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.]

A ngel appeared at a faculty meeting in a major university, and told the dean that in return for her unsullen 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 theater 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

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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 reshelved 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 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 misadventures 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 unbelievable 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.

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.

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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 Merrion 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.