, they engaged over 100 institutional stakeholders in developing and implementing plans for restoring The Mount's traditional focus on student success; for reopening the University quickly but safely in the face of COVID in Fall 2020, and for addressing major DEI concerns on campus this year.

The 2017 plan restored the University to its soul; the 2020 reopening plan was so effective that first-time freshman enrollments increased 26 percent from 513 in 2019 to 648 in 2020; and the DEI effort has produced several promising recommendations to address concerns in that critical area. These efforts have created significant momentum for leadership efforts to truly transform the University and position it for long term success. It goes without saying that The Mount is one of those institutions that are endangered. But, by applying many of the transformational principles outlined in this book, it appears that it has a good chance of thriving in the coming decade.

Why Read This? Transformative and committed leadership in action. This is a model that any college or university could usefully deploy in the face of disruption.



The Case Study *(Referenced in Chapter IV)*

This case describes Mount St. Mary's University's ("The Mount") efforts to correct a serious failure in presidential leadership in 2016, define a long-term strategy for University growth, address an ongoing COVID Pandemic, and bring the campus together to confront diversity, equity and inclusion issues this year. These efforts provide a textbook example of bringing an institutional community together to establish a shared sense of urgency and organize for action and execution, using a variant of the Leading, Navigating and Orchestrating transformation approach described in this book. In the process, the stage was set for long term University transformation through incorporation of the learnings from these efforts into an updated version of the University's 2018-23 Strategic Plan. What began as a discrete case study of an institution adapting well to the challenges to COVID, became a bigger story of a leadership team that has used several existential challenges to strengthen its strategy and culture and set the stage for a promising future for the University.

The Mount main campus straddles US Highway 15 in Emmitsburg, MD about 22 miles north of Frederick with a beautiful view of the Catoctin Mountains. It was founded in 1808 and now serves over 2,200 undergraduate and graduate students. It is a Catholic institution dedicated to the development of "ethical leaders who are inspired by a passion for learning and lead lives of significance in service to God and others." It is coeducational and over 40 percent of its students are persons of color. The University operates a small graduate campus in Frederick, Maryland, which is in the western reaches of the Baltimore/Washington suburbs.

<https://msmary.edu/about/quickfacts.html>

The Mount is no stranger to the news. In 2016, its President was forced to resign for some comments to faculty about getting tougher on students. The incident resulted in a sharp decline in Freshman admissions, from the usual entering class in the mid 500's to 417. In succeeding years, enrollments recovered to previous levels, but in Fall 2020, when freshman enrollment was down 13 percent nationally, The Mount attracted a record freshman class of 648.



A New President Comes to the Rescue

In 2016, Tim Trainor was on his way to retirement as an Army Brigadier General and Academic Dean at West Point. He had been thinking of moving to a presidency as his next career move and the idea of a faith-based institution like The Mount appealed to him. So, when an interim opportunity there came open, he jumped at it. When he started at the University in August 2016, he was well aware of the challenges he faced. He decided to begin his work with a three-month listening tour, sitting down with all University constituencies. He learned that there was a crisis of confidence at the school because freshmen enrollments were down 20 percent and fund raising had cratered.

Building a Sense of Urgency I

He set about to harness this concern and begin the development of new, a urgent agenda for The Mount by defining six strategic imperatives in January of 2017 that pointed a way forward and incorporated the concerns he heard on his listening tour. These were to be pursued, “While maintaining our values as a Catholic liberal arts institution, emphasizing teamwork and keeping student success at the center of all we do.” The strategic imperatives included:

- Grow total enrollment to increase tuition revenue,
- Develop premier curricular and co-curricular programs to improve our attractiveness (our brand) to potential students,
- Diversify and innovate academic program delivery methods to better meet changing student market conditions,
- Diversify revenue streams by increasing contributions from outside sources and forming partnerships to bring in needed resources,
- Improve the quality of academic, athletic and seminary facilities, as well as our utility systems, and
- Develop a strategic plan that charts the five-year path for accomplishing the above.

The six imperatives galvanized and focused The Mount Community and pulled it back to its core values and soul. Enrollments soon recovered to previous levels, and a pattern of listening and acting in accord with that advice gained President Trainor considerable support.

The sixth imperative called for the development of a five-year strategic plan. A highly inclusive planning process was mounted in January 2017—over 100 community members were involved- and the 2018-2023 plan was approved by the Board in October 2017. The values animating the process were drawn from Jim Collins' *Good to Great* thinking about questions leaders should ask in determining their organization's priorities. They include: What is my organization best at? What is it passionate about? What drives its resources? The resulting plan has a laser focus on student success, but also seeks to address The Mount's financial sustainability and further strengthen the focus on faith and values on campus, a key discriminator for The Mount in the marketplace.

The January 2021 Mid-Term Assessment of progress on the 2018-2023 plan revealed considerable advances on nearly all of the metrics used to measure success on strategies defined in the plan. Areas of concern included student retention, a high level of bond indebtedness, and the need to increase net revenue. Clearly President Trainor and his leadership team, with strong Board support and extensive and authentic campus engagement, had taken The Mount out of its tailspin, put it back on track and set promising new directions.

The COVID-19 Response: Building a Sense of Urgency II

And then COVID hit. It probably goes without saying that President Trainor had little difficulty creating a sense of urgency about the pandemic. He and his team went into crisis mode right after residential students left the campus on March 11, 2020. The first priority was getting students home, including those who were abroad.

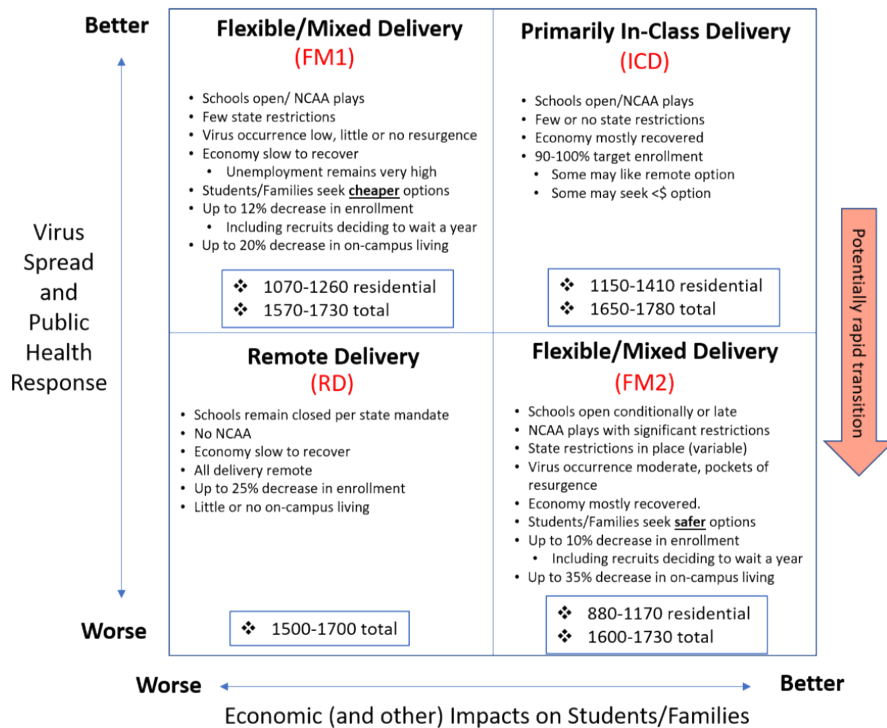


Planning and Executing Safe On-Campus Operations During a Pandemic

Once the students were safely home, the planning activities -- from April through August 2020 - - focused on resuming classes in person in the fall. Elevating his inclusive style, President Trainor and his team adopted the “Integrated Nerve Center” approach developed by McKinsey for organizations that must respond to major, fast-moving and disruptive crises. (This approach is analogous to the Model for Leading, Navigating, and Orchestrating Transformation approach, in particular the networked coalitions, described in Chapter III. It is clearly an effort to build The Mount’s capacity for transformation.)

The work began with the appointment of small senior “Plan Ahead Team,” which was tasked to “conduct a rapid analysis of how The Mount should position itself, given the uncertainty of the pandemic.” The team’s deliverables were the development of four scenarios of what The Mount’s operating environment might look like in the fall; identification of actions that had to be implemented in each scenario; and recommendations as to additional working groups that would be needed to ensure that The Mount could continue to execute its mission and vision regardless of the impacts of COVID. The Figure 1 summarizes the team’s work.

Figure 1 – Integrated Nerve Center Approach



The team recommended several working groups and identified key actions and decision points that would be needed to ensure safe University operation in the fall. From talking with the team leader, Executive Vice President Kraig Sheetz, and the President about this planning, its

central outcome was to assure them that the university could move forward quickly with opening in the fall because they could adapt to whatever COVID threw at them. They were guided by McKinsey’s advice on leading during the COVID crisis: “Do not wait until all the facts are in—they may never be—to act. In a crisis, good now is better than perfect later.” Taking this guidance to heart set The Mount up to capture a significant increase in enrollments and at the same time use COVID planning as a way to build community.

As President Trainor and his leadership team anticipated the challenge of coordinating a safe fall reopening, it became clear that the teams tasked with various aspects of the safe opening would have to coordinate their work very closely and communicate flawlessly. To do this they organized and implemented The Mount Safe Initiative. It was organized around the Integrated Nerve Center approach portrayed in Figure 2 and clearly described in a document prepared by the President. The team chairs, for the most part, were members of the Plan Ahead Team, enabling each team to start with a good understanding of its mission. The Team members were drawn from throughout the University and across functions. At the height of the initiative over 100 members of the University community were involved in the effort to make The Mount safe.

Figure 2 – Planning Organization - MSMU Safe Teams



President Trainor made it clear that the first principle driving all of the teams' planning was the health and safety of The Mount community. "No decisions will be made without first considering the health and safety of our community, informed by guidance from federal and state public health authorities." He also took the courageous step of announcing that no Mount faculty or staff member would lose their position during the COVID crisis.

Planning Using the Nerve Center Model

With this guidance and reassurance, the teams began their planning. Using the Nerve Cell structure, they moved quickly. The Nerve Cell and team leaders met weekly and President Trainor broadcast progress reports often to members of the campus community.

By early May, before most colleges and universities, The Mount announced its plans to open in the fall. In order to maintain an on-campus presence but keep the classrooms arranged in a socially-distanced manner, most classes were divided into two groups. For a Monday-Wednesday-Friday class, the first group attended class in-person on Mondays and every other Friday. This group attended class synchronously via Zoom from a remote location (e.g., their residence hall room or elsewhere on campus) for the other class sessions. The second group attended Wednesday and every other Friday.



A series of rules -- explained in videos -- for campus operations was launched. Among other things, face masks and social distancing were compulsory. As President Trainor put it, "In-person education, with rules, is just a better learning experience." Online education is fine for certain programs, but "what we are finding is that students are not as engaged in that environment. The ultimate message is that we're all in this together."

A testing regimen was developed by the COVID-19 Response Team. Among many things, it, involved weekly performance of a scientific test of waste from major campus buildings—in particular dormitories—for the early identification of hot spots. The approach was recommended by science faculty on the team and worked well and yielded significant economies in testing.

In acknowledgement of the need to anticipate the longer-term future, an Emerging Opportunities Team was formed to "identify opportunities for The Mount to pursue given the

lasting changes the pandemic will have on the higher education environment.” The work of this committee as factored into the Mid-Term Assessment of The Mount’s 2018-2023 Plan and also ensured that the conversations at weekly Nerve Cell meetings were tilted to the future and the emerging promise of The Mount.

The plans of The Mount Safe Teams were assigned to operating units as soon as they were completed. Many of those assigned implementation responsibility had worked on a Mount Safe team and thus understood the thinking behind the plans and were committed to their implementation. In our interviews, participants uniformly reported that the commitment to implementation extended far beyond Safe Team members to the entire campus community. In effect, The Mount Safe initiative not only addressed a genuine crisis, but also further strengthened a university community that had been deeply fractured only four years before.

Results of the Fall 2020 Effort

The immediate results of the Fall 2020 effort were well reported. First-time freshman enrollments exploded to 648 from 513 in 2019, a 26% increase. With this sharp increase came a major challenge: insufficient housing supply. Fortunately, excess rooms were available at nearby hotels. Jack Chielli, Vice President of Enrollment Management, Marketing and Communications, said the big difference in yield was that The Mount was able to communicate early and clearly that it was “safe” for students who wanted to be on a campus. He said the college will aim for its normal 550 new students in the fall. Capacity limits would prevent another class of 648.

As the 2020-21 academic year progressed, The Mount Safe Initiative functioned as planned, enhanced by close collaboration with the Frederick County, Maryland Health Department. Two infection flare ups were identified early, and the affected students isolated, preventing any further spread of COVID. One of the infections was identified using the sewage testing approach adopted by the University. Most gratifying, however, was how the campus community stayed together to provide a satisfactory on-campus hybrid learning experience.

As the campus opened for Fall 2021, President Trainor made the decision to require all members of The Mount Community to be vaccinated. Provisions were made for exceptions for those with a compelling medical, religious, or moral reason not to comply. In implementing this measure, the President took the position that it was in keeping with The Mount value to keep all members of the University community safe and healthy.

Fall first time freshman enrollments came close to the goal of 550. These results were achieved using a new, targeted approach to student recruitment focusing on students who are most likely to attend The Mount. Significant budget savings were achieved using this approach.

Addressing Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Concerns

During the 2020-21 academic year, concerns emerging from the Black Lives Matter Movement impacted the campus, particularly among persons of color. President Trainor and his leadership team decided that these concerns deserved serious and timely consideration.

To accomplish this, the Nerve Cell approach was used again to bring the campus community together to focus on a major issue and develop remedies. Over 100 members worked to identify the DEI challenges facing the University. The process produced a large number of suggestions for improvement ranging from minor (make sure students are aware of the online form for reporting incidences of bias by promoting it more often) to major (review the general studies curriculum for diversity of sources and adequate attention to social justice issues). It is the view of The Mount leadership that use of the Nerve Cell Approach again paid off, producing a much richer, more comprehensive set of solutions to address University DEI concerns.

To ensure that the DEI initiatives are not just sustained but strengthened over time, a procedural framework was created in which each initiative has a designated leader, clear objectives, and a timeline. Initiative leaders are expected to report regularly, using a collaborative online form where everyone can see the progress being made. This prevents the projects from fading away due to neglect.

While implementation of the recommendations from this effort has just begun (Fall 2021), the consensus is that the process provided an opportunity for honest dialogue and produced recommendations for improved policies and practices that hold real promise. This effort is notable because it was undertaken during a period of great stress on campus arising from COVID. It was the belief of The Mount leadership, however, that this issue deserved serious consideration and that the sooner this was done, the better.



What Does the Future Hold for The Mount?

President Trainor is optimistic that the sense of common purpose developed in the course of The Mount Safe and the DEI Initiatives will carry over into the years ahead. In the Mid-Term Assessment of the Mt. St. Mary's 2018-2023 Strategic Plan, he suggested that the higher education market will be highly competitive and that The Mount must significantly improve its value proposition if it hopes to be competitive.



The Assessment defines a wide range of initiatives, which have since been expanded, to make the University more competitive:

- Renew and expand academic programs to make them more desirable, accessible, and cost-effective. Areas where more emphasis will be placed are STEM areas and the health professions, including a physician assistants program and an invigorated Master of Health Administration in conjunction with the local health system. In addition, pathways to engineering, dual degrees, undergraduate certificates, and refreshed adult education programs at the Frederick Branch Campus are being pursued.
- Expand the student population by establishing fully online academic programs in areas such as the Master of Business Administration, cyber security, communications, and applied behavioral science, and an undergraduate program for working adults; significantly improve student retention; and pursue a variety of other smaller initiatives to achieve this goal.
- Strengthen student success services in areas such as DEI programs, college readiness, volunteer programs, peer mentoring and increased scholarships for disadvantaged students.

- Pursue an ambitious agenda to develop life-long learning programs in promising degree and non-degree areas to enhance The Mount's service to the region and its financial sustainability.
- Other initiatives include the improvement of campus athletic facilities to make them more attractive to prospective student athletes and the reduction of onerous facilities debt through bond renegotiation.

President Trainor recognizes that this agenda is an ambitious one that will require significant transformation of The Mount in terms of its programs, its culture and the capabilities of its faculty and staff. His ambition is to lead The Mount on an expedition to greatness in which it retains its historic religious and student first values and at the same time expands its capacity to serve learners throughout their lives. This case study clearly shows that the expedition has begun in earnest.

Figure 3 summarizes this case study, using the key factors we have utilized to summarize the case studies from other institutions.

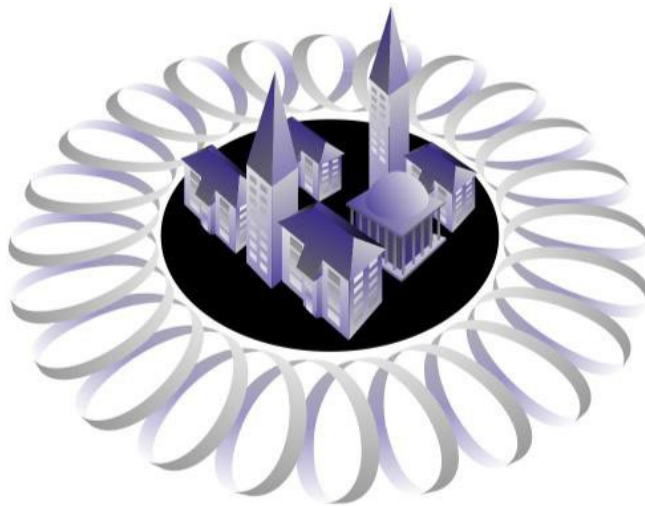


Figure 3 - Summary of Mount St. Mary's University Case Study

Key Factors	Actions Taken
<i>Sense of Urgency</i>	Established three times—returning The Mount to its historic student focus in 2017—and in bringing the community together to safely open the campus during the Pandemic and to address serious concerns about DEI on campus.
<i>Form a Guiding Coalition and a Constellation of Coalitions</i>	Established a highly participative strategic planning process in 2017. Used many of the principles of Leading, Navigating and Orchestrating Transformation with the Nerve Cell approach for The Mount Safe Teams and the DEI Initiative, allowing for quick, innovative, and coordinated action on key challenges facing the University.
<i>Create and Communicate a Vision for Transformation</i>	Both the laser focus on student success in the 2018-23 Strategic Plan and the priority on health, safety and equity in the University community in The Mount Safe and DEI Initiatives provided clear guidance to the large numbers of community members involved in these endeavors.
<i>Empower Action</i>	Large numbers of community members (~100) were directly involved in defining and implementing the Strategic Plan, The Mount Safe effort, and the DEI Initiative.
<i>Quick Wins, Continuing Wins</i>	President Trainor's dramatic refocus of the University community on student success and support after a difficult episode when that focus was lost and the stunning 25% increase in freshman enrollments in Fall 2020 have built significant momentum for the transformations that must occur in the future to assure The Mount's viability.
<i>Culture Change</i>	In short order The Mount went from being an institution very much on the ropes and unmoored from its historic focus on student success to one in which the student focus has been restored; a novel health crisis has been turned into a roaring success; serious concerns about DEI are being meaningfully addressed; and a transformative expedition for a promising future for The Mount has been successfully undertaken.