

Welcome, Provost
Fernández!

Q&A with

Eva M. Fernández, Ph.D.

Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs

Eva M. Fernández, Ph.D., was appointed as Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs in July 2022. Fernández comes to Mercy from Guttman Community College, City University of New York (CUNY), where she served as Interim Vice President for Academic Affairs and Provost. In her role at Mercy, she oversees all faculty and academic programs.



Photo provided by Eva M. Fernández

What attracted you to Mercy College?

I was attracted to Mercy's excellent track record of successful service to underserved populations; strategic initiatives in place to do even better; the leadership team, faculty and staff committed to innovation in higher education; and, most importantly, amazing students.

What are the most exciting projects that you look forward to diving into at Mercy?

The most exciting part of my work is working with people, and I'm fortunate to be surrounded by people who are student centered, talented and out-of-the-box thinkers. I'm really excited about the Student Success Toolkit 2.0; it helps focus our attention on strategies that we know work. I'm also really excited about getting to know our faculty. It's their expertise and dedication that makes Mercy's educational model exceptional.

Is there a particular challenge you are looking to tackle at Mercy?

Two challenges come to mind. First, I have spent most of my time since I joined Mercy at our campus in Dobbs Ferry, but I am committed to having a presence and being available at MercyManhattan and the Bronx Campus. Second, I am impressed by the depth and breadth of the data available to help us improve our practices — thanks to the team in Institutional Research, it is presented with much more insight and analysis than in many other places. Still, I know we can do better in understanding how to use this treasure-trove of data. What are the lead measures we can act on now so we can move the needle on more comprehensive measures like retention and graduation?

Can you tell us about advancing the prospects for student success at Mercy now that COVID is (mostly) in our rear-view mirror?

It's one of those rear-view mirrors that says, "objects in mirror are closer than they appear," right? As a society, we're beginning to feel like we have COVID a little more under control, but the impact on higher education is still deeply felt, and we will have scars from the pandemic for years to come.

The pandemic has had significant impact on enrollment: We are seeing accelerated enrollment declines all around the country.

The pandemic has also had significant impact on learning: Learning losses are being reported everywhere; there's some agreement that the pandemic as an external influence is mostly the reason, though it is likely also linked to less-than-ideal learning designs in some online courses; there's no clear ideas about what to do to recover learning losses, but I think we can ramp up our academic supports — both by embedding support strategically within certain courses and by providing more direct access to tutors and peer mentors through the Center for Academic Excellence and Innovation.

But wouldn't it be amazing if 10 years from now we look back and say that we took this opportunity to rethink what we could be as a higher education institution? To get there, here are some of the areas where we need to dedicate more resources and grow our expertise:

- Really take advantage of online technologies to improve teaching and learning, and to prepare our students for the hybrid workforce they'll be entering.
- Improve flexibility in delivery of services and supports to students, as well as services and supports for faculty and staff.
- Continue to provide flexibility for faculty and staff in their on-site schedules.

- Serve a sector of the population that we have not been able to serve (or serve well) because they don't have the bandwidth for in-person coursework.

Are there trends or “best practices” in student success across the country which you find admirable?

I'm very interested in practices that can be scaled. This is something President Hall regularly reminds us about. If a practice can't be scaled, it can't be a “best practice,” it can only be a “pretty good practice.” For instance, PACT does impactful work because they work with all of our students: that's definitely a best practice. I'm very interested in models of learning that incorporate peer mentoring. I'm inspired by the work that was begun by Phil Treisman at UC Berkeley in the 1980s. Learning is social and we could do a lot better in higher education to rethink how we get students to learn with each other. I'm also very interested in how to empower instructors to improve their practice, because the most direct methods to improve learning are going to be in classrooms, designed and delivered by faculty.

Where are you from, and what part of your ethnicity/ culture has most enriched your understanding/ appreciation of higher education?

I was born in Spain, and even though I have spent most of my life in the United States, I have been very fortunate to be able to keep close ties to my heritage, and I am Madrileña through and through. I learned very quickly that my bilingualism gave me an important advantage. Higher education serves as a vehicle for endowing people with such advantages: along with learning new skills, you get to learn about yourself, your community, your world and become better off for it.

What drew you to the position of provost?

Thirty years ago, when I was starting my graduate work, if you had told me I would become a college administrator, I would have said, “What? Never!” But the possibility of improving learning for hundreds or thousands of students keeps me deeply engaged in this work.

What is the most important lesson/observation about higher education you have learned during your career?

It's hard to pin it down to just one thing. Listen louder than you speak. Learn to collaborate. Make learning fun — it's way better that way.

You're in higher education at a time when many starting to question the value of a college degree. What's your take on that?

We all should make some time to listen to those skeptics — we need to understand what it is about the college return on investment that people are questioning. But overwhelmingly, the data tells us that bachelor's degrees are worth a lot. A bachelor's degree gets you a better chance of getting a job, gets you better starting salaries and better salaries on average.



It gets better. People with college education also are more likely to engage in cultural activities. People with more education are more likely to be happy, have better health, live in more stable relationships, and live longer. And, people with more education are more likely to actively participate in democracy.

Still, we need to be aware of persistent inequities. Women with bachelor's degrees earn 25% less than men with the same credential. Black and Latino bachelor's degree holders earn \$1M less than their White and Asian counterparts over a lifetime. So we have a ways to go in making a college degree valuable to all. Consequently, I'm very interested in the kinds of things that a college like Mercy can do to advance career preparation for our students, because these are inequities we should not tolerate.

What else would you like the College community to know about you? Hobbies? Books you like to read? Parts of the world you'd like to see if you could?

I really love music. I enjoy live music, enjoy hearing it from my phone, love singing along and love playing along. Right now, I'm listening to the brilliant performance by Ella Fitzgerald recorded in Berlin in 1960. Wow.