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# TAKING FLIGHT

An innovative new academic approach at **Gwynedd Mercy Academy High School** allows students to pursue their passions and develop the skills needed to thrive in a rapidly changing world.

by **MATT COSENTINO**

In her role as the Dean of Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment at Gwynedd Mercy Academy High School, Melissa Sullivan, Ph.D., often finds herself feeling inspired by the confidence and leadership qualities shown by today's generation of students. One such occasion happened this summer during a service trip to Romero Center Ministries in Camden, New Jersey; students learned about urban poverty and were sent into under-resourced neighborhoods in Camden and Philadelphia to work side by side with community members on improvement initiatives.

Not only did the students spring into action for a good cause, but they also quickly began thinking long-term about how to ad-

dress the issues at hand. To Dr. Sullivan, it was a telling reminder of how education continues to evolve in the 21st century.

"Today's students see what's going on in our world," she says. "They have questions, they want answers, and they want to be the ones to find those answers. So why not harness that intellectual curiosity that grows so naturally in teenagers? That's a key piece of understanding in secondary education right now in general, and particularly at Gwynedd Mercy."

Founded in 1861 by the Sisters of Mercy, the all-girls Catholic high school has a history of preparing young women for a future in which they become difference-makers in their communities and beyond. Over time,

the school's mission of developing thoughtful and compassionate leaders has adapted to meet the changing educational needs of today's students.

In recent years, the school's "She Is the Future" strategic plan provided an exciting new direction for the academic programs at Gwynedd Mercy. Now, "The Flight Plan" (named as a nod to the school's mascot, the monarch butterfly) aims to take things to an even higher level with a customized approach that helps students discover their passions, and then build the necessary skills to thrive in college and in the work force.

Comprising four distinct pillars, the program aims to: ensure the curriculum inspires the potential for academic excellence; promote holistic student growth through a broad range of programs, clubs, and activities; create specialized learning pathways to stimulate personalized education; and pave the way for an outstanding faculty to employ best practices within their classrooms, departments, and the entire school community.

"The Flight Plan is the academic innovation we're now advancing," adds Kim Dunphy Scott, Gwynedd's Director of Enrollment Management. "It allows students to explore in ninth grade, engage in 10th grade, and by 11th grade, we're really working with them to be leaders. In 12th grade, they're ready to take off and launch with it."

Experiential learning is embraced at



Gwynedd Mercy is in the process of building a 37,000-square-foot addition that, once completed, will house collaborative spaces and a new counseling center.



Gwynedd Mercy embraces experiential learning in the form of internships, externships, and service opportunities. For example, Zoë Mackey '24 gained hands-on experience in criminal defense law as a law office extern. She attended proceedings with the Honorable Wendy G. Rothstein, Montgomery County's Criminal Administrative Judge.

Gwynedd Mercy in the form of internships, externships, and service opportunities, and it is also a major part of the first two advanced academic concentrations that have developed through The Flight Plan. The Innovation concentration is an interdisciplinary, STEM-related program that includes courses in advanced engineering, computer science, and statistics, in addition to AP science and calculus classes, and also gives students the chance to design and participate in their own research projects. An innovation team is currently competing for a grant from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology with a project seeking to increase safety for women walking on city streets in Philadelphia.

The second concentration is in global studies. Geared toward students interested in the humanities, the concentration includes classic humanities classes and AP environmental science, as well as a new Global Horizons course focused on major events currently shaping the world.

Students are encouraged to apply for the concentration programs after their freshman year. A similar endeavor that starts in ninth grade is the Seminar course, a nimble and collaborative class in which the girls themselves often impact the curriculum. For example, increasing interest in financial literacy spurred the growth of an advanced economics class, and eventually a partnership with Horn Entrepreneurship at the University of Delaware; students can receive college credits and are able to design, test, and launch their own products.

"Experiential learning is a key part of these advanced academic programs," Dr. Sullivan says. "It's not just students with a laptop doing some research—they're working with their research and working with people in the real world to see those connections in the public sphere. In the long run they grow more confident, they grow more adept, and they have a lot of intrinsic motivation and pride in that work, because they see how the public-speaking skills, the research skills, or the analytical skills they have learned matter, and how they can make a difference."



Dr. Sullivan, who has worked in girls' education for many years, believes that today's young women enter high school with more confidence and clearcut goals than previous generations. She is grateful to work for an adaptable school that promotes their courage, and one that was founded as an organization of change.

"In some ways the changes we have now are new, and in other ways change at Gwynedd Mercy is an evergreen experience," she adds. "This is a place where transformation will always be at home while staying true to our traditions. Our leadership continually inspires us all to grow and to change with the right guidance and support. That's rare—that merging of tradition and innovation in a way that feels balanced is hard to find."

Scott has experienced Gwynedd Mercy from an array of perspectives. Not only has she worked in admissions for 22 years, but she is also an alumna of the school and parent of twin daughters, also GMA alumnae. Her unique perspective allows her to give prospective students and their families insight into the school's distinctive approach to education.

"While Gwynedd Mercy has grown and evolved in the best ways possible since I attended high school here, our core values and the mission are the same, which is awesome to see," she says. "As a parent, I am grateful my daughters received a Mercy education. And as I see this new generation of women coming through here, the opportunities that they are receiving to get to the next level—for whatever it is that they want to do—are amazing."

She adds that enrollment is at an all-time high. She credits the school's new strategic vision, as well as a 37,000-square-foot addition that, once completed, will house assorted collaborative spaces and a new counseling center.

"I encourage families to come to our open house, but if you don't like crowds, come for an intimate private tour or a group tour," she says. "Come see a game; come see a musical—just get on campus any way you can, and you'll see that it's a special place. I wouldn't be here for 22 years if I didn't like what I was seeing, and I didn't want to be part of our success. I wholeheartedly believe in our mission." ■

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**Gwynedd Mercy Academy High School will host its fall open house on Sunday, September 29, from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. Visit [GMAHS.org](http://GMAHS.org) to register.**