

Making the Invisible Visible

“Once I saw a prizefighter boxing a yokel. The fighter was swift and amazingly scientific. His body was one violent flow of rapid rhythmic action. He hit the yokel a hundred times while the yokel held up his arms in stunned surprise. But suddenly the yokel, rolling about in the gale of boxing gloves, struck one blow and knocked science, speed and footwork as cold as a well-digger's posterior. The smart money hit the canvas. The long shot got the nod. The yokel had simply stepped inside of his opponent's sense of time.” -Excerpt from the Prologue of Invisible Man, Ralph Ellison

The underdog, he who few knew or cared to understand, stepped into his opponent's sense of time and took him out. Now is the time, on this day and in this place, for St. Mary's College of Maryland to step into our opponent's sense of time and to become the model of what **can be** in the world of higher education. It is time for us, the invisible, to become visible.

Before I delve into my remarks, I want to say “Thank you” ...

- Board of Trustees
- Students, faculty, and staff as well as the local and state community
- Family and friends
- Parents and siblings
- Husband
- Twins

We sit here in this historic place at a historic time. We find ourselves at a place where religious toleration took hold in the New World. We find ourselves at a place where just down the road slaves who survived the Middle Passage were brought in large numbers for inspection before being shipped out to plantations in the South. We are at a place where only 50 years ago the first African American student graduated from this college. We find ourselves on this day and in this place, witnessing the entrustment of leadership of St. Mary's College to an African American woman.

What is special about this place, this institution? St. Mary's College is known throughout the state as the hidden gem. Why is this place, this gem, hidden?

Our history begins around 1840 when a doctor, a lawyer, and a planter got together and decided that girls must be educated. Even the beginning – a doctor, a lawyer, and a planter – sounds like the opening line to a joke but this undertaking was no joke. These three men were incredibly astute to choose Adele France as the leader of that seminary. She made certain that the young women attending that school had the skills necessary to be successful beyond that place. As time progressed, the school evolved from a boarding school to a 2-year junior college to a four-year institution. Ted Lewis, the 4th president, took the college to another level and it was under his leadership that SMCM became the public honors college of the state committed to the traditions of the liberal arts. Maggie O'Brien, the 5th president, enhanced SMCM's ties to the local community and worked to enable its global reach.

This hidden gem is ranked in the top 90 of national liberal arts colleges. Our students enjoy close personal relationships with our accomplished faculty and staff. We have the highest four-year graduation rate of any public college or university in the state. More than 50% of our students study abroad and our core curriculum has been recognized for its innovation in helping students apply their liberal arts education to the world beyond this campus. This place with its rigorous academic standards and some of the best scholar-athletes in D-III athletics also has one of the top sailing programs in the country. SMCM appears to be utopia on the banks of the St. Mary's river. So I ask you again, why are we hidden?

Currently, the public discourse about the high cost of higher education, the value of the liberal arts, and families' concerns around their return on investment has led many to proclaim the demise of liberal arts institutions and that higher education is in crisis. Appropriately, this discourse has caused leaders to be more cautious when considering raising prices. It has also forced us to look for efficiencies and to eliminate waste. It has forced us to be creative and innovative about our programming.

So, too, this public discourse has sparked some questionable behavior and shortsightedness. For example, the Federal government is considering imposing regulations that in the long-term may prove to be as devastating as the "teach to the test" mentality, that unintended consequence of the "No Child Left Behind" legislation that, in my view, has crippled students' creativity and the higher order thinking necessary to solve the problems of the day, to prepare for the challenges of the future, and to foster lifelong happiness, success, and productivity. This public discourse has also sparked individuals who, in their zeal to cut costs while elevating the importance of STEM, have forgotten what it means to be human and the essentiality of the arts, humanities, and social sciences. The discoveries and potential application of the natural sciences and mathematics are worthless if one does not understand human nature and the human condition; if one is clueless about how people and societies interact; or if one does not appreciate the aesthetics of the world around them and be allowed to create beauty in all of its manifestations.

This is indeed a troublesome time but I believe it is the perfect time and place for this excellent institution to transition from being invisible to visible in a profound way that extends beyond this corner of the world. Thus, it is time for us to embrace our history, embody our ethos, and to reaffirm & fulfill our mission.

Parents want their student to be able to get a job when she graduates. No one can predict the future and the skills that will be needed. What better than a liberal arts education to prepare for this uncertainty? Critical thinking, problem solving, effective communication, and rational and ethical behavior - these are the foundational characteristics and skills needed for lifelong success. SMCM graduates exhibit these characteristics but we must take it to the next level.

Families want their student to receive the best education possible at a reasonable price. St. Mary's is an honors college. This means there is rigor of the highest standard in all that we do and rigor is expensive. However, as a national liberal arts college, our tuition and fees are low compared to the other top schools. This morning we heard about the changing demographics of college-going students that will have a profound effect on who can afford the type of experience we offer - an experience

that best prepares students for life-long success, happiness, and global citizenry. SMCM must continue to address issues of accessibility and affordability.

We know that the changing demographics are not just about socio-economic status. We, at this place, rest upon the shoulders of those who were sensitive to issues of inclusivity and acceptance 400 years ago. We must not forget our history. We must embrace diversity in all its forms. We must continue to work to live the St. Mary's Way and ensure that this campus remains welcoming and supportive of all.

Going forward, SMCM will be hidden no longer. We will be recognized as an accessible and affordable institution that provides a dynamic, progressive, and holistic liberal arts educational experience for *all* high-achieving students. To that end:

- we must attract and retain a more diverse population of students of high intellectual capacity;
- we must integrate and collaborate more with area institutions and take fuller advantage of our location as a means to enhance our students' experiences;
- we must have more cross-disciplinary collaborations that lead to 21st-century-relevant programming built upon our liberal arts foundation;
- we must better and more fully integrate technology into our programming to enhance education and, equally important, to facilitate accessibility;
- Our students are problem-solvers as well as creators of new knowledge and art forms. We must enhance our students' entrepreneurial abilities by providing them with more opportunities that foster creativity and innovation;
- we must develop our students' abilities to translate their SMCM experience into practical experiences that can be applied globally; and,
- we must be willing to let the world in to see all of the excellence that is, and will be, St. Mary's College of Maryland.

SMCM is not the yokel. We may be the underdog. YET, we are an underdog with 175 years of experience of quietly beating the odds and providing an education that fosters the pursuit of lifelong success and happiness. It is our time to step into the opponent's sense of time. It is time, at this place that has a conflicted history of toleration and enslavement, for us to be the model of what 21st-century higher education must embrace - inclusivity, diversity, affordability, relevancy, and entrepreneurialism. Business as usual is unacceptable. It is time to do what some may believe to be impossible, and to make visible this hidden gem known as St. Mary's College of Maryland. The path may not be easy. However, the woman known as Moses, whose home is preserved not far from here, was able to lead countless numbers to a better place. The path was clear to her. I am no Moses, but I can see the future and I am ready to take you there.

Thank you.

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