



Photo provided by Brian Amkraut

Q&A with Brian Amkraut, Ph.D.

**Vice President and General Manager for
Division of Workforce Credentialing
and Community Impact**

You are the Vice President and General Manager for Workforce Credentialing and Community Impact at Mercy College. That's a mouthful. Can you expand on your title and job description?

We use the phrase “workforce credentialing” in recognition that academic degrees are not always the appropriate measure of job-readiness, and that Mercy College can offer and certify competency in specific subject areas in addition to the many degree programs we offer. Additionally, I believe colleges need to be integrated into the fabric of the communities in which they are situated, so in addition to transforming individuals’ lives through higher education, Mercy can directly impact communities by providing educational programming to meet their needs.

The new division you are heading represents a whole new strategic direction for the College. How is it different from post-secondary education?

We believe that education is a never-ending endeavor—and that in our ever-changing economy colleges have an opportunity (I could argue an obligation) to offer continuous learning to our students and our communities throughout individuals’ lifetimes, through both non-credit skill-based training as well as learning for personal enrichment. In that respect we are extending and expanding the mission of conventional post-secondary education, but not replacing it.

Can you tell us more about the CERTIFI program?

CERTIFI by Mercy College is the new brand we are assigning to our workforce initiative. We want to clearly distinguish this project from the other great programs Mercy offers and to make clear to the key constituency of learners and employers that we are laser focused on the skill needs of the labor market. Our brand philosophy is the following: “CERTIFI by Mercy College is designed for students with or without college degrees to further their careers, advance their skills, and gain credentials vital in today’s workforce. Connecting to an ever-growing number of certificate programs and learning opportunities, CERTIFI offers a full spectrum of courses. From hard skills that solidify career needs to soft skills that help you navigate the business climate, CERTIFI will help upgrade your skills so you can stand apart in the workplace. Get moving. Get CERTIFIED.”

Will the new certificate programs be offered solely online?

Over time we anticipate offering both in person and online programming. But we have an enormous amount of data demonstrating that self-paced learning and online accessibility create more opportunities for students representing the full spectrum of our population.

Who do you see being our target audience for these new certificates?

Our main target audience will be working adults who are looking to advance their careers or transition to new career pathways by obtaining credentials in high-demand skills.

What is significant about the timing of this new venture?

The true significance is alignment with broader changes in the higher education arena that in truth have been in play for some time but have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, we must address the changing needs of the workforce, the challenges to conventional business models at our colleges and universities, and the likelihood of greater disruption rooted in new technologies (as we have seen in most other economic sectors).

How did you come to Mercy College?

As is true for many others during the last two years, this past summer I took stock of my professional pathway and thought, with the right opportunities, it might be time for a change. (The fact that my youngest child graduated high school in June 2021 may have contributed as well.) When I read the posting for this new position at Mercy, and the difference we could make in people's lives, I knew the opportunity was right up my alley.

Your LinkedIn profile says you are interested in civil rights and social action. Does the venture at Mercy dovetail with that?

First of all, I think creating access and pathways to higher education for traditionally underserved communities and then promoting/supporting student success is very much in the DNA of Mercy College. I also believe that for too many years higher education has been almost exclusively focused on putting high-schoolers into degree programs. And while that is admirable it excludes much of our population, especially in the immediate areas surrounding our campuses, where life has often gotten in the way of an immediate post-secondary college experience. I believe that you are never too old to learn and that is incumbent upon us to create pathways for everyone—pathways which can empower people through skills and knowledge and thereby help close some of our gaps in wealth, income, and social equity.

You're from Ohio? What most surprises you about New York?

For the last two decades I would say that I was from New York but happened to live in Ohio, but in fact having lived in Cleveland for the past 21 years has shaped who I am, and for my children was really the only home that they knew. When I left New York, I was a real Manhattanite so while I am not all that surprised, I am very much enjoying the richness of the rest of the region. For example, until I started at Mercy, I had never taken the Hudson Line on Metro-North, and now it is part of my daily routine and without a doubt one of the most scenic public transportation routes available. We are also learning to find the many places to hike and other green spaces not only in the region but within the boundaries of the city itself, which is a pleasant surprise.

Are you a Cleveland Browns fan? Other favorite sports?

It would be tough to survive all those years in Ohio without drinking some of the local Kool-Aid on the Northeast Ohio sports teams. And I learned that the city's overall demeanor could rise and fall with the outcome of a Sunday game—so I did (and still do) cheer them on. I am more conflicted on basketball and baseball as I am a long-time Yankees and Knicks fan but did support the Cleveland teams as well, and if you lived in Cleveland, you saw the impact LeBron James had on the community way beyond bringing a championship, so I will always be a fan in that regard. But I am looking forward to returning to Broadway theater and catching some games at the Garden.



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