



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

GCU Self-Study for Reaffirmation of  
MSCHE Accreditation

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JOSEPH R. MARBACH, PH.D., PRESIDENT  
*Spring 2019*


**GEORGIAN COURT UNIVERSITY**

THE MERCY UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY

*Lakewood, NJ*



GCU SELF-STUDY  
**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**



**Georgian Court University's (GCU) Self-Study** was an intensive review of all aspects of the university and came at a time that matched with the closeout of the 2012–2017 strategic plan and the launch of a new strategic planning process. The results clarified the university's identity and set the course *for an even better tomorrow*, focused on four compass points: mission integration through academic excellence; an exceptional student experience; revenue generation and diversification; and operational efficiency and resource utilization.



**Catherine McAuley, Foundress of the Sisters of Mercy**

In preparation for its Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE) decennial reaffirmation of accreditation scheduled for Spring 2019, Georgian Court University President Joseph Marbach appointed the GCU Self-Study Steering Committee in November 2016. Also in the summer prior to the 2016–2017 academic year, GCU began a strategic planning process by engaging Dr. Jeffrey Buller, a professor at Florida Atlantic University and author of *Change Leadership in Higher Education: A Practical Guide to Academic Transformation* (2015). GCU used the Strategic Compass framework as outlined by Dr. Buller in a process that fully engaged the Board of Trustees (BOT), the President’s Cabinet, the Provost’s Council, the President’s Leadership Council, and the faculty and staff. While separate in scope and development, both working groups for the university’s Self-Study for MSCHE reaffirmation of accreditation and for the Strategic Compass encompassed such a wide net of university stakeholders that they formed a synergy across the campus. While the processes began together, the data and findings of the Self-Study ultimately informed the directions of the Strategic Compass. The Self-Study was invaluable in clarifying goals and objectives that must be met to fulfill the university mission and to establish GCU as an institution that empowers students to shape a just and compassionate world.





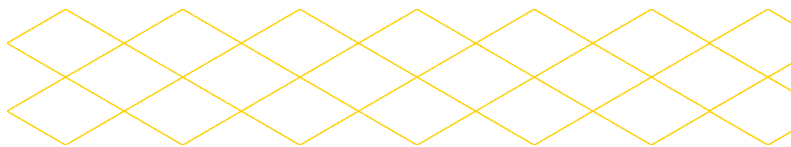
GCU identified key personnel for its MSCHE Steering Committee, with co-chairs for each Standard of Accreditation. This committee had a twofold charge. The first charge was to provide the documentation necessary to show compliance with the MSCHE Requirements of Affiliation and Standards of Accreditation. In addition to these documents forming the basis for the Self-Study and the university's compliance with the MSCHE Standards, they also provided the basis for understanding the university's unique identity and purpose, which set the direction of the Strategic Compass. The second charge for the Steering Committee was to identify additional research areas that aligned with GCU's unique story of compliance with the MSCHE Standards. As the Self-Study Steering Committee identified areas of self-recommendation, the Strategic Compass guiding principles and compass points were formulated to illuminate the way toward the vision of a growing university that remains (1) true to its mission and (2) focused on the student's overall experience.

THE SELF-STUDY STEERING COMMITTEE MET MONTHLY DURING THE ACADEMIC YEAR TO SHARE RESULTS AND TO ARTICULATE AREAS IN NEED OF STRENGTHENING TO CONTINUE MEETING THE STANDARDS OF ACCREDITATION AT THE HIGHEST LEVEL.

The meeting minutes, related documents, documentation roadmap, and Self-Study draft documents were housed in a secure SharePoint site on the university's portal. Throughout the process, the university community was offered opportunities to participate in the Self-Study process through newsletters, review of the drafts of the Self-Study, and most importantly, through widespread inclusion on the sub-committees of the Steering Committee.

# KEY FINDINGS

## OF THE GCU SELF-STUDY



**Since its last MSCHE decennial Self-Study in 2009,** Georgian Court University has seen some significant changes. Rosemary Jeffries, RSM, Ph.D., '72 completed her term as president, and in October 2015, Joseph R. Marbach,

Ph.D., was installed as GCU's ninth president.

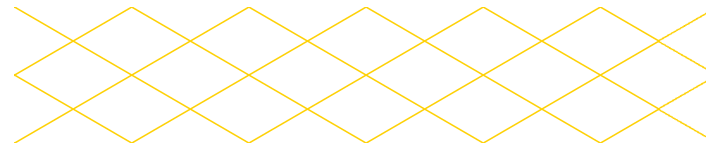
Previously, at the start of the 2013 academic year, GCU went fully coeducational, admitting 275 first-year students—including men—into its former women's-only day program, bringing Mercy education to a more diverse student body. Fall 2016 saw the implementation of the Bridge General Education Program after six years of research and planning.

After the 2009 decennial Self-Study and resulting reports, the provost appointed a task force in 2011 to study the general education program. The task force, which included some former members of the General Education Curriculum Committee, proposed several models for a new general education program. One of the models (the "Bridge" model) was chosen by the Faculty Assembly (the full body of the faculty) in Fall 2013. The revised general education program (Bridge General Education) was developed to offer students a coherent and integrated learning experience in the Catholic intellectual tradition, aligned with the Mercy charism and the values of the

university. This model includes fewer specific course requirements but adds two courses, a cornerstone and a capstone, based on the vision and mission of the university. These two new courses are Discovering the Self in the Big Universe (GEN199) and Visioning a Future: Justice, Compassion, and Service (GEN400).

In recent years, GCU has also adjusted its academic offerings to meet the needs of current and future students, adding and augmenting programs in nursing, health sciences, psychology, and education. During the last 10 years, the university has developed course modality and site flexibility, offering hybrid and online course delivery, and has expanded its presence to off-site locations convenient to adult learners and degree completers. In 2018, GCU was recognized as a "College of Distinction" in the areas of nursing, business, and education, and as a Catholic College of Distinction. "Colleges of Distinction applauds Georgian Court for pushing the envelope with its up-to-date curriculum, enriching the college experience with high-impact educational practices, and providing every student with an education that stretches far beyond what's typically required from an academic major," said Tyson Schritter, CEO of Colleges of Distinction.

# HIGHLIGHTS & SIGNIFICANT ACCOMPLISHMENTS



## STANDARD I: MISSION AND GOALS

In addition to being a key driver for the Bridge General Education Program, GCU's Mission was the foundation for the university's Strategic Compass development. Each of the compass points begins with the phrase "Mission fulfillment through..." and the full title, "The Strategic Compass . . . for an Even Better Tomorrow" is based on this 1841 quote from Catherine McAuley, foundress of the Sisters of Mercy: "Resolve to be good today, but better tomorrow." The guiding principle of the Strategic Compass states that "Georgian Court University is a distinct Catholic university in the Mercy tradition, empowering students to shape a just and compassionate world."

While the physical, campus presence of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas is diminished, the spirit of this founding religious order is very much a part of GCU's being. Annually, the university joins with the broader community of Mercy in celebrating a week of Mercy and also Critical Concerns Week, bringing awareness to the continuing efforts of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas to address social justice issues through the lens of Mercy and Catholic Social Teaching.

GCU was founded by the Sisters of Mercy, whose charism also requires them to take a vow of service. Georgian Court embraces five of the Mercy values as their university values: service, compassion, respect, integrity, and justice. The university, in the spirit of service, encourages volunteerism through its general education curriculum,

student organizations, campus outreach, and in employees' personal lives. During the academic year 2017–2018, Georgian Court University students, faculty, and staff contributed nearly 121,000 volunteer service hours to help individuals, community organizations, and area nonprofit agencies.

## STANDARD II: ETHICS AND INTEGRITY

There is clarity of ethics and integrity as cornerstones throughout the institution. Key documents, policies, and significant events are published on its website ([www.georgian.edu](http://www.georgian.edu)).

External consultants are used to review programs, practices, and processes. The university replies to all requests for data as required by government, accrediting, and banking agencies, and reports its annual audit to the Board of Trustees and other constituents, while publishing its annual reports on the publications page of its website. For students, GCU publishes a student consumer information page, also on its website.

However, communication processes need to be reviewed and directed within and without the university. This area became a self-recommendation from the Self-Study. A task force was created to plan and implement actions related to the above findings.

86%

OF GCU'S FIRST-YEAR STUDENTS PARTICIPATED IN AT LEAST ONE HIGH-IMPACT PRACTICE, WHILE 86% OF GCU'S SENIORS PARTICIPATED IN TWO OR MORE OF THESE PRACTICES.

## STANDARD III: DESIGN AND DELIVERY OF STUDENT LEARNING EXPERIENCES

Georgian Court University has a highly structured process for academic program review and program development. Academic program planning and assessment processes are in place. Faculty scholarship, according to Boyer's taxonomy, is a key component of GCU's tenure and promotion practices, and faculty scholarship is noted annually in the *Faculty Focus* publication on its website. Most recently, GCU opened its Center for Teaching and Learning as a virtual site on its Learning Management System (LMS).

The 2018 GCU Strategic Compass has an overall strategy to attract more students by diversifying the academic programs offered in response to student interest and employer needs. The university will also seek to expand its virtual and physical presence by offering courses on the Lakewood campus and beyond through multiple delivery formats at multiple locations. GCU currently offers more than 30 major areas of study for the undergraduate students and has more than 10 areas of study in which to earn graduate degrees or credentials. A strategic enrollment planning process is underway to expand offering of undergraduate and graduate degrees as well as co-curricular experiences and services that will improve retention.



Students are engaged in learning beyond the classroom through high-impact practices. All students have the opportunity to do service, starting at Orientation, continuing through courses that include service learning, and culminate in the service learning project integral to the Bridge General Education capstone course (GEN400). Faculty are encouraged to engage students in faculty-led research through the Faculty Research Fellows initiative. Global education and experiential learning opportunities abound for semester-long and short-term study-abroad and service opportunities. As a small university, GCU helps students form natural learning communities. Cohorts in a major area of study tend to be small and have repeated instruction with key faculty who also serve as academic advisors. In addition, students gain real-life experience in their field of study through required practicums, internships, and clinical experiences. The 2017 National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) survey showed that 86% of GCU's first-year students participated in at least one high-impact practice, while 86% of GCU's seniors participated in two or more of these practices.

**GCU** IS A TRANSFER-FRIENDLY SCHOOL. OUR TRANSFER GRADUATION RATE OF 75% FAR EXCEEDS THE NATIONAL AVERAGE OF 57%.



## STANDARD IV: SUPPORT OF THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE

Georgian Court University offers a variety of support and engagement opportunities for both undergraduate and graduate students. Its mission calls for a provision of an environment for the entire university community to grow through shared educational, cultural, social, and spiritual experiences.

Under-prepared and at-risk students are well supported through student services and programs. A skills development program allows students to strengthen academic skills in writing, reading, and mathematics prior to taking college-credit classes or the general education requirements in these disciplines. Successful retention practices such as Chart the Course are supported by federal Title III grant funds, and the results of these practices yield first-year retention rates in the upper-seventies. GCU is a transfer-friendly school, and the retention and graduation rates of transfer students well exceed the national norm.

The Georgian Court University Lions compete in 14 NCAA Division II sports as a member of the Central Atlantic Collegiate Conference (CACC). Within the athletic program, students find people and programs that bring out their best: as a student, as an athlete, and as a member of the community. The goal of the athletic

program is to prepare students for a meaningful, confident life after college. Earlier this year (2018), the GCU Lions won the NCAA's Helper Helper community service competition. It is the second year in a row that GCU student-athletes were involved with more than 20 organizations and logged more service hours than any of the 300+ Division II programs in the country. Throughout the year, GCU student-athletes invested upward of 13,000 service hours to help others.

## STANDARD V: EDUCATIONAL EFFECTIVENESS ASSESSMENT

Organized, systematic student learning outcomes assessments occur for all undergraduate and graduate programs as well as co-curricular programs. The assessment plans are available on the university's website, as are executive summaries of program assessment reports. The program assessment plans follow a three-year cycle. The plans developed in 2016 will be reviewed and updated in Fall 2019. The assessment webpage on the GCU website promotes assessment transparency. Mission is integrated into the assessment through reflection on how the Mercy core values are incorporated into courses.



## STANDARD VI: PLANNING, RESOURCES, AND INSTITUTIONAL IMPROVEMENT



Planning for its preferred future while gathering evidence of compliance with the Accreditation Standards of the Middle States Commission on Higher Education, GCU embarked on its Self-Study and Strategic Compass in parallel and synergistic processes from Fall 2016 through Fall 2018. Two of the self-recommendations from the Self-Study formed the key components of two Strategic

Compass directions (#3: Revenue generation and diversification and #4: Operational efficiency and resource utilization). The information gained through the study of the university's academic programs and student support services informed the Strategic Compass directives directly related to the other two points (#1: Academic excellence and #2: An exceptional student experience).

Georgian Court University completed its Facilities Condition Assessment in Spring 2018. This is a prelude to completing a Campus Development Plan, which is one of the stated initiatives of Compass Point #4 of the GCU Strategic Compass. A feasibility study for a capital campaign was undertaken in Fall 2017. The university's strategic enrollment planning document is currently under development. Unit assessment was coordinated in Spring 2018, with results from the first year due in early 2019. These efforts, along with financial planning initiatives and IT infrastructure review, will direct GCU toward its preferred future.



THE GCU LIONS WON THE NCAA'S 2018 HELPER HELPER COMMUNITY SERVICE COMPETITION. IT IS THE SECOND YEAR IN A ROW THAT GCU STUDENT-ATHLETES WERE INVOLVED WITH MORE THAN 20 ORGANIZATIONS AND LOGGED MORE SERVICE HOURS THAN ANY OF THE 300+ DIVISION II PROGRAMS IN THE COUNTRY.

UNIVERSITY LEADERSHIP IS COLLABORATIVE AND APPROACHES DECISION MAKING AND PROBLEM SOLVING AS A TEAM LED BY THE PRESIDENT, WITH ALL MEMBERS OF THE PRESIDENT'S CABINET WORKING TO STEER THE UNIVERSITY IN ONE DIRECTION.

## STANDARD VII: GOVERNANCE, LEADERSHIP, AND ADMINISTRATION

GCU has a clearly defined and rigorous governance structure. Georgian Court University is governed under a sponsorship model of the Conference of Mercy Higher Education (CMHE), albeit with its own defined Board of Trustees.

Highly qualified leaders have been supported and quickly integrated into campus life, even with frequent personnel turnovers. This is true because university leadership is collaborative and approaches decision making and problem solving as a team led by the president, with all members of the President's Cabinet working to steer the university in one direction. These leaders meet weekly as a whole and one-on-one with the president. Objectives and goals are aligned with the mission and values of the university and are assessed in an annual performance review of all administrators and staff.

Since June 30, 2018, the ending date for data and information included in the Self-Study, Georgian Court University's ability to resiliently handle turnover has been tested as three Cabinet members left to pursue the next level of opportunity outside the university and a fourth decided to return to the faculty. The president's foresight in including wide participation in planning and decision making has allowed the Cabinet to continue its work uninterrupted. In addition, he added a special consultant to the Cabinet to work as a shared resource on the key challenges of the university. A planned change in the Office

of Mission Integration was made with a new executive director and special assistant to the president being hired with experience in a similar role at another university. The dean of the School of Business and Digital Media assumed the role of interim provost for a two-year period, working side by side with the outgoing provost for three months and using her knowledge and experience from other university-wide initiatives, and well as her participation in the CIC Senior Leadership Academy, to make a smooth transition. The assistant provost for student success and retention assumed the expanded role of interim vice president for enrollment and retention, strengthening the integration of admissions and retention efforts. An associate vice president of undergraduate admissions position was created to bolster that office. The search for a new vice president for advancement is nearing final stages after a long and careful search. Time was allowed because of the competence of the underlying advancement leaders who reported directly to the president in the interim. Most recently, the vice president for finance and administration announced retirement. Again, the transition is being handled well with the special consultant to the president stepping in to shoulder the work while an intensive search for the next vice president for finance and administration is underway. It should be noted that the outgoing CFO led GCU's successful completion of the annual audit and launch of the annual budget process. He also leaves behind a seasoned assistant vice president for finance/controller.

# GCU SELF-RECOMMENDATIONS

## BASED ON THE SELF-STUDY

**While the university determined**, through the evidence collected, that it was in compliance with all Standards, there were three significant areas for improvement. Action planning related to the three self-recommendations continued with the President's Cabinet through Fall 2017 and Spring 2018, resulting in a separate initiative with some overlap with the Strategic Compass Points as indicated below.

### GCU's self-recommendations are:

1. Planning for continued viability (Aligned with Compass Points #3 and #4), facilities condition report was conducted in Spring 2018; capital campaign feasibility study was conducted in Fall 2017.)
2. Communications Integrity (Communication processes need to be reviewed and directed within and without the university. A task force was created in late Spring 2018 to plan and implement these actions.)
3. Unit Effectiveness and Planning (Aligned with Compass Point #4. University Assessment Plan and implementation began in January 2018).

Georgian Court University is grateful for all of its constituents who became involved in its decennial Self-Study, and looks forward to acting on its findings within the coming years, believing that *we are good today, and can be even better tomorrow* (McAuley, 1841).





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