



Photo by John Rizzo

# A Farewell to Timothy L. Hall

## *Mercy College's Student Success President*

**O**n April 17, 2015, Timothy L. Hall was formally inaugurated as the 12th president of Mercy College, feeling “awed and grateful” to join the Mercy family and serve as leader of the institution. In June 2023, he and his wife, Lee Nicholson Hall, will retire to Texas, a prospect he describes a bit differently as “blessed and nerve-wracking.” “I’ve worked steadily all my life. I never had a gap except during law school,” Hall explained. Have I saved enough to support my beloved wife, who has very good genes, and whose mother is 99 as we speak?”

Hall came to Mercy with an impressive list of accomplishments, then added quite a few more: the College was recognized by the White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for Hispanics as a “Bright Spot in Hispanic Education” and went on to receive the “Seal of *Excelencia*,” making it the first private college in the country to be nationally recognized by *Excelencia* in Education for meaningfully advancing the prospects of its Hispanic students. Mercy added a new, 350-bed residence hall on its Dobbs Ferry Campus and did a complete makeover of its MercyManhattan Campus with new state-of-the-art facilities, dormitory and academic programs; it purchased and renovated a historic Tarrytown, New York mansion for community and alumni gatherings; it undertook a “teach out” of students from the closing of The College of New Rochelle, which brought in 1,800 students and several new academic programs; and he launched an ambitious student success platform (the “Mercy Success Toolkit”), employing strategies for student engagement and achievement which has significantly increased retention and graduation rates for all students, especially our Black and Hispanic students. His time at Mercy, he says, has been enriching — and surprising.

“I didn’t expect to learn so much. I thought, ‘All right, this is the last stage, probably, of my professional career. And this is the stage to which I get to bring all the things that I’ve learned.’ I didn’t expect that this would be the stage when I learned the most. I thought I knew a lot about student success when I came to New York, but I was just a babe in the woods compared to what I know today because of my experiences at Mercy.”



Photo by Leslie Kahan Photography



President Hall entertaining students at his home.

Former Mercy College Board of Trustees Chairman Gary Brown says while Hall had all the best credentials on paper, it was his heart that made him the best candidate to lead the College.

“Tim was absolutely the standout because of who Tim is. He has enhanced the academics of the College, and the standing nationally of the College, but for me and all of us on the Board, the focus is on how he interfaces with the students,” said Brown. “It’s not that common among presidents of colleges. He’s somebody who can get down and relate to kids who are struggling. He’s lived that, I’ve lived that, having to pull ourselves up from different but humble backgrounds. Tim has a heart for what the mission of Mercy College truly is.”

“When I came here, the Board said, ‘We think you should spend the time working within the College to make it better,’” says Hall. “And when they talked about making it better for students, they meant the students we have, the ones we’re serving right now.”

Just prior to his arrival, however, Mercy had raised its admission standards — putting pressure on the stand-by-your-students philosophy. “That one decision cut the freshman class by a third. And so far, as I can see, not a lot of people really appreciated what that would mean. When you cut your class by a third, that’s going to roll through your enrollment for a minimum of six years and probably more like eight. We’ve been combating that the whole way,” Hall said. “I’m happy to tell you that our freshman enrollments are significantly higher today than they were when I arrived.”

Hall chose to invest in success wherever possible. Although Mercy relies on an economic model of low tuition and a core group of full-time faculty, “We deliberately used some surplus money to hire more full-time faculty. I want to keep that investment.” And he pushed for such measures as proactive advising for students in need of additional support and the use of data analytics to improve educational outcomes.

It was all part of a strategy to position Mercy as “student ready” rather than relying on students to be “college ready.” Career preparedness is also central to the Mercy Success Toolkit. “We are trying to be much more intentional about embedding career education throughout our curriculum, because virtually all students are not in the slightest persuaded by the general values of being educated as being a citizen. They’re looking for a job. They want to see that happen.”

As he explains it, this success model isn’t brain surgery: the Toolkit, he says, simply adapts what is already working elsewhere to Mercy students and their needs.

Through the years, Hall has gotten to know lots and lots of Mercy students. He made it a priority to have them feel “seen and known.” He has been a fixture in the cafeteria, at athletic games, concerts and lectures. “I tell myself regularly, ‘Probably half your job should be paying attention to



President Hall and Mrs. Lee Nicholson Hall hosting student government leaders at their home.

people, especially to students — seeing them, hearing them, interacting with them, letting them know that they can make a difference by what they say to me. This is very, very important work.”

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There is leading. And then there is leading through the unimaginable. The COVID-19 pandemic briefly closed the campuses, then forced the College to re-emerge offering education online, which immediately and disproportionately compromised Mercy’s first-generation and low-income students, who studies show perform better in class than remotely. Under Hall the College moved decisively to help students through the challenging times while maintaining health and safety: expanding access to the Mav Market food pantry; establishing a Student Emergency Fund; sending computers to students’ homes; and keeping all academic instruction going at a distance until it was safe to come back. Not every institution of higher education had the underlying financials to survive the pandemic. On Hall’s watch, Mercy College did.

With a few months until retirement, Hall now has a new mandate from the Board: Don’t slow down. He drove the launch of CERTiFi by Mercy College as a strategic business decision to meet the demands of a competitive marketplace and evolving labor force. CERTiFi, offering non-credit, certificate courses, is “...more adult focused, something that brought new students that didn’t come to us traditionally. CERTiFi is a very deliberate attempt to diversify our sources of revenue, so that we can’t be so impacted as COVID impacted us,” said Hall. In March, the College started the approval process with New York State to become Mercy University later this year.

Asked what retirement looks like to him, he says the focus is family. But he leaves with the same convictions that brought him to Mercy. Student success is possible if those entrusted with educating them commit to following the path.

“There are very specific things — not so widely known in higher education — that especially help the students who need the most help. And — it’s almost mathematical. If you do these things, they get the help, and they soar.”