

A College of Distinction

By Margaret Merrion
Dean, College of Fine Arts

[Margaret Merrion, Dean of the College of Fine Arts, spoke at the annual meeting of the Friends held on April 4, 2002. Dr. Merrion addressed her favorite subject, the College, which is the only College of Fine Arts in Michigan that includes all four of the fine arts. The following article is excerpted and paraphrased from her presentation.]

An angel appeared at a faculty meeting in a major university, and told the dean that in return for her unselfish and exemplary behavior, the Lord would reward her with her choice of one of three things: infinite wealth, wisdom, or beauty. Without hesitating, the dean selected infinite wisdom.

"Done!" said the angel, and disappeared in a cloud of smoke and a bolt of lightning. After a few moments, all heads turned toward the dean, who sat surrounded by a faint halo of light. At length, one of her colleagues whispered, "Say something." The dean looked at them and said, "I should have taken the money."

I love this story because it allows me to pursue the concept of a "college of distinction" since I, too, have gained a little wisdom after 13 years as a dean. Let me begin by emphasizing that there are only 22 colleges of fine arts—by this I mean academic organizations that include the visual arts, dance, music, and theatre within one collegiate structure—in the entire nation. Even more specifically, of these 22, only 14 are professionally accredited across the board. This means that each of the four programs has been accredited by its own accrediting organization. Faculty, student outcomes, curricula, facilities, and resources are deemed to meet national standards evaluated by the accrediting agency. With pride, I emphasize that the College of Fine Arts at WMU is one of the 22 in the nation and, even more important, one of the 14 in which all programs are accredited.

So, we have "deep" excellence and distinction with each discipline meeting the national standards for depth of program, AND we have "broad" excellence and distinction with each unit in the College of Fine Arts sustaining a superior level of "artistry." The potential for working together as a college to address the understanding and appreciation of the arts at such a high-powered level is distinctive. Thus, we make our first claim to be a "College of Distinction."

A second quantifiable measure of distinction is that our College of Fine Arts is the only CFA in Michigan. At a state level, and in a state with several nation-

ally recognized universities, this is an enviable distinction. Our sister institutions have not chosen to develop a structural organization that matches our strong approach to governance issues, advocacy, and resource acquisition. We have the clear advantage of a unified voice for the arts. We have harnessed the commonalities of the arts within a single, collegial environment that permits us to work collaboratively to enhance our mission as a "College of Distinction."

The last quantifiable indication of distinction is found right here on our own campus. The students who come to WMU to enroll in one of the programs in the College of Fine Arts have the highest academic profile of any student group admitted to this University. This is to say that based on an analysis of ACT scores and high school GPAs, the students in the College of Fine Arts have the highest scores when compared to the other colleges of WMU. This, too, makes us a



Margaret Merrion, Dean, College of Fine Arts

"College of Distinction" within our own institutional colleges.

So, to put all of this wisdom in one sentence, the College of Fine Arts at WMU is marked as a truly distinctive college at three key levels: national, state, and institutional. However, now let me add some extra wisdom! All of the quantitative measures are less important than what I define as the artistic, cultural, and aesthetic realms in which our faculty and students operate—at the international, national, and institutional levels. Our productivity has become so noteworthy that the University and the College had to develop a separate section of the University's Web page entitled "Arts and Entertainment." This section describes a formidable number of accomplishments and events—with the vast majority initi-

ated by the College of Fine Arts. Because of this "productivity" let me emphasize two special characteristics of distinction that define our College of Fine Arts.

The first is found in what can only be described as a close partnership with the Kalamazoo community. Faculty, staff, and students are actively engaged in all aspects of the cultural life of our community. Exhibitions, productions, performances are fortified with their talent—annually we mount more than 400 events on campus, and an enormous number of our people are performing at regional theatres, art hops, concerts and cultural affairs within a 50-mile radius. Dozens more are found throughout the State, the region, and on the stages and in galleries of communities and cities across the nation and internationally.

We are equally proud of the fact we also offer unique assistance in non-cultural arenas including healthcare, youth treatment facilities, nursing homes, places of worship, and, of course, in all the habitats of K-12 education. "Service learning" and "internships" are age-old practices of the arts with our College's students highly visible in such special locations as Bronson Hospital and the Lakeside Treatment Center as well as the Kalamazoo Institute of Arts, the Kalamazoo Symphony Orchestra, and the Civic Theatre. In our "College of Distinction," there is almost a seamless web between our programs and the community—a sincere and sustained partnership in which we share resources, ingenuity, and expertise.

The second special distinction is education itself. The education of our students is truly part of our finest distinction. Every person in the College is dedicated to student development. Moreover, this key distinction occurs without compromising faculty work as scholars and artists. Our University demands and gets a level of commitment to excellence in teaching that truly exceeds that of the part-time faculty at Julliard or the ability of small liberal arts programs to pay less attention to national recognition as a standard of tenure and promotion.

Our students receive an outstanding arts education that permits them to gain entry to the finest professional graduate schools, earn major fellowships and assistantships, have a 100% placement rate in fields such as music therapy and music education, and win regional and national awards for design. Weekly, if not daily, I learn of an alum getting a part in a New York production or opening a show in a significant gallery. All of this rests on the quality of our faculty who not only achieve excellence in teaching, but are

Continued on page 6

Libraries ...

Continued from page 1

hand. Japanese literature is located some distance away from world theater and both are nowhere near history. I located and placed on a workspace both my references and the books I found in the Japanese section, and walked away to locate references on Caesar and Napoleon. Less than five minutes later, loaded with books, I returned to discover that my first selections had been reshelfed and my notes, too, had disappeared. I muttered, "Damn efficiency!" It was all too evident that the staff was what it was cracked up to be!

Since I knew where to find "the behind the scenes" staff, I tracked down the Stacks Supervisor, and she assisted me in locating the vest-clad student who had been so untimely (for me) efficient. Perhaps fearful of my blue suit, the young lady tried to apologize, but I lauded her for her carrying out her tasks appropriately. However, I still needed to find the second set of references that I feared had been recycled beyond recovery. The student led me in a floor-wide sweep of waste receptacles. She eventually located my papers and handed them to me with a broad smile: patron-orientation (and a sense of humor) at its best.

A little later, I shared my misadven-

tures with the third-floor administrative staff who have been so supportive of my "interim" role. We all laughed together—each understanding the comedy of errors and requisite sense of humor that marked my efforts—and that of the library staff. However, the last laugh was on me. My wife, a school librarian, when told of the incident, chastised me for leaving my papers strewn about in the stacks. Still, from such a small example, I saw how a library-wide work ethic makes an unbelievably major operation function efficiently day after day after day. One small example, but one that is multiplied each day by the dozens of staff who work every day to keep the University Libraries functioning at its highest level. This IS people service—not virtual but human, every day, every way, and it's there for every one who visits our University Libraries either entering our physical environs or accessing our extensive WWW site.

The past months as Interim Dean of WMU's University Libraries have been a truly unique experience for which I am, indeed, grateful. Most of all, beyond all of the technological delights of this increasingly complex information age, I am especially grateful to discover, once again, that the age of humanity survives, and the warmth and personal touch of human "interface" is the keystone, the reach out and "touchstone" of our University Libraries.

A College...

Continued from page 5

artists, composers, designers, and scholars in a way that informs their teaching. This IS distinctive beyond all argument.

And so goes the story of WMU's College of Fine Arts—a veritable "College of Distinction"—as seen in five "distinct" ways. [Dean Merriam then spoke of her leadership role and what is needed for the College of Fine Arts to continue to succeed in a competitive educational and economic environment.] In closing, I am reminded of the story with which I began: wealth, wisdom, and beauty were all offered to the dean. Surely, all three are needed for distinction but, in particular, I am drawn, ultimately, to beauty. Only through the arts can civilization experience and record beauty. As our *raison d'être*, we strive to elevate the human condition through the arts. Once we have beauty, then insight, mystery, meaning, humanity, and truth can be achieved. Our College of Fine Arts has the distinction to elevate the human condition in Kalamazoo, the nation, and the world. I'm truly fortunate to be dean of this college, at this time, in this institution, and to have the support of my administrative colleagues, the uniquely talented faculty and staff of CFA, and the students who make all things possible.

WESTERN MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY

Dwight B. Waldo Library
Kalamazoo, Michigan 49008-5080

Non-Profit Organization
U.S. Postage
PAID
Kalamazoo, Michigan
Permit No. 478

