

N.Y. administrator to lead the College of Notre Dame

School Sisters tradition is broken

By DAVID FOLKENFLIK
SUN STAFF

For the first time in its history, the College of Notre Dame of Maryland has named someone who is not a member of the School Sisters of Notre Dame as its long-term leader, tapping a veteran administrator from a

Catholic campus in upstate New York to become its 11th president.

Mary Pat Seurkamp, vice president for institutional planning and research at St. John Fisher College in Rochester, N.Y., will take over the college's presidency in July.

"This is a college that is very clear in its values," said Seurkamp, 50. "It [is] a place where I felt that I could be quite effective in providing leadership."

She pledged to continue the century-old college's dedication to a "holistic" curriculum that tends to the intellectual, spiritual, social and physical education of its 3,200 students. "I know firsthand — not just from the research — what that kind of education can do," said Seurkamp (pronounced sir-kamp).

She noted that she had spent most of her own education and career at Catholic institutions — 12 years of primary and secondary schooling, her college years, and more than two decades of work experience on Catholic



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New leadership: Mary Pat Seurkamp will take the post at the College of Notre Dame of Maryland in July.

campuses.

"She's really bright. I think she is a good fit," said Karen Stoddard, a professor of communication arts at the school. "That's really important to us: that she really have a full [See College, 5A]

College of Notre Dame of Md. selects Seurkamp as president

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understanding of and a long-term commitment to Catholic higher education."

While the undergraduate student body is made up entirely of women, some male students are enrolled part time in the College of Notre Dame's weekend college.

Because the college relies heavily on tuition revenues, the school needs to closely monitor its enrollment levels, which often dip and soar, Seurkamp said.

She said the trustees made it clear that she will be responsible for raising the college's profile as well as more money to run the school. The campus is about to embark on a capital improvement program slated to take 20 years and cost \$70 million.

Interim leadership

Georgetown University historian Dorothy M. Brown, who is not a nun, has received strong praise in leading the college for the past year as its interim president while trustees searched for a new campus leader. Former President Sister Rosemarie Nassif resigned abruptly in February 1996 after receiving sharp criticism from some faculty members over moves she made without much consultation.

"With our interim president for the year, Dorothy Brown, we got a sense of how the president and the faculty can work together," said philosophy chairman Christopher Dreisbach, who is also head of the faculty senate. "It's really whetted our appetite for collaborative government."

Seurkamp "seems very promising in that regard," Dreisbach said. "We also wanted someone who had the appropriate respect for the tradition of this college, and I got the sense that she understood that."

In an interview at what will become her office at Gibbons Hall, Seurkamp outlined a philosophy that appears geared to allay faculty concerns.

"It's been my experience that faculty can have very valuable contributions, and they're willing to make hard decisions if they're involved in the process," she said. "With the appropriate involvement and the appropriate process, we can ordinarily find the solution."

Campus officials are also currently searching for a new academic vice president. Once that person is in place, Seurkamp said, the college will begin its first full review of its entire curriculum to ensure that it is consistent with the campus mission.

Seurkamp's selection, finalized by trustees at the end of last week and announced to the campus yesterday afternoon, broke the tradition of having a nun from the order of the School Sisters of Notre Dame run the campus.

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Kathleen O'F. Friedman,
chairwoman of the search panel
that nominated Mary Pat Seurkamp for the college's presidency.

"Everybody that went into this would have loved to be able to continue the tradition," said trustee Kathleen O'Ferrall Friedman, chairwoman of the search panel that nominated Seurkamp for the job. "We all feel a sense of loss — it's a loss of tradition."

But, said Friedman, a Baltimore City Circuit Court judge, "We all have a tremendous sense of enthusiasm [about Seurkamp]. She's inspirational. She just is ready to be a president. Everybody says that."

Early on, Friedman said, the 12-member search committee decided not to limit interviews to members of the School Sisters of Notre Dame, the order of nuns dedicated to the education of women that founded the school in 1896. One of three finalists was a college official who was a member of the order, but she was not offered the job, campus sources said.

"I think we chose the person who could take us into the next century," Friedman said.

Students voice enthusiasm

Several students and faculty members expressed enthusiasm for the prospect of Seurkamp representing the campus in the Baltimore region.

"Her whole demeanor is very professional. She's well spoken," said MaRhea Holiday, a sophomore who is the host of a talk show on the college's AM radio station. "She has a way of communicating her ideas in a manner to which the audience may be more receptive."

"She was interested in making sure that when you say the College of Notre Dame, people know what that is," said Celeste Walls, a 20-year-old junior from Levittown, Pa., who is president of the campus Arts Society. "People should know that it's a strong college in the Baltimore area — and especially that it's [for] women."

Seurkamp graduated from Webster College in St. Louis and earned a master's degree from Washington University in St. Louis and a doctorate from the State University of New York at Buffalo in 1990. With her husband, Bob, a retired Xerox executive, she owns a marina at Keuka Lake in upstate New York. The couple have two daughters and a son, and recently became grandparents.