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## **Pastoral Care, Mission, Tradition and Community: Alumnae Perceptions of a Catholic Female Single-sex High School**

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LOYOLA MARYMOUNT UNIVERSITY

Pastoral Care, Mission, Tradition and Community:  
Alumnae Perceptions of a Catholic Female Single-sex High School

by

Samuel Torres

A dissertation presented to the Faculty of the School of Education,  
Loyola Marymount University,  
in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree  
Doctor of Education

2019

Pastoral Care, Mission, Tradition, and Community:  
Alumnae Perceptions of a Catholic Female Single-sex High School

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by

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This dissertation written by Samuel Torres, under the direction of the Dissertation Committee, is approved and accepted by all committee members, in partial fulfillment of requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education.

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Sir Isaac Newton is credited with the statement, “If I have seen further it is by standing on the shoulders of giants.” I have relearned the important and very simple lesson that I am not alone. I have not completed this work without the influence of many people. The journey towards fulfilling this goal required me to actively listen to the Holy Spirit over many years. Each colleague, friend, acquaintance, or family member has surfaced at an appropriate time in my life, in order for me to receive encouragement, wisdom, direction, and sometimes just a needed pat on the back to continue moving forward towards the completion of this project. Dare I say, I am a different man than when I started, having learned many lessons not reflected in the document but vital to who I have become. I have learned that progress isn’t always a step forward. Progress for me involved coming to the realization that my journey in this program should reflect whether or not people are more connected to the reality of God’s presence in our lives as a result of my involvement. I have seen the value of Catholic education in the lives of so many and have made it my choice to advocate for it when I can. I have experienced the good fortune of being surrounded by givers, and I am expressly grateful for those who have touched my life and walked with me on this journey.

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Being a father has provided me with many challenges, but more importantly, has resulted in my greatest blessings. Sons, you are amazing. Together, we tackled the rigors of your young lives. I did my best to teach you about life, manners, faith, and love, while pointing you towards God in all matters. You continue to make me a proud father. As young men, you are now teaching me about the joys of adult parenting. I thank you for supporting me through all things.

Reflected in you is the life philosophy of taking the high road and smelling the roses along the way. Thank you for being men of good character and vital members of my team. My beautiful daughter, you are forever in my heart. I thank God for you every day and know He will remain beside you when I can't. I share this with all of you, my beautiful children. I thank you for the chance to be your dad, a role I knew I wanted and felt called to, long before you were born. I love you always.

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To the participants in my study, I appreciate the trust you placed in me while sharing your history. Your tender stories humbled me, and now, they inspire me to strengthen my advocacy for Catholic education. Realizing the impact your Catholic educational experiences had on you reaffirms the reasons I choose to serve God in my work.



## **DEDICATION**

I have heeded the calling of the Holy Spirit.

I dedicate this work for the glory of God.

To my parents, Arturo and Maura Torres:  
You have always encouraged me to see more.

To my wife, Maggie, and our children:  
You have enabled me to endure this journey.  
This work confirms your love and respect.

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## **ABSTRACT**

Pastoral Care, Mission, Tradition and Community:

Alumnae Perception of a Catholic Female Single-sex High School

by

Samuel Torres

This qualitative study examined the experiences of Saint Mary's High School alumnae from the freshman class of 1949 through the graduating class of 2010 in order to identify what has sustained the school over the decades. Years after graduation, alumnae held memories of their school experiences that resulted in personal and long-lasting qualities that continue to have significant impacts on individuals and the institution. Data was gathered through written journals and interviews. The Appreciative Inquiry (AI) model was used to analyze the context of alumnae experiences. Using the AI model, multiple categories arose as positive notables mentioned by the participants. The prominent themes contributing to school sustainability were pastoral care, mission, tradition, and community. These sustaining characteristics, which are still exhibited in the lives of current laity and students, were linked to the original charism brought to the school through the Sisters' order.

Student success and satisfaction are critical to sustaining Catholic schools as tuition continues to rise and enrollment in Catholic schools' decline. Saint Mary's High School, and other similar Catholic schools, should consider strengthening their identity through mission-related activities and values. The findings of this study suggested that sustaining Catholic school environments may be as simple as becoming reacquainted with their original missions. Results of this study showed that Catholic school leaders and faculty are successfully transmitting the same

values and mission-driven messages as their predecessors. Emphasizing a holistic and compassionate school setting is vital to the overall success of each student and the longevity of schools.

# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

The Academy of the Shepherd was opened in 1898 and closed in 1948. The coeducational Saint Mary's High School (a pseudonym), an all-female secondary school which began in 1949 under the direction of the pastor of St. Jude's opened at the same location. The Academy of the Shepherd and Saint Mary's High School combined their legacies to form a 120-year-old institution governed by the Archdiocese and dedicated to educating high school students. It is an Archdiocesan high school in Southern California and currently serves a predominantly Hispanic demographic (Higareda, Martin, Chavez, & Holyk-Casey, 2011).

The school was originally established to educate the students of local families. It borders a local diocese and has attracted many students from that region, as well. Over the years, the school has made numerous adjustments to maintain enrollment in response to changing demographics and impacting economic variables. For example, in 2011, it was recommended that the school add a coeducational middle school program to improve enrollment on the campus. The all-female high school and the coeducational middle school programs functioned separately but shared campus resources, administration, and faculty. Decisions made on behalf of the school's viability may have changed programs and student access, but ultimately, these decisions have resulted in the school's ability to reach its 120th anniversary. (To maintain anonymity for the school, details derived from its sources will be used anonymously.) The purpose of this research was to discover alumnae perceptions about elements of their experiences, which may have contributed to the long-term viability of the institution.



## **Background**

The establishment of the Archdiocese of Los Angeles during the 1930s and forward, was initially formed by the local culture and traditions of the Irish, Polish, German, and Italian immigrants (Weber, 2000, 2006). In recent years, the United States' Catholic population has shifted sharply to the Western and Southern regions of the country; 34% of Catholics in the U.S. are now Hispanic (Ospino & Weitzell-O'Neill, 2016). This number was almost twice what it was 20 years ago. The number of school age Catholic Hispanic children in the U.S. was over 14.6 million in 2015 (Ospino & Weitzell-O'Neill, 2016). An increasingly Hispanic representation in the churches of the Archdiocese of Los Angeles suggests that a review of the effective and sustainable qualities should be considered. Schools experiencing demographic changes will benefit from understanding how alumnae perceive their experiences with respect to the sustainability of the institution.

## **Mission, Charism, and Catholic Schools**

The first Catholic schools in the United States were founded by religious orders or orders of priests. One common element among Catholic schools was their unique mission (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops [USCCB], 2019). The mission was rooted in the theological traditions of the religious orders seeking to mold their students morally, spiritually, and intellectually (Heft, 2011). The mission of Catholic schools was at the root of their foundational values, and guides schools' operations and environments. Furthermore, religious orders, which in many instances are considered the founders and sponsors of individual Catholic schools, possessed an established guiding charism. According to one religious order, "a charism is a gift of the Holy Spirit given in a particular way to an individual or to a group to build up the

Kingdom of God for the good of the Church” (Carmelite Sisters of the Most Sacred Heart of Los Angeles, 2019). Many schools’ missions are an outgrowth of the charisms of their order. As Catholic lay leadership in schools became more common, compensatory actions were required to do two things: preserve the charism of the religious order and commit to a shared responsibility with the lay faculty to realize the mission (Heft, 2011). A school’s mission is the rudder that can be used to navigate the present and future. These two concepts, mission and charism, were essential in the analysis of this historical inquiry as it relates to sustaining Catholic schools.

Saint Mary’s High School is an all-female college preparatory high school with an Advanced Placement (AP) capstone program. It had the specific mission to prepare confident, socially aware, and participative young women who have had the opportunity to visualize futures as active participants in a changing world. In examining the history of Saint Mary’s High School and reviewing the literature, this researcher sought to secure the future of Catholic education for young women, and in particular, the young Hispanic women who were currently the predominant population. Using the lens of Appreciative Inquiry (AI), the project explored the perceptions of Saint Mary’s High School alumnae. These findings may be relevant to similar Catholic secondary schools.

### **St. Mary’s and Social Justice**

History has demonstrated that with diminished teaching orders, Catholic school tuition increased to such a level where families of low socioeconomic status were moved to the periphery of access to Catholic education without any kind of tuition assistance. The benefits of Catholic female single sex high school continued to provide the advantage to females whose families make the sacrifice to afford the tuition.

The report prepared for the National Coalition of Girls' Schools revealed a number of advantages that were unique to students of Catholic female single sex high schools. A significant advantage was that girls are more challenged to higher achievements (Holmgren, 2014). In being challenged, girls are more likely to be active participants in their learning process; they're more receptive to support from classmates, teachers, and other school personnel, which is central in providing the motivation and inspiration (Holmgren, 2014). The conclusion identified several key areas of preparing females for success. The all-female graduates were better prepared for readiness in meeting real world situations and reinforcement of their goals and dreams (Holmgren, 2014),

Our Catholic schools have faced rising operational costs, and an overall increase in tuition. It has become a growing challenge to offer and maintain a quality college preparatory curriculum. Saint Mary's High School represents the underserved and underrepresented. With a predominantly Latino population, this school resides in a city where the median income is less than \$50,000 and results in families not able to choose a Catholic education without financial assistance. Maintaining access to a quality Catholic school affords an opportunity for this largely underserved group of females to be represented at the collegial level when they would otherwise be excluded. It is essential that minorities be afforded access in higher education so they may develop and achieve leadership positions and skills necessary to contribute to our diverse society.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Catholic schools have steadily declined in enrollment since 1965 (Hamilton, 2008). Additionally, there has been a decline of religious faculty and administrators in Catholic schools across the nation (Hamilton, 2008; Huchting, Martin, Chavez, Holyk-Casey, & Ruiz, 2014). As

these staffing positions were increasingly assigned to laity, the cost of running schools increased dramatically. Schools struggled to pay competitive wages and provide adequate benefits (Hamilton, 2008). In addition, beginning in 1965, an exodus of affluent Catholic families from cities to surrounding suburbs left city parishes with fewer committed families with the desire to send their children to Catholic schools. Families that remained in the city were often of low socioeconomic status (SES) and could not afford to pay increasing Catholic school tuition (Hamilton, 2008). These changing dynamics and demographics have forced Catholic schools to examine all elements of function and design to secure viability.

Today, Saint Mary's High School represents the changing and predominantly Latino population trend discussed in the literature (Hamilton, 2008; Higareta et al., 2011). The city, Latino and Catholic, and the population earns a median income of \$48,000 (2010 Fast Facts, 2017). This income does not allow most families the option of parochial education without extensive tuition assistance. An increasing Catholic-Latino population was expected, according to Ospino & Weitzell-O'Neill (2016), and the Church's response to this growing trend will have a significant impact on the future of the Catholic Church and its schools. While other studies have focused on changes that have impacted the viability of Catholic schools, this study is not about the changing demographics or financial stresses of Saint Mary's High School. Rather, it focuses on the constant positive forces that have contributed to the school's continued success.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to inform and educate those who will lead Catholic education into the 21st century for Saint Mary's High School and similar school communities. The school has been in operation for 120 years while changing to meet the needs of the

continually evolving church and community. This study explored alumnae perceptions about positive elements significant to their experience at Saint Mary's High School. The findings identified longstanding, foundational values that may lead to student success and institutional sustainability,

### **Research Question**

The study explored the following research question:

How do alumnae perceptions about their experiences in a Catholic female single-sex high school contribute to an understanding of the sustainability of the institution?

### **Significance of the Study**

Challenges currently facing Catholic schools include rising tuition and operational costs, diminishing tuition collection, loss of mission and identity, and the demand to offer a quality inclusion program while also maintaining college preparatory curriculum standards. This study explores alumnae perceptions about their experiences at a Catholic all-female high school and how these perceptions can shed light on institutional sustainability over time. It is the researcher's hope that this study will inspire and direct those who are charged with this effort in a creative discussion on how to best meet the needs of this school and others like it.

### **Conceptual Framework: Appreciative Inquiry**

Catholic education was initiated in the 19th century in the United States, and since that time, Catholic schools have been filled with the children of practicing Catholics (Bryk, Lee, & Holland, 1993). From the inception of Catholic education, change has been constant as social issues have impacted Catholic schools' trajectories (Bryk et al., 1993). In 1965, enrollment in Catholic schools began to decline; this decline has continued into the third millennium (Bryk et

al., 1993). The model of Appreciative Inquiry (AI) was an appropriate tool for examining the life of a longstanding organization like Saint Mary's High School. AI is a collective inquiry model that studies social systems to inform what is and what can be imagined. It was a framework for positive organizational study that facilitates understanding of the historical strengths of an organization (Kessler, 2013). Traditionally used in business settings, Ryan, Soven, Smither, Sullivan, & VanBuskirk (1999) argued that AI could also be useful in assessing the multiple affirmative attributes of a school culture. It is ultimately not profitable to review the past to determine "what went wrong;" rather, it is most productive to reflect on the previous and current culture of an institution to determine "what went right." Understanding their positive characteristics can inform Catholic schools as they face questions of long-term sustainability (Kessler, 2013).

Guided by the precepts of Appreciative Inquiry (AI), this analysis explored the perceptions of female alumnae regarding the institutional elements of sustainability by attempting to discover what could be, rather than what has already been identified as deficit, at Saint Mary's High School. The AI model allowed the freedom to analyze information through a positive lens and embraces assumptions from the perspective of the researcher. This model also constructed a process of inquiry that revealed a sustainable and dynamic social system.

### **Principles of Appreciative Inquiry**

Cooperrider & Whitney (2005) outlined five principles of AI that can be applied to institutions: constructionist, simultaneity, poetic, anticipatory, and positive (Kessler, 2013). Firstly, the constructionist principle suggests that our beliefs and actions are manifested in our relationships. This precept suggests that what we believe to be true determines what we do and

how we act. It is believed that through the dialogue and discussion of the day-to-day interactions existing within an institution, people form, or construct, the organizations they occupy (Kessler, 2013). Secondly, the principle of simultaneity suggest that as one explores human systems, one is changed by the process of inquiry. The discussion that follows the questions is directed by the nature of the questions. Therefore, the questions are significant because they have a direct purpose and impact in moving the conversation towards revealing identifiable themes (Kessler, 2013).

Thirdly, the poetic principle refers to an understanding of organizational life through the stories people tell one another. The narrative of an organization continues to evolve as contributors add to the dynamic collection of stories (Kessler, 2013). Fourthly, the anticipatory principle posits that human systems are designed to continually project an expectation that brings the future into the present. In other words, people are informed about the future by what they think and how they perform today. The purpose of AI is to foresee and build the future by created images of affirmative activity from questions and answers revealed through processes of inquiry (Kessler, 2013). Lastly, the positive principle proposed that sustainable change is a result of social bonding. Hope, excitement, inspiration, camaraderie, and joy allow ingenuity and resourcefulness to present new ideas. This principle promotes strong connections and relationships between people, and advocates for institutional and individual disposition that are positive and life affirming (Kessler, 2013).

### **The Appreciative Inquiry Method**

Discovery, Dream, Design, and Delivery are the four elements of the “4D model,” which defines the process phases to be used when AI (Kessler, 2013) is implemented. During the phase

of discovery, participants were called to reflect on and discuss their experiences. In this phase, the researcher sought “the best of what is” (Kessler, p. 3). In AI, the participants are drawn into conversation to discuss the elements of their own stories that left an indelible mark on their experiences. The art of listening is paramount when personal stories are being expressed. Widespread engagement and relationship are built into the early stages of the change process. During this phase, the researcher sought information about the sustainability of a school, which turned into discussions about the personal experiences of the participants (Kessler, 2013).

In the dream phase, the researcher sought for the best in the organization and community. It is through the strengths of an organization that its foundational values are sought and supported. The dream phase asked participants to discuss times when she felt affirmed, listened to, and dignified. It is through this process that the values of a school and their impact on sustainability were made clear (Kessler, 2013). In the design phase, the stories of participants lead the researcher to further understand the impact of past experiences on the present. The researcher constructed an outline of the foundational, sustainable values in order to influence new practices (Kessler, 2013). Hearing stories from older generations helped to inform the values that were prevalent in the past and that continued to shape the mission of the school, met the needs of current students, and continued to be the foundation of the school’s life. AI allowed the researcher to receive information that allowed a design for the future success of the institution.

In the destiny phase of AI, the value and impact of conversations are ushered in from the recall of “daily interactions at work as people discuss the inquiry and trade stories” (Kessler, 2013, p. 4). This phase was ongoing and ultimately brought the organization back to the



discovery phase. As a comprehensive approach, continued AI may result in continuous dialogues and continued learning (Kessler, 2013). When participants were comfortable sharing their daily interactions, they continued to communicate positive new experiences beyond the timeframe of the actual research. In this way, continuous dialogue and learning occurred.

Montejano (2007) used the AI method to explore the positive dimensions of a Catholic school called St. Leo with the hope that knowledge of these characteristics would help the school further strengthen and develop them. He interviewed personnel from St. Leo's to identify positive dimensions of the school culture that related to sustainability in order to evaluate the life of the organization and address issues of sustainability. Similarly, for her master's thesis, Janella Rea, used AI to explore perceptions of young parishioners because it provided a foundation that sought positive images that would lead to positive outcomes. Using the AI framework, she asked young adult parishioners to express the positives aspects of living their faith life in the world. She believed this dialogue would reveal insight into how they could further develop and increase their faith life in the church (Rea, 2013).

AI centers on participants' interactions, discussions, stories, and memories, all of which can bring about new insights for the researcher. In this particular study, it was through conversations that the researcher explored alumnae perceptions of Saint Mary's High School and how they informed sustainability. AI focuses on the belief that values are discovered in conversations and are revealed through positive comments, and that values are not likely to surface while fixating on what is broken or inherently wrong with the institution.

## **Method**

This study employed a qualitative research design. It was chosen because it was an effective way to focus on the voices and personal narratives of alumnae across time from one specific organization. This method included analyses of interviews and journal writings in order to identify what was significant to the study (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). This approach provided data that was analyzed to reveal the foundational values of Saint Mary's High School, and conclusions were drawn about how these values have led to sustainability over the generations. A coding process facilitated the examination of emergent findings.

## **Assumptions and Limitations**

This study examined the memories and stories of participants over a large span of time; some participants were recalling stories from decades ago, but it was not possible to examine or review every detail collected. The focus is an all-female Catholic High School in southern California, and the conclusions and recommendations of this study are not necessarily generalizable to other all-female Catholic schools.

The findings were limited by the design of the study. Though interviewees were grouped according to the era during which the participants attended Saint Mary's High School, the sample size in each group created a limitation of experiences that could be included in this report. The study may have been limited because all of those who volunteered reported having satisfactory experiences; the researcher was concerned that alumnae who were dissatisfied did not have the opportunity to influence this study. Satisfactory experiences may also have been reported because of the researcher's position as a school administrator at the time of the study. In addition, the subjects being interviewed were a select few who volunteered to share their

perspectives. Further, the researcher, as a former administrator of the all-female Catholic high school, does have a particular perspective about the school. All attempts have been made to report the findings as objectively as possible.

Another limitation could be the effect of home environments supporting the participants at the time of attendance and how it influenced their experience. A further internal factor limiting the results is time, since participants may have answered questions differently at an alternate time period. The exclusion of interviews with people who worked as administration and faculty while the interviewed alumnae were at Saint Mary's High School and the lack of parental perspectives are external limitations; these additional perspectives may have lent more insight into why or how students summarized their experiences in the ways they did.

### **Definition of Terms**

The *Archdiocese of Los Angeles* comprises three counties in the Southern part of California: Los Angeles, Santa Barbara, and Ventura (Archdiocese of Los Angeles, 2018a).

*All-female school or single-sex school* refers to an institution conducting education where only females attend classes (Novotney, 2011).

*Catholic teaching/education* is central to the mission of the church. It refers to teachers who blend faith with knowledge to teach and minister to students (Archdiocese of Los Angeles, 2018b).

*Low socioeconomic status*, or SES, refers to an individual or family status within a societal structure based on social and economic conditions (American Psychological Association, 2018).

*Charism* is a distinct spirit that permeates a religious community. This spirit is a living force that unites the community as a family with a dynamic mission and a particular way of life unique to that community (Carmelite Sisters of the Most Sacred Heart of Los Angeles, 2019)

*Mission* refers to inviting people to a relationship with Jesus Christ or deepening an existing relationship with Jesus and understanding the role of faith in one's daily life and in society (Ozar & Weitzel-O'Neill, 2012).

### **Chapter Outline**

This chapter outlined the researcher's personal position, background, and the purpose of the study, as well as the theoretical framework, methodology, assumptions and limitations, and a list of key terms in to this historical inquiry of Saint Mary's High School. Chapter 2 provided a history of events and issues impacting the school since its inception, with an emphasis on issues of mission, charism and sustainability. Chapter 3 detailed the methods and design for the case study: setting, rationale, participants, data analysis, and limitations. Chapter 4 presented the data and findings. The final chapter offered a discussion of the data. Based on the data, it offered practical recommendations for Catholic schools' success and suggestions for future research.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter discussed historical events and variables impacting Catholic education in the United States. The discussion began by explaining the original purpose for Catholic education and the foundational influences of religious orders on the institutions. Moving forward into more recent history, the chapter then highlighted the challenges that have contributed to decreased enrollment and have therefore required schools to substantiate their value in today's educational world. Additionally, the chapter included a review of literature that discussed single-sex education, which was particular to the context of this study. It then discussed how these variables intersected with Catholic school charism and values, and how they related to school sustainability in the 21st century. The chapter concluded with a history of Saint Mary's High School, the subject of this study,

#### **Catholic Education in the United States**

Catholic schools in the United States date back to the 1800s, when some of the first Catholic schools were established for pioneering families. Buetow (1985) argued that Catholic schools are "a miracle of U.S. society" (p. 1). Influences seeking to snuff out access to Catholic schools has threatened their existence. The purpose of the first Catholic schools was to exercise the country's freedom of religion and to teach the Catholic faith through a framework of social equity (Marshall & Oliva, 2010). Buetow (1985) wrote that Catholic schools existed to teach members of society to lead a good life, so they would contribute positively to society and the growing country.

Although they received little credit for their contributions to the educational bedrock of the United States, Catholic schools played a significant role assimilating various ethnic groups into United States culture over centuries (Bryk et al., 1993). One common factor in early schools was that they were made available for all students (Martin & Litton, 2004). Throughout U.S. history, oppressed communities have often found refuge within the inclusive Catholic school environment. This resulted in an eclectic melting pot of identities in the American Catholic church and added to the ongoing theme of unity and diversity (McGreevy, 2003). The idea of cohesion among differing entities is repeated generously throughout the evolution of Catholic education in the United States, and is no less relevant now as students are prepared for democratic and spiritual citizenship than when the first Catholic schools were founded (Notre Dame Task Force on Catholic Education, 2008).

One of the elements that has contributed to the longevity of Catholic institutions is the countless contributions made by religious orders and Archdiocesan governing bodies (Buetow, 1985; Heft, 2011). Throughout most of Catholic school history, religious Brothers and Sisters set up frameworks that exemplified social teaching models. Students from all religions, statuses, and races received an education in Catholic schools regardless of their ability to pay, resulting in major contributions to cultural, spiritual, and academic enrichment aligned with the United States' constitutional values (Heft, 2011). The teaching practices of religious Brothers and Sisters also contributed to the longevity of Catholic schools (Heft, 2011).

Legislation threatening Catholic Schools has propelled actions and reactions in support of sustaining Catholic education. As a response to ongoing hostility toward Catholics and the Protestant emphasis in public schools brought on by the common school movement begun by

Horace Mann, a Unitarian minister, who designed the schools to provide a common socialization (Heft, 2011), This educational program began with readings from the *King James Bible* which promoted generic Protestantism (Heft, 2011). The Roman Catholic Church responded by establishing the Third Plenary Council of Baltimore in 1884 by installing parish schools. A particularly heroic moment occurred in 1925, when the Sisters of The Holy Names of Jesus and Mary challenged the Oregon Compulsory Act mandating that all children must attend public schools (Heft, 2011). Exercising freedom and challenging those who sought to eliminate religious rights has unified Catholics and has served as a catalyst for securing access to Catholic education for the marginalized (Massaro, 2000).

By 1900, over 3,500 Catholic schools were available to all age groups nationwide, and these schools remained in high demand through the 1950s. From 1930 to 1940, the U.S. population increased from 123 million to 132 million; it jumped from 132 million to 152 million between 1940 and 1950 (1940 Fast Facts, 2017; 1950 Fast Facts, 2017). An increase in the general population also meant an increase in the Catholic population, and thus, further demand for Catholic schools (Youniss & Convey, 2000). A study evaluating trends in student demography in Catholic secondary schools determined that 9.63% of the total U.S. student population was in Catholic schools (Youniss & Convey, 2000). In 1946, over 4.5 million students attended Catholic schools. In the 1950s, 11.53% of U.S. children attended Catholic schools (Youniss & Convey, 2000).

The U.S. population continued to grow rapidly as a result of the post-World War II baby boom. In 1950, there were over 151 million residents in the United States, and in 1960, the U.S. population was 179 million (1950 Fast Facts, 2017; 1960 Fast Facts, 2017). In 1970, the reported

population was over 203 million (1970 Fast Facts, 2017). The percentage increase from these two decades, from 1950 to 1970 was approximately 34%. During this time, there was also a proportionate increase in the market share of Catholic students attending Catholic schools in the United States. Based on this data, there should have been a continued increase of students in Catholic schools; until the 1960s, the market share of Catholic students increased somewhat proportionately to the overall U.S. population. However, in 1965, Catholic schools began to lose this market share (Youniss & Convey, 2000).

The high-water mark for Catholic enrollment in 1965 was 4.5 million students. In 1990, the number had declined to 2.5 million students nationwide. During this time span, the number of Catholic schools in the US declined by 44%. There are several reasons why enrollment began to drop and continues to decline, but one of the main reasons for this dramatic decline was the cost of operating a school, and the disappearance of religious orders, Brothers, Sisters, and Priests who served as teachers and administrators in the schools (Youniss & Convey, 2000). In 1965, there were 114,000 religious teachers and the majority of the costs were absorbed by the respective parishes (Youniss & Convey, 2000). With the decline of religious orders, lay teachers were employed to fill positions, resulting in increased operating costs (Bryk et al., 1993). During this transition, access to Catholic education became more selective. Initially, Catholic schools were accessible to the working class and the economically disadvantaged, but with rising costs, access was restricted to those with the ability to pay increasing tuition and fees (Youniss & Convey, 2000).

Second, the movement of affluent Catholics to suburbs resulted in fewer students in urban, Catholic classrooms. In the 1960s and 1970s, Catholic schools were largely filled with



middle class, White, Catholic Americans (Greeley, 1979). But with affluence came choice, and many middle- and upper-class families fled to the suburbs, resulting in fewer parishes and fewer schools in the cities. With limited schools to choose from in the suburbs, families began sending their children to non-Catholic schools, and thus, the enrollment decline in Catholic schools continued. As middle- and upper-class families left the inner cities, this void was initially filled by new residents, which in many cases consisted of predominantly Black, non-Catholic families. This lower SES group lacked the resources to access and exposure which would allow them to prefer Catholic education over other alternatives (Youniss & Convey, 2000).

### **Latino Access to Catholic schools**

Latino access to Catholic schools was a challenge. This was important for the school under study as it serves a primarily Latino population. At a time when Latinos grew rapidly in the Catholic church, they did not enroll in the local Catholic school (Ospino & Weitzell-O'Neill, 2016). According to Corpora and Fraga (2016), the progress of the enrollment of Latinos into Catholic schools was relatively small and inconsistent. Latino Catholics in the United States who attended a Catholic school amounted to only about 3% (Ospino & Weitzell-O'Neill, 2016). Corpora and Fraga (2016) further stated that enrolling Latinos involves a multi-layered challenge. Two of the layers involved the promotion of the unique value of Catholic schools followed by the Catholic school responding to the needs of the Latino family (Corpora & Fraga, 2016).

The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops' Committee on Catholic Education has called for all bishops to encourage more Latino families to send their children to Catholic schools (Corpora & Fraga, 2016). Catholic schools need to be more welcoming and inclusive to

diverse populations. The enrollment and retention of children from diverse populations in our Catholic schools was important, particularly in making an effort to reach out to underserved and underrepresented communities. This remains critical for the future of Catholic schools and of our church (Ospino & Weitzell-O'Neill, 2016).

Father Corpora (2016) was creative in generating discussions on how to increase Latino enrollment. In his effort, he created guides that can be implemented by schools and dioceses. One of the lessons learned was the identification of the support of the highest religious order and the highest school official; the pastor and the superintendent (Corpora & Fraga, 2016). A second lesson was the cost of enrolling and attending a Catholic school. Discussion with the family in their native language to fully explain the tuition costs, monthly payments, financial aid, and how a working family can afford multiple children in a Catholic school is also key (Corpora & Fraga, 2016). Latinos, like all communities, were more apt to enroll their children in schools that are administered by people who look like them, sound like them, and demonstrate a respect for all (Corpora & Fraga, 2016). Ospino and Weitzell-O'Neill (2016) have informed that the church has grown quickly with the Latinos and the Latino presence in the Catholic school remains at a low number. If more Latino families do not enroll their children in Catholic schools, the current trend of declining enrollment will continue. In 1965, there were approximately 5,000,000 students enrolled, while today, there are under 2,000,000 students (Ospino & Weitzell-O'Neill, 2016). If the Latino growth in the church does not enroll in Catholic schools, it is likely that the current trend of declining enrollments, school closures and consolidations will continue (Corpora & Fraga, 2016). There was a compelling interest for both Latino families and Catholic schools to

work with each other to increase enrollment and serve the families of the church (Corpora & Fraga, 2016).

### **Challenges Faced by Catholic Schools**

In *Catholicism and American Freedom*, McGreevy (2003) described the sexual abuse crisis in the church as the “single most important event in American Catholicism since the second Vatican Council, and the most devastating scandal in American Catholic history” (p. 288). The church was perceived as more sympathetic and protective of accused priests than of victims, and the incredible burden of settlements from lawsuits threatened bankruptcy for many dioceses (McGreevy, 2003). This crisis has devastated Catholics across the nation and has contributed to diminished Catholic membership in churches and schools. The diminishing membership in the Catholic churches across the nation has experienced a steady decline and peaked in 2002 (McGreevy, 2003). The diminished enrollment in Catholic schools continues to be a multi-layered dilemma (Youniss & Convey, 2002).

During the decline of Catholic schools beginning in the 1960s, all-female Catholic high schools were particularly vulnerable. The vulnerability lies in the operating costs of sustaining all-female Catholic schools and the families’ financial ability to afford tuition. Various all-female Catholic high schools in California experienced rapid decline or closure in the ensuing decades. This section provides details about a few of these schools. In order to show relevant experiences of schools that were either closed or restructured, the following schools’ history were reviewed.

In May 2012, Loyola Marymount University’s (LMU) School of Education released a report on the future of St. Matthias High School, an all-girls’ Archdiocesan secondary school

located in Downey, California (Batsis, 2012). Up until the initiation of the study, St. Matthias was struggling with a distressed reputation, the perception of weak academics, and declining teacher morale and student enrollment, which led to questions of financial viability. The LMU report looked at many facets of a Catholic school in determining the future of St. Matthias High School (Batsis, 2012). The LMU study recommended to close the school and sell the property. It was publicly known that the local school district was inquiring about the possibility of acquiring the school campus. Another recommendation by the LMU study was to continue with the all-female Catholic high school due to its traditional value and strong cultural support from the local Hispanic community (Batsis, 2012). Closing St. Matthias and reopening under a new name with increased resources was an additional alternative. Ultimately, in the fall of 2013, Pius-Matthias opened as a coeducational Catholic high school in the Archdiocese of Los Angeles. The first coed freshman class was admitted in August of 2013. The goal of this change was to better serve the surrounding Hispanic community. Local Hispanic families were receptive to maintaining an affordable and safe coeducational Catholic High School campus as an alternative to a single-sex school (Batsis, 2012).

In May 1987, Our Lady of Corvallis High School, the oldest Catholic all-female high school in the San Fernando Valley, closed its doors for the final time. Declining enrollment and changing SES of families contributed to financial challenges that the school could not overcome. The school began in 1941 and closed in 1987 after 45 years. In 1981, the Religious of the Sacred Heart of Mary vacated the school (McGarry, 1987). With the religious order teachers no longer at the school, operating expenses continued to climb increasing tuition to an amount that was no longer accessible to the local families.

In Sacramento, California, Loretto High School closed in June of 2009 after serving the community for 54 years. The Sisters of the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary led the school until its closure. The reasons for closure were mixed and there is pending legal action targeted at the school's last administration. The Catholic identity of the school was called into question, as private Catholic schools must follow a unique set of guidelines to be considered "Catholic" in the eyes of the Archdiocese (Bizjak, 2010). Although it was not an Archdiocesan school, it was charged with not advancing the precepts of the Roman Catholic Church. Others felt that it closed because it lost presence in the community, hosting fewer community events and school fundraisers. Some believed that private donors supported the school, making fundraisers unnecessary to meet the school's financial obligations; indeed, the Sisters were adept in soliciting foundations and donors. When the school finally closed, many alumnae were perplexed as to the reasons why (Bizjak, 2010). A decline in enrollment also contributed to the weakening of the school's financial status. Fewer students in the school also meant diminishing classes, electives, and co-curricular activities. In its final year, Loretto had 389 students, or 30% fewer students than in 2006. The tuition was not providing the monetary sustenance to operate the school (Bizjak, 2010).

In 2010, Ursuline High School closed its doors after serving the Santa Rosa, California, region for 130 years. Founded in 1880, the school was subsidized by the Santa Rosa Ursuline Corporation in its final years. In its final year, the Board of Directors agreed to fund the last school year in the amount of \$1.2 million (Benefield & Carter, 2010). After this commitment, the Board decided to stop subsidizing the school (Benefield & Carter, 2010). Ursuline's declining financial situation was due to several factors. The decline in student enrollment from 1999-2000

to 2010 was approximately 30%. The recession in 2008-2009 affected the tuition-paying demographic. More families were applying for financial aid and fewer could afford the \$11,000 yearly student tuition. The principal commented that having a cash-flow deficit was a new situation the school had never experienced (Benefield & Carter, 2010). According to news reports of the time, the closure was a surprise and a shock to the faculty, students, and community. Faculty and staff made sacrifices, for example, receiving lesser compensation to continue the mission of the Ursuline Sisters, and they believed their sacrifices could alter the future of the school. When the announcement was made to close the school, they felt their efforts had been hopeless. There was so much emotion released in the announcement that many questions were left unanswered for students, faculty, staff, and the Catholic community (Benefield & Carter, 2010).

The most recent all-female Catholic high school in Santa Rosa, California, closed in 2011. Yet, a few all-female Catholic secondary schools continue to serve students across California. Enrollment continues to be the resounding issue of concern, with rising tuition as the significant factor. The Private School Review (2016) reported that the average tuition cost for private high school nationwide was \$12,953. In California, the average high school tuition was \$18,088 (Private School Review, 2016). This financial barrier was a huge obstacle for many families who might otherwise choose a Catholic school. Hamilton, (2008) suggested that church and school leaders can defray the cost of tuition in the form of awarding need-based scholarships or grants to students who qualify. To attract families, school leaders must also work to effectively promote the development of values and morals within the students by partnering with

parents who are attracted to all-female Catholic schools because they uphold a healthy Catholic lifestyle and offer the benefit of an all-female community.

### **Benefits of All-Female Catholic Schools**

Historically, the educational socialization of young men and women has always had identified varying distinctive roles. Each gender was prepared for their duties as assigned by society: girls were prepared for maternal and domestic work, while boys were trained for public service (Bickett, 2008). Historically, girls' schooling did not offer formal educational programs. The coursework offered reinforced social norms and did not teach girls that they were worthy of academic instruction or public roles in society (Bickett, 2008).

Overall, girls are still discouraged from nontraditional career tracks (Sadker, Sadker, & Zitterman, 2009). Even with an increased emphasis on Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) programs for girls in recent years, female students seem to be impacted by forces of sexism that steer them towards other careers (Sadker et al., 2009). When freed from gender-role expectations, boys and girls attending single-sex schools seem more willing to take nontraditional courses; for example, in single-sex schools girls excelled in leadership, sports, and pursued nontraditional fields and college degrees. Sadker et al. (2009) found that small class sizes, emphasis on academic focus and experimentation, and teacher mentorship were strong factors in success. Sadker et al. (2009) argued that if these elements could be carried into a gender-neutral setting, gender-segregated schools would not be necessary.

Single gender education does not necessarily liberate struggling students; some students need learning environments that address personality or unique learning needs that may be unaffected by single-gender classrooms (Sadker et al., 2009). When wealthy communities

employed skilled teachers with superb resources and programs, and poor communities offered low wages to teachers with few to no resources, our schools offered little hope for the equality needed to elevate all youth toward educational fairness, regardless of gender or socioeconomic status (Sadker et al., 2009).

In the traditional coeducational model, male interaction often overwhelmed girls. This gender dynamic often spilled out of the classroom (Sadker, et al.,2009). All-female high schools provided girls with opportunities that are minimized in co-educational environments (Bickett, 2008). Girls in all-female institutions were afforded opportunities to build confidence, operate in team environments, and gain leadership skills (Bickett, 2008).

Another important educational goal of Catholic schools was to form community leaders who will cultivate a lifelong embrace of servant leadership (Greenleaf, 2019). All-female high schools were unique in the sense that young women are formed in an all-female environment by experiences that the school presents through its mission and curriculum. These young women are taught to be successful citizens and servant leaders, particularly within the Catholic Church (Bickett, 2008). There were more opportunities for leadership at all-female Catholic high schools. Extra-curricular activities like student government, yearbook, and Associated Student Body are steered solely by females. Sax, Riggers, and Eagan (2013) found that at graduation, students who engaged in extracurricular activities were more confident and willing to embrace and participate in their surrounding community.

In a study of college-bound women, Sax et al. (2013) indicated that females from all-female Catholic high schools recorded higher scores on indicators of academic engagement than their coeducational counterparts (Sax, Riggers, & Eagan, 2013). A few other significant



differences for students from all-female Catholic high schools, as compared to their non-Catholic-school counterparts, included greater engagement in group study, greater interaction with faculty, and increased willingness to tutor other high school students (Sax et al., 2013). Sax et al. (2013) also indicated that all-female Catholic high schools offered more AP courses, and the schools enrolled a more diverse student population than coeducational Catholic high schools. These factors influenced increased rigor, more social interaction, and opportunities for student engagement and responsibility that prepared students for the next post-secondary education (Sax et al., 2013).

Sax et al. (2013) suggested that girls in all-female Catholic high school may possess better public speaking skills, as these skills can be developed without the self-consciousness that may exist in traditional coeducational settings (Sax, et al., 2013). Females from all-female Catholic schools tend to stay up to date on current political affairs. These female graduates are more likely to vote and express political views in discussions with classmates, friends, and family members. The confidence of girls from all-female schools suggests that these young women have a potential advantage over their coeducational peers.

The goal of single-sex education was to create opportunities for greater academic achievement and to foster collaboration. Opponents of single-sex education suggest that separating the sexes may increase stereotypes and limit social skills (Martin & Beese, 2016). Martin and Beese (2016) suggested that separating boys and girls implied that each gender should be treated differently. However, in 2010 the American Association of University Women reported that males continue to dominate the STEM fields while the number of women continued

to decline in the STEM fields (Martin & Beese, 2016). Further, there was a greater decline of women who entered and completed graduate and postgraduate levels (Martin & Beese, 2016).

Nonetheless, a recent survey revealed that opportunities for girls in single sex educational institutions create positive results. A recent survey by Holmgren (2014) revealed girls responses provided clear feedback for the benefits of an all-girls educational environment. In this survey, the benefits included higher aspirations and greater motivation than their counterparts at coeducational independent and public schools (Holmgren, 2014). The girls in the study were most likely to engage more actively in the learning process than their counterparts, demonstrating a higher level of active participation in classroom discussions. This participation came as a result of the teachers challenging the girls to become more engaged, particularly in speaking and writing (Holmgren, 2014).

In addition, the girls in the study informed that they were more likely to engage in an environment that welcomed an open and safe exchange of ideas. Particularly, the girls were asked, “Do you feel safe at their school?” Almost all girls in the study reported feeling safe (Holmgren, 2014). Also, the girls reported feeling comfortable being themselves which allowed them to focus their energies on learning rather than dealing with fear (Holmgren, 2014).

In summary, the study for the National Coalition for Girls Schools, indicated that participants in the all-female environment indicated that they experienced high levels of support from their peers, teachers, and administrators. This study informed that all-female high schools significantly prepared the girls for their upcoming higher education success and skills valuable for navigating life experiences (Holmgren, 2014).

A study conducted by Watson, Quatman, and Edler (2002), revealed that during adolescence many changes occur for a young woman. These changes strongly influence the development of aspirations and career preferences. During this time, young women, were in need of greater autonomy and independence which contribute to identity development (Watson, Quatman, & Edler, 2002). When a young woman, has a greater awareness of her skills and interest, career choices and options become more realistic. According to Watson et al. (2002), girls from a single sex school received the benefit of time devoted specifically to them during a key developmental period when they are ready to formulate ideas and goals that led to high aspirations,

Further, according to Hart (2016), separating the genders and using gender-specific learning strategies led to positive outcomes. For example, middle school girls possessed social anxieties that can be minimized in a single-sex classroom where girls benefit from a positive and collaborative environment. Without boys present, girls formed deeper trust relationships (Hart, 2016). In the single-sex classroom, girls' grades and learning increased, and they reported that they could be more focused on work when they did not have to interact with boys (Hart, 2016). Hart's findings indicated that middle school girls benefitted from single-sex classes, but only when the school's leadership and faculty were equipped with intentional professional development (Hart 2016). Renn & Lytle (2010) reported that women who experienced leadership opportunities in secondary school became student leaders in higher education. The findings of this study indicate, when a female has access to a single-sex environment, she was more able to develop leadership skills and confidence (Renn & Lytle, 2010).

## **Catholic School Values, Charism, and Mission**

Many families were attracted to Catholic schools because of the mission statement or guiding principles that formed the practice and culture of the institution. These guiding principles were derived from the charism and mission of each school. The Catechism of the Catholic Church (Ratzinger, 1994) described a charism as grace given by the Holy Spirit to build up the Church and glorify God. This grace was given for the purpose of being used for the sake of others (Ratzinger, 1994). The charism of a Catholic school, animated by the founding religious Sisters or Brothers, met the needs of students from generation to generation and helped sustain the viability of a school (Cook, 2015). Charisms were once reserved for the founders of religious orders (Cook, 2015), but today, due to the diminished presence of religious order educators in Catholic schools, the responsibility of nurturing and perpetuating a charism applies to lay individuals, as well as, Catholic communities and institutions. Many Catholic schools' characteristics stem from unique charisms of the religious order that founded the school; these charisms were seen in the values and mission directing the school. In large part, the charism is translated into the overall identity of the school and provides a framework for the institution's mission (Cook, 2015).

Tagliaferro (2018) asserted that more attention should be directed towards preserving and addressing future charism sustainability. When an institution's programming and planning reflect a set of values stemming from the charisms, the institution makes decisions and relationships that support the community and faith formation (Cook, 2015). Tagliaferro (2018) explained that a charism must be lived. It is an energy and identity, passed to a community from the Holy Spirit to contribute to the identity of the group or order who embraces it. In Fisher's (2003) study,

Catholic school alumni expressed that the charism was a contributing factor to their meaningful experience while attending Catholic school. Further, Fisher (2003) reported that alumni exhibited the charism after graduation and believed that schools should provide the same level of charism to future students (Tagliaferro, 2018).

Catholic schools achieved the mission of Catholic education when their graduates lived the values of their faith and remained connected to the elements that helped them solidify their relationship with God. Many Catholic high schools have vibrant alumni organizations that provided support for their affiliated schools, also provided a platform for alumnae to experience and contributed to the ongoing mission of the church. When Catholic schools set themselves apart from other schools, recruited effectively, and produced students positively engaged in values-centered relationships, they kept their charism alive and added to their sustainability (Fisher, 2003).

The Catholic Education Collaborative Leadership Conference in 2010, hosted by Loyola Chicago's Center for Catholic School Effectiveness, focused on five primary questions regarding Catholic school mission effectiveness (Boyle, 2010). At the conference, Dr. Patricia Weitzel-O'Neill, Superintendent of the Archdiocese of Washington, D.C., outlined a concern she referred to as "mission confusion" (Boyle, 2010). She remarked, historically when Catholic schools served the immigrant poor, the mission of Catholic schools was clear. The Catholic schools served as safe havens for the immigrant from hostile public schools reacting against Catholics. Today, few can agree on the profile of a typical student served by American Catholic schools. Her point was that in recent times, Catholic education was sought for reasons other than faith

formation. This has caused the original intention and mission of Catholic Schools to be minimized.

According to Boyle (2010), there was no consensus on who Catholic schools were serving and when faith formation was not the chief focus of the schools. Schools continued to recruit and competition for students has become the norm, and academic quality has suffered. The trend towards market-driven rather than mission-driven schools has led many Catholic schools to place less importance on Catholic values. In order to appeal to a broader enrollment pool, many schools have distanced themselves from their original mission. Dr. Patricia Weitzel-O'Neill identified "clarity of mission" as a clear need for Catholic School sustainability, especially in light of the fact that schools run by religious orders and congregations could effectively instill values through efficient leadership and charisms congruent to the mission (Boyle, 2010).

### **Sustainability and the Catholic School**

In 2015, the World Congress on Catholic Education discussed the right for all Christians to have access to Catholic education by right of their baptism. The Congress restated that the chief function of Catholic Schools is to provide a deeper awareness of God and salvation. Reinforcing the relationship between parents and church, the Congress reminded parents that they were their children's primary educators and promised to work with parents to impart the faith and guidance necessary for a holistic education (Gandolfo, 2015). Thus, sustainability of Catholic schools was, in part, the purview of the Catholic parent.

Since 1960, almost half of Catholic Schools in the U.S. have closed (Cook & Simonds, 2011, Tagliaferro, 2018). Yet, there are Catholic schools still thriving in today's educational

landscape. It was important to examine why many have remained viable. Though fewer in number than at the height of their popularity, many Catholic schools across the nation have continued to be successfully stewarded and sustained (Heft, 2011). In the early years, students from all religions, races, and financial backgrounds received an education regardless of ability to pay, this was easier to manage when staffing came from religious orders who worked for less money than the laity. Examining sustainability solely through a financial lens, however, is insufficient. Parents were willing to sacrifice for the holistic educational experience their child will have in a values-driven Catholic school at a time when only 3.2% of U.S. Catholic school employees are religious Brothers or Sisters, (Gandolfo, 2015).

Student achievement has been a means of viability for many Catholic schools and was an area in which public schools have been deficient. This was especially true in areas where opportunities for students have been distributed unequally. Additionally, many large public schools struggle with a considerable loss of instruction time due to disciplinary problems. This trend has caused frustrated parents to seek out smaller, Catholic school campuses with fewer behavioral problems (Youniss & Convey, 2000). Not all Catholic schools are the same, but research has found that the advantages, as compared to public schools, included more rigorous course study, enforced discipline, and a stronger sense of community (Youniss & Convey, 2000).

New Catholic immigrants historically sought out Catholic schools as an escape from inadequacies or dangers in public schools, therefore, another feature of sustainability due to the admissions policies. Catholic schools have long been viewed as receptive and ecumenical in their admissions practices. Most schools kept with the spirit of the church when enrolling students and admitted students regardless of religion (Youniss & Convey, 2000). Many parents were attracted

to Catholic schools' longstanding promotion of social justice and responsibility to self and community, values that played out in diverse settings at Catholic schools. These practices led to a variety of learning opportunities in terms of social development and skill-building, such as social interactions and relations (Youniss & Convey, 2000).

Catholic schools continued to educate youth by exposing them to a culture of compassion, rooted in a relationship-based culture. Maney, King, and Kiely (2017) asserted that a major component of education is the relationship between teacher and student. Maney et al. (2017) reported that teacher care was a major component in realizing the educational mission of the Catholic school. High student achievement was associated with strong and meaningful teacher-student relationship (Maney et al, 2017). In Catholic schools, teachers instructed with the belief that each child was created in the image of God, and that they are charged with impressing upon students the privilege of this established right through interaction with each other and the community. Students' culture and morality was shaped during these vulnerable and formative years; Catholic schools with positive teacher-student relationships tend to develop leaders who positively contributed to their communities.

Catholic schools were unique in that they possess a charism and mission which adds value to the school's sustainability. They sought to shape students far beyond the academic realm. Families from all walks of life who realized that Catholic schools were relevant and accessible were benefitting from strong teacher-student relationships (Maney et al., 2017). Sustainable Catholic schools were those that possessed a strong Catholic identity, actively pursued their mission and charism, emphasized community engagement, and promoted positive teacher-student relationships (Maney et al., 2017).



Like all educational institutions, Catholic Schools prepared students for the future. Unlike other educational institutions, Catholic Schools were committed to shaping the future by helping students to understand fully, accept freely, and live faithfully the Gospel message (Buetow, 1988). Catholic schools were an important ministry in the church, and caretakers of Catholic schools shoulder an incredible responsibility to operate and sustain their schools. While curricular standards and cultures may have changed over the years, the charism influencing schools' institutional values have not. A consistent and well-communicated message through meaningful experiences and relationships provides the bedrock for Christ-centered values (Cook, 2015). The desire to sustain Catholic schools is at the heart of this study. Institutional values, as reflected in the lives of graduates and carried forth from religious orders to laity, provided an important look into how schools can advance their thinking on sustainability. The next section uses Saint Mary's High School as a case study and examines how it has been sustained over the last 120 years.

### **Pioneer Years of Catholic Education in Southern California**

In 1771, the establishment of the San Gabriel Mission brought the Catholic faith to the region where Saint Mary's High School resided (Weber, 2000). Mission Assistencia was built in 1810 in local San Bernardino. It was serviced by missionaries of the area who worked with indigenous people who, though they knew nothing of Catholicism, partnered with religious orders to create an equitable and meaningful community (Weber, 2000). In 1886, Father James arrived in Southern California to serve as pastor of its first church, St. Jude's, which is located near the current school location (Weber, 2000). In 1889, he began planning a Catholic school that would include religious instruction and a secular curriculum (Weber, 2000).

According to census records, only 2.5% of Catholic teenagers in the region were attending Catholic school in 1898. Father James invited the order of the Sisters of Jesus to staff the new school, which opened in 1898 under the name Academy of the Shepherd (Weber, 2000). The Sisters of Jesus staffed the school until 1948. In the early years, the Sisters of Jesus functioned under the direction of Father James, the school's pastor and principal, whose first students were all girls—both Catholic and non-Catholic—from grades one to 10. The building served as a convent for the Sisters of Jesus and a boarding property for some of the students. The physical school site remained the same as the original Catholic school.

By the 1920s, Academy of the Shepherd was thriving. It even faced overcrowding due to the large number of local residents who wanted to enroll their children. In response, acting pastor Reverend Lewis opened St. Jude's elementary school in 1925. It initially had 168 students in grades one through eight, and Father James remained the principal for both schools while serving as pastor for St. Jude's Catholic Church. Most of the students who received an education at this school were non-Catholic. Unfortunately, the school burned to the ground in 1927. This catastrophe occurred at a time in the community's history when they were strongly united, and the school was rebuilt in only one year; it reopened in 1928 at its present location. The resiliency of the community was evident in the respect and leadership of the Sisters of Jesus who worked in partnership with Reverend Lewis.

From 1898 to 1948, the Sisters of Jesus taught at and governed the school. In 1943, Father James was the appointed pastor at St. Jude Parish. He saw a great need for a Catholic high school, so he negotiated the purchase of the academy, and in June 1948, the Sisters of Jesus departed and the property changed hands. The Saint Mary Sisters from Chicago agreed to come

to Southern California to staff the school. The first name of the school was Holy Saints High School. It was not until 1952 that the current name, Saint Mary's High School, was installed by Cardinal Francis.

In the fall of 1958, the first freshman class of Saint Mary's Boys High School was enrolled at an adjacent city on a former vacant campus. The following year, the next class of freshman entered and two grades attended Saint Mary's Boys High School. In the third year, the next set of freshmen enrolled at Saint Mary's Boys High School. The only remaining boys at Saint Mary's High School were the seniors. The final coed high school class from Saint Mary's High School graduated in spring of 1962. The Saint Mary's Girls High School class of 1963 was the first all-female class to graduate.

The decision to move the boys was made by the administration at the offices of the Archdiocese of Los Angeles. The decision was made purely because of overcrowding on the Saint Mary's High School campus. At that time, there was no research available to inform the leadership of the benefits of single-sex education. According to the alumnae, this decision proved to be a positive experience for both boys and girls. The boys' campus boasted science classes, sports fields, and a gymnasium. The girls who remained on the Saint Mary's Girls High School Campus had a sewing room and a home economics room that taught cooking and table etiquette.

### **Historical Benchmarks**

In the 120-year history of Catholic education at the site of the current Saint Mary's High School, the school created a legacy that was shaped by the presence of the various religious

orders and economic forces. The following is a brief timeline of events related to St. Mary's history.

- 1898 to 1948, Sisters of Jesus begin Catholic education in the Region
  - Father James recognized that only 2.5% of the region's school-age children were in Catholic school,
  - Father James invites the Sisters of Jesus from Oakland to staff the new school in 1898,
  - The final farewell of the Sisters of Jesus in 1948. The Sisters of Jesus were already staffing five high Schools and denied the request to open a high school due to the limited number of Sisters of Jesus available to teach. Therefore, the Sisters of Jesus made the decision to leave the Valley.
  - The Saint Mary Sisters from Chicago were invited by the Pastor of St Jude to staff the new all-female school,
  
- 1949 to 1962, Transition of Religious Orders and Single Sex education
  - June 1948, Pastor of St Jude, local parish, negotiated the purchase of the Catholic school property,
  - September 1949, first day of high school under the Saint Mary Sisters (Kalinowski, 1967),
  - 1952, name change to Saint Mary's High School (Kalinowski, 1967),
  - 1958, 759 students enrolled at Saint Mary's High School (Kalinowski, 1967),
  - 1958, first freshman class to attend Saint Mary's Boys High School in a neighboring city (Kalinowski, 1967),
  - 1962, completion of transferring the boys to Saint Mary's Boys High School (Kalinowski, 1967).
  
- 1962 to 1967, Establishment of Single Sex educational institutions
  - 1962, opening of both single sex high schools
    - Saint Mary's Girls High School
    - Saint Mary's Boys High School
  - 1967, Saint Mary's Boys High School name change to Holy Saints High School.
  
- 1979, Saint Mary's Girls High School joins the Archdiocese of Los Angeles
  - Saint Mary's Girls High School officially becomes an archdiocesan school in Los Angeles (Archdiocese of Los Angeles, 2018a).
  
- 1988—1990, Military Lay Offs begin the decline of Catholic school enrollment in the Valley,
  - 1988, General Dynamics lays off 600 at the Missile factory (Sullivan, 1990),
  - 1990, General Dynamics, lays off an additional 1,500 to 2,000 (Vartabedian, 1988).

- 1994, The Closure of Norton Air Force Base
  - Scientists, researchers, and technicians who lived on the base lost their jobs (Whitehead, 2019),
  - The Air Force brought in money that supported other businesses (Whitehead, 2019).
  
- 2000 to 2011, continued decline of Catholic school enrollment in the Valley, opening of the middle school,
  - 2000, Enrollment of 360 girls on campus,
  - 2009, Enrollment of 190 girls on campus,
  - 2011, Opening of the Catholic coeducational middle school on campus of Saint Mary's Girls High School, and
  - Saint Mary's Middle School is opened to provide a strategy to increase enrollment at the high school and attract new middle school students to prepare for the respective Catholic single-sex high schools.

Saint Mary's High School has provided single-sex classes since 1963. This model was found to significantly improve academic engagement at the high school level and promote greater confidence and college success (Sax et al., 2013). Perhaps the success of single-gender education can be examined against development theorists, Erikson and Kohlberg, who suggested that these critical formative years are when children are developing identity, forming ideas of morality and justice, and strengthening their understanding of reciprocity and reasoning (Psychology Notes HQ, 2016, 2017). Few would argue that removing barriers to self-understanding, cultivating an environmental attitude of inclusion, and modeling a societal expectation of justice and success would benefit students of all gender identities. The study does imply that cultures within institutions have a significant influence over individuals at this stage of development (Sax et al., 2013).

Cable and Spradlin (2008) wrote that in the 1960s, single-sex education was initiated to allow for specialized education. At that time, boys were taught different life skills than girls. Boys had classes in agriculture or industrial arts, while girls took classes suited to the current

values of society: that women should be mothers and homemakers. The first all-female academies were founded in the 1800s. At that time, there was no methodology or rationale to separate the sexes other than function (Cable & Spradlin, 2008).

Each generation presented unique challenges for Catholic schools. Best practices developed as needs were realized. Creating an environment rich in Catholic values, tradition, and successful academic programs continued to align with a common Catholic philosophy in every Catholic paradigm. The mission of a school was embedded in the foundational values which may determine sustainability. The history of Catholic schools, from the era when Sisters were plentiful in classrooms through the transition to lay educators, and the current factors impacting administration and faculty provides the backdrop for a discussion about how investing in Catholic schools' charism and mission can help sustain them.

### **Summary**

Buetow (1985) wrote that Catholic schools existed to teach members of society how to live a good life so they could contribute positively to society. Throughout most of Catholic school history, religious Brothers and Sisters set up a framework that exemplified a social teaching model. Students from all religions, statuses, and races could receive an education in Catholic schools regardless of their ability to pay. As a result, Catholic schools have made major contributions to cultural, spiritual, and academic enrichment that encouraged faith and aligned with our country's constitutional values (Heft, 2011).

Enrollment in Catholic schools had a strong correlation with the growing population in the United States and the growing Catholic community. Enrollment steadily increased from the 1930s until 1965. Population shifts, lawsuits, all-female secondary schools, and increasing

tuition costs have contributed to diminishing enrollment in Catholic schools. With the cost of Catholic education escalating, many schools are re-examining their scope and purpose.

This chapter reviewed the challenges and benefits of single-gender education. Although it may not necessarily liberate the struggling student of either gender, some studies have suggested there are benefits to single-gender classrooms (Sadker et al., 2009). High school girls in all-female institutions are afforded opportunities to build confidence, operate in a team environment, and use these new found characteristics to gain leadership skills (Bickett, 2008),

The examination of Catholic values that attracted families to Catholic education is critical to the sustainability of these institutions. Parents and guardians continued to sacrifice, pay tuition, and have searched for a meaningful purpose beyond academia.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **METHODOLOGY**

This study examined how alumnae perceptions contributed to an understanding of the sustainability of Catholic schools facing societal, demographic, and global changes. The methodology analyzed interviews with Saint Mary's High School alumnae, which revealed the types of positive experiences that have contributed to the school's sustainability. This inquiry developed an understanding of the qualities that have sustained the institution over the past 120 years: environment, context, culture, and values. Examining this data can help those responsible for the continued success of Saint Mary's High School and similar secondary Catholic schools.

#### **Qualitative Case Study**

To grasp the multidimensional influences on the school, the researcher used a qualitative approach, analyzed interviews and examined a variety of documents. According to Creswell (2014), a qualitative approach was useful when data collection involves multiple sources of information and when a study explores the contextual features of a case. Qualitative data was gathered through interviews, journaling, and document reviews. The interviews, conducted by the researcher, focused on stories and memories from alumnae of various ages as they reflected on their experiences at Saint Mary's High School. The voices and perspectives of Founding Alumnae (1948 to 1960), Mature Alumnae (1960 to 2006), and Young Alumnae (2007 to 2017) were recorded and transcribed. As stated by Bogdan and Biklen (2007), researchers often supplemented historical data with interviews to qualify deducing information relative to answering the research question. In this study, primary documents provided data that was used to highlight defining themes.



According to Bogdan and Biklen (2007), a case study focused on one single entity and gathers a broad range of information so the researcher can identify significant themes during the examination phase. This case study reviewed existing documents, reflective journals, and interviews with alumnae associated with the school and community members indirectly associated with the school in order to appropriately represent the scope and influences on the school. A case study can provide both descriptive richness and insights into people, events, and passions in real-life environments as recalled by the participants (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007).

### **Physical Description**

This study focused on Saint Mary's High School; an all-female college preparatory high school founded in 1898 in California's San Gabriel Valley. The high school remained at the same location as the founding school led by the Sisters: an urban location in the eastern part of the Archdiocese of Los Angeles. It was only five miles from the Diocese of San Bernardino. The city has approximately 152,000 residents, with Hispanics making up approximately 63% of the population. The median income in this city was \$49,186 and the per capita income was \$17,557. Approximately 22% of the population lived under the poverty limit (2010 Fast Facts, 2017). There were three local public high schools, four specialty high schools, and a small number of charter schools.

Saint Mary's Middle School was founded in 2011 on the campus of Saint Mary's High School. The coeducational middle school includes grades six, seven, and eight, and utilized classrooms not in use by the high school. The school was accredited by the Western Catholic Educational Association and the Western Association of Schools and Colleges. The high school included grades 9, 10, 11, and 12 and used a college preparatory curriculum that prepared

students for admission to colleges and universities. All courses offered are A through G approved by the University of California system. In the 2017-2018 academic year, Saint Mary's High School was designated as an AP Capstone school by meeting qualifications set forth by the College Board.

In the 2018-2019 school year, there were 229 girls in the high school and 109 in the middle school. Students came from the Inland Empire, surrounding cities, and also from abroad; in 2018-2019, the school had international students from China, Spain, Taiwan, and Vietnam. The ethnic makeup of Saint Mary's High School in 2018-2019 was: 65% Hispanic; 10% White; 3% African American; 3% Filipino; 9% Asian Pacific; and, 10% Multiracial. Approximately 80% of students were Catholic. The religious affiliations of the remaining students were Baptist, Muslim, Protestant, Buddhist, and other Christian denominations.

**Data Collection**

Bogdan and Biklen (2007) categorized official documents as internal, external, and/or popular culture. External documents included newsletters and yearbooks, and internal documents included student rosters, recruiting material, school activity flyers, and tuition charts (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Within these categories, the researcher used current and archival documents to acquire information (see Table 1, Table 3).

Table 1  
*External Archival Documentation*

Document Type	Years
Yearbooks	1953 to 2018

Table 2

*Internal Archival Documentation*

Document Type	Years
Student Rosters	1953 to 2018
Recruiting Material	1953 to 2018
Tuition Rate Sheets	1953 to 2018
School Activity Flyers	1953 to 2018
School Demographic Information	1953 to 2018

All participants in the study were alumnae, former principals, and diocesan personnel from the district office. The individuals selected were alumnae who agreed to participate in the study. The participants were all actively involved in supporting some aspect of the school. The current Associate Superintendents interviewed were recent appointees who had not served in any capacity at Saint Mary’s High School.

Prospective interviewees were sent an invitation to interview for the study, which included a participation form. The participation form listed the purpose of the study, who was to interview the participants, an informed consent form for the audio recording of the interview, and a statement of voluntary withdrawal. The interviewee signed and dated the consent form. Interviews were recorded and transcribed. Interviews were kept confidential by assigning each with a pseudonym known only to the interviewer. The interview protocol has been reproduced in the Appendix.

Using the 4D Model of AI: Discovery, Dream, Design, and Delivery, the researcher asked the participants about their best memories of their time at school. The questions allowed conversations to unfold organically. The researcher did not prompt responses and participants disclosed their best memories. The experiences of the participants clearly revealed important, non-negotiable sentiments about participants’ time at Saint Mary’s High School,

## **Journal Writing**

Participant journal writing was another important means of extrapolating data in this study. Janesick (1998) purported that journaling exercises often help participants to clarify their thinking and share with more depth. The researcher presented participants with journaling questions prior to the actual interview so that the interviewee had an opportunity to recall their time at Saint Mary's High School and the significant memories that they would later share in the interview. Journals were collected before the interviews. The journals were reviewed and content analyzed. The interviews relevancy determined use in the data.

Once the participant agreed to participate and returned the signed consent form, the journal question was sent. The first journal question was, "What are some of your favorite memories of your time at Saint Mary's High School?" The second journal question was "Identify a time when you felt most effective and engaged during your experience with Saint Mary's High School?"

In the exercise of preparing the journal, the participants enjoyed recalling their prime moments in high school. Many of them mentioned prior to the interview that, it has been many years since they recalled these memories. The participants re-affirmed the financial sacrifice their parents made and the opportunities they seized. In the process of coding, all journals were reviewed and used as the writings were informative.

The researcher also had access to documents from Saint Mary's High School. Over the years, recording of data continued to evolve. School Demographic Information was reviewed to confirm enrollment at Saint Mary's High School and Saint Mary's Boy's High School. Student rosters were reviewed to confirm ethnicity and religion to further inform the census of the

school. Other documents, such as recruiting material, tuition rate sheets, and school activity flyers added further identity to the school. In the writing of the dissertation, the documents became of less importance due to the rising quality and intimate discussions from the interviews.

Table 3  
*Interview Participants*

Alumni Group	Years	# People	Length of Commitment
Young Alumnae	2007 to 2017	2 persons	One-hour interview and follow-up
Mature Alumnae	1961 to 2006	2 persons	One-hour interview and follow-up
Founding Alumnae	1948 to 1960	3 persons	One-hour interview and follow-up
Diocesan Personnel	1996 to 2018	2 persons	One-hour interview and follow-up
Former Principals	1988 to 2002	2 persons	One-hour interview and follow-up

### **Data Preparation and Analysis**

All documents were gathered and read by the researcher. Interviews were recorded and transcribed. Data was coded by creating categories as topics and patterns emerged during analysis. As suggested by Bogdan and Biklen (2007), these categories were used to organize the data by theme. Hard copies were annotated with the codes. Initially, upon coding the interviews, approximately 20 themes were identified. As the analysis progressed, the emerging themes were refined, combined and reduced from 20 to 11. After absorbing the experiences articulated by the participants, the researcher was able to further combine the themes and reduce them to a final four that were consistently communicated throughout all generations of participants (Founding Alumnae, Mature Alumnae, and Young Alumnae). These themes—pastoral care, mission, tradition, and community—were analyzed in Chapter 4.

## **Trustworthiness**

The researcher used three methods to create trust between himself and participants. Trust was necessary to elicit authentic and accurate information from participants (Creswell, 2014).

The three methods used in this study were:

1. **Variety of methodology:** To gain validity, a variety of sources were examined to justify themes. Using sources including interviews and primary documents added to the trustworthiness of the study (Creswell, 2014).
2. **Transparency of Researcher Positionality:** The researcher's self-reflection informed readers about the researcher and his motivation for the study. It also offered insight about what the researcher was hoping to uncover through interpretation of the data (Creswell, 2014).
3. **Member Checking:** The researcher reviewed interview materials with participants to ensure that they agreed with what they had said, and gave them the opportunity to change, remove, or add information to the interview data (Creswell, 2014).

## **Positionality**

As a minority, and first-generation college graduate, I did not originally have a vision of pursuing or completing college; my family and high school did not encourage me to develop a vision. In fact, I recall that applying to a university or college was not an expectation; therefore, neither was attending higher education. As my journey continued, I encountered many new experiences that set me apart from the values of my birth culture. I became aware that pursuing my degrees was countercultural and made some of my family and friends uncomfortable. My father, the majority of my uncles, and cousins were blue collar workers. At family functions, I

often received comments like, “You think you are better than us” or “Are you afraid to get dirty?” My high school counselor directed me to attend a vocational school or community college. She was a minority female with good intentions who regularly told me I was good with my hands.

When I entered the field of Catholic education on the East Coast, I worked with a predominantly (88.6%) Caucasian demographic (Maryland State Data Center 2000 Census, 2001). The personal and professional common ground for my teaching experience were the Catholic values under which the school operated. Many cultural differences remained. The Catholic school provided wonderful learning opportunities for me which have become significant assets in my professional life. This earlier professional experience began to prepare me for the position I currently hold. The socio-economic status (SES) of students’ families in my previous position was middle-to-high-income, and most students came from second- or third-generation college families. As an administrator immersed in the college preparatory and college application process, I became passionate about the need for underserved students to acquire access to Catholic education. The common ground that unites cultures and people is God’s love for all of us and His reflective image among us. This was the same environment where I found acceptance and gained professional experience. My own experiences of faith and knowledge inspired me to help underserved students prepare for the university experience in a Catholic environment,

My prior education and professional experience compelled me to accept the challenge of my former position at Saint Mary’s High School. Saint Mary’s High School region is comprised of a majority Hispanic population, at 69.5% (2010 Fast Facts, 2017). Sixty-five percent of

students at Saint Mary's High School are Hispanic (Saint Mary's Office of Development Census, 2018). The Hispanic population in the Saint Mary's High School region, does not possess the educational attainment that their fellow non-Hispanic counterparts possess; only 7.8% of Hispanics in the local area attained a minimum of a bachelor's degree (2010 Fast Facts, 2017). The Hispanic population at Saint Mary's in the school year 2017-2018 was 60%. The growth of the Hispanic population in southern California communities required schools to ensure their participation in a changing world. As a minority, first-generation college graduate, and as a Hispanic administrator, I worked to maintain access for low-SES male and female students in a way that provides academic rigor and academic support in a Catholic environment. It is through the experience of Catholic education that students contributed to a growing and vibrant church. My goals were to promote solidarity in Catholic teachings and subsidiarity, so that local administration makes decisions that benefit school efficiency and mission.



## **CHAPTER 4**

### **FINDINGS**

The purpose of this study was to explore perceptions held by alumnae about their time spent at Saint Mary's High School. By analyzing these perceptions, recommendations can be made to improve function, sustainability, and viability for other all-female Catholic High Schools. The central research question was:

How do alumnae perceptions about their experiences in an all-female Catholic high school contribute to an understanding of the sustainability of the institution?

This chapter reviews and synthesizes alumnae responses to this question and analyzes four themes that emerged from the participant data. The analysis of each theme is organized by the three participant groups: founding alumnae (1953-1962), mature alumnae (1963-1999), and young alumnae (2000-2018). Each theme is then summarized, and the chapter ends with a final summary of the findings. Saint Mary's High School has been a fixture in Catholic education in the regional community for over 120 years. The school has evolved, transformed, and adjusted in response to changes in economic climate, demographic movement, and religious formation. This study attempted to isolate and determine perceptions of sustainability by alumnae across the years.

#### **Theme 1: Pastoral Care**

Pastoral care emerged as the most important characteristic for the sustainability of the school. Pastoral care is defined as a theology that embraces the idea of being connected to community and to small groups where people can find healing and guidance (Jesuit Institute, 2011). All study participants mentioned the importance of pastoral care to their experiences.

They recalled positive, trustful relationships with faculty and administration and relayed stories that shed light on some very important factors. Pastoral care was one of the main factors contributing to positive relationships and trust (Jesuit Institute, 2011).

Pastoral care helped fulfill the mission of the school through the trust formed in relationships among administration, faculty, and students. The Sisters' charism, along with other principles, shaped and formed the school's mission statement (Grace, 2002). Pastoral care was a prominent theme in all participants' recollections of their experiences at Saint Mary's High School. It appears to have been transmitted from religious order to the laity. The cultivation of pastoral care was evident in the culture of the school.

### **Founding Alumnae and Pastoral Care**

The founding alumnae (graduates from 1953-1962) experienced pastoral care that was very personal. For example, Faith recalled that while the Sisters and Father (priest) were strict, they had relationships with the families. Faith remembered a couple of situations where the Sisters could have demoralized her family but chose to exercise empathy and compassion. Her family owned a restaurant within walking distance of Saint Mary's High School, and Faith would go to the restaurant for lunch daily. If she was needed during the lunch hour, she would stay to help the family business. Her mother would send a note to the Sisters that Faith was sick. Both the Sisters and Father knew Faith was at the restaurant, but "they knew, we knew, that they let it go," remembered Faith.

One day, however, Faith actually became so ill that she needed to go to the doctor. The next day, she presented the note to a Sister who asked, "Were you sick?" Faith said, "I was so

sick that I had to go to the doctor.” Faith reported that the Sister immediately believed her and “gave me all the advice for bronchitis.”

Faith also recalled, “When you walked on this campus, there was support and there was a caring that you knew was there.” She remembered that her mom had to run the restaurant and that her family had no money for hospice care when her dad was terminally ill. She said that while her mother worked at their family restaurant, the priest would often go to her house and stay with her dad until her mom finished at the restaurant. She recalled the trauma of losing her father during her sophomore year of high school. Yet Faith “still enjoyed being a child.” In hindsight, she believed that her ability to remain a child despite difficult experiences was, in part, because of, “my mother and my family’s (relationship) with the school, my friends and the Sisters. They allowed that to happen.”

Faith mentioned she did not go to college; that was not her goal. Faith noted that she had a learning disability and did not learn like her classmates. She said that the Sisters did not sit her down and say, “well you know you’ve got a problem,” but instead they provided her with a support system. Faith remembered, “I had the Sisters. I know that if I ever got in trouble, I just knew I was going to have to work hard and do my best. That is all they asked of you.” By encouraging Faith to work hard and do her best, Faith believed, the Sisters were preparing her for life beyond high school.

Betty remembered the principal Sister Mary. “She was all learned. She had her way. She was very conservative and she would get after everybody,” but Sister Mary was well respected. Betty recalled that the Sisters were strict, they cared, and they had high expectations for all students. Betty was a cooperative student and worked hard. She recalled that “the nuns prepared

us well for school. They prepared us for life.” Betty said that she knew her family “trusted” the Sisters with her Catholic education. This model of care by the Sisters was transferred to the students. Betty offered, “There is a special binding force that was created [at Saint Mary’s High School] and we [classmates] are still, we are still very much in touch. . . . We like to be with each other and reminisce old times.” Having caring relationships is critical for existing in a small community. Betty remembered that caring for the whole student was important to the Sisters. Academic success was not the Sisters’ only goal; teaching the girls to become good, caring people was the top priority.

### **Mature Alumnae and Pastoral Care**

According to Elena, “There is something about this place that grows a certain kind of woman and a certain spirit is just always there.” Hayley believed that a Saint Mary’s High School graduate was greater than all the pieces that she experienced during her four years at Saint Mary’s High School. The mature alumnae agreed that “[t]he caring of the school’s students extended beyond the walls and gates of Saint Mary’s High School.”

Although the number of Sisters diminished, the size of the all-female school was small enough that all students were engaged and included by the Sisters who remained. Due to the familial relationship with the Sisters, all students were included in discussion and participation. There was no hiding, even for a student sitting in the back row. Elena said, “[T]he Sisters that were here didn’t have a back row. And that’s what I love about the Sisters.” It was reassuring and an integral part of the experience; she added, “We had about five or six Sisters that were beautiful and loving.”

Even when the presence of the nuns was less significant, their impact remained. Elena commented, “When I would see the counselor, I would think of all the conversations my family had with the school. The counselor would call my mom and say, “Okay, well, if you can just get Jackie [her sister, who was having difficulties] to school, I’ll talk to her.” In Elena’s experience, the Sisters were replaced by school counselors, but counselors did not always care for students in the way the Sisters had. According to Elena, during her sister’s time at Saint Mary’s High School, the school was not attentive to attendance, especially when it came to her sister. Her sister would accumulate 30 to 40 absences without incurring any consequences. In addition, there was a growing turnover rate of teachers. This culture was different from the one the Sisters had previously cultivated. Their pastoral care would have held the family accountable and provided direction. So, it seems that there were times in the history of the school when pastoral care was lacking or severely diminished. Yet, it was never completely gone, because there were always those faculty members who continued to care personally for each girl and provide pastoral care that sustained both individuals and the institution.

Dora’s experience at Saint Mary’s High School was enlightening. She was encouraged to be involved in many activities and organizations. She remembers taking karate during a mini-course between first and second semester. “I’m a white belt, so watch out!” she exclaimed. Many new experiences were supported and encouraged by the Sisters, and others gave her confidence to try new things. Dora also recalled the time she knew the call to a vocation was in her future. As she continued her discernment, she remembered, “My friends, my peers, and my teachers were very supportive.” She needed that encouragement because she was taking a risk; her mother did not support her decision to become a Sister. In addition, Dora remembered being the target of

jokes and unkind remarks at her previous middle school. She knew Saint Mary's High School would provide a new start and great opportunities. And that expectation came true. Dora reminisced, "I had very nurturing and caring teachers." "I got to discover some talents, I didn't know." Her senior retreat, Kairos, was a memorable experience; it was there that she became certain of her path in religious life. Dora recollected, "I never experienced a retreat like the senior retreat."

The overall theme here was the pastoral nature of the school, first manifested through the Sisters and later carried on by others. Dora's two older sisters had graduated from Saint Mary's High School prior to her attendance. Before becoming a student there, she said the one thing she knew was that "Saint Mary's High School was a family. . . . It was obvious from the beginning that I was about to be a component of this great family."

### **Young Alumnae and Pastoral Care**

In more recent years, without the presence of the Sisters, pastoral care was carried out by lay persons living the mission of the Sisters. One young alumna, Tammy, characterized pastoral care in regard to the school principal and a teacher. Tammy had been a student for three years and felt that the school was losing its value as a beacon of Catholicity. However, a new principal arrived for her senior year. She commented, "It was nice to see that the principal cared about us, he was there, and he could see you." She said some students had left the school due to the lack of concern and inattention from the former principal. In many ways, Tammy was praying that someone would come and restore the school to its pastoral nature: "The pastoral care began to be evident because the newly appointed Principal cared about us and gave off a good aura of care."

Tammy believed, with the physical presence of the new principal, teachers began to change because they were held more accountable to the mission of the school.

As Tammy reflected on her high school years, she began to realize the pastoral care that was evident, even when she failed. She remembered that her teacher, Mr. Thomas “didn’t make us feel like failures. He made us feel like you know, if we weren’t trying hard enough, he could tell. Our teacher never quit on us and supported us during the challenging times.” Mr. Thomas, along with several other teachers, believed in the students, lived the pastoral mission, and held all accountable. Tammy did, however, notice a decline in spirit and enrollment during these years. In 2009, when Tammy was beginning her senior year at Saint Mary’s High School, she noted that “There were teachers that weren’t very good.” She continued, “We never saw the principal. I can’t remember where her office was. I never really went there. I never really saw her. So, I don’t remember where her office was.” With no visible or vocal leadership, the students felt neglected. Tammy recalled hearing rumors about the school’s closing: “Oh it is going to close, oh, they’re going to join the boys’ school. . . . It’s going to close down soon.” Tammy’s narrative described the diminishing strength and viability of the school. Students attributed this to a lack of pastoral care.

However, bright spots of mission and pastoral care remained despite the perceived downturn. For example, Tammy remembered that, even though the principal was weak and some teachers were ineffective, the school was committed to good teaching: “The good teachers were kept, the other ones let go so that we could get better teachers who would teach the girls and care about them.” There were several teachers who had stellar reputations. Tammy stated that her confidence came from certain faculty members: “Mrs. Pratt and Mr. Thomas, I would say had a

huge impact on me.” She fondly recollected the faith and belief Mrs. Pratt and Mr. Thomas had in students. Both of these teachers had created relationships and they used this knowledge to challenge and encourage. She proudly commented, “Mr. Thomas, his classes were some of the greatest (personal) growths that I’ve had and I chose his passion as a profession because of him.” She also learned, “We [females] are strong in our own ways and so it was interesting because we had all the different role models as well.”

Another young alumna illustrated her experience of pastoral care by describing the tragic death of a classmate and how the school processed the shock. She said that the grieving was very personal and the school allowed the students to bond amidst the tragedy. Sylvia described her deceased classmate as a good young lady centering her life in service. When she passed, Sylvia remembered, “It was a shock to the school because everyone felt something missing.” The school missed the student dearly. The students, according to Sylvia, were changed by the death of a classmate: “After that everyone kind of got a little bit more involved in their faith.” Sylvia felt that the culture of the school became more relevant to the mission of the school during this time period. “Her passing kind of made us closer together. And, made the whole school closer together and the teachers.” It was difficult to deal with the loss, but the care shown by the leadership allowed the community to heal. The school did not want to forget her, but they understood that the students had to move on. “After our classmate passed away, the teachers were more available and attentive to us” Sylvia remarked. It was their caring influence that helped the students work through this ordeal.



## **Summary of Pastoral Care Experiences**

The theme of pastoral care was observed, experienced, and witnessed by all three categories of participants. The relationships formed between students and staff created bonds that allowed pastoral care to take priority over the rules of the school. Each alumna, whether young, mature, or founding, all believed that they received care above and beyond the regular standards of a school. They believed the leaders of the school conveyed the love of Christ. Saint Mary's High School showcased this quote on the wall in the front office: "Let it be known to all who enter here that Jesus Christ is the reason for this school, the unseen but ever-present teacher in all its classes, the model of its faculty, and the inspiration for its students." Organizing a school culture around care and concern for students' emotional and psychological wellness allowed students to feel safe and embraced by the school and its leaders.

### **Theme II: Mission**

The mission of the Saint Mary's School is: "Saint Mary's High School offers a safe, nurturing, and challenging college preparatory Catholic education in an environment which inspires students of all faiths to achieve academic excellence and develop into confident, service-oriented leaders." Participant responses consistently revealed that the values derived from this mission impacted their experiences at the school.

### **Founding Alumnae and Mission**

Early in her time at Saint Mary's High School, Faith realized that the Sisters were strong, educated women. At home, she was surrounded by strong women: her mother and grandmother. At Saint Mary's High School, she felt the Sisters embodied the characteristics of her strong, female family members. She recalled, "You come to a school where you know these Sisters, you

see Sister Bea and Sister Clare; they are teaching science. If they weren't teaching you know they were cleaning floors and washing dishes. They did it all and they did it for the love of God." Faith felt that her mother and grandmother modeled the same behavior: they taught the family and took care of the house. The resilience of these women was evident to the students. Faith said, "The Sisters worked hard and they expected you to work hard also."

Faith's experience of the Sisters illustrates that their work was mission-driven. Faith had a difficult time in high school because of her father's illness, the struggling family business, and her classmate's brother's death. Yet, despite her difficulties, she remarked, "The nuns were so good to our family." Instead of criticizing her for her absences or poor grades, they would ask her, "Are you sleeping? Are you taking care of yourself? I knew the support was there." Faith and her family felt valued and validated as children of God in the school community.

Saint Mary's High School's mission included educating students of all faiths. The school, a pioneer in this regard, was accessible to all students. Irma remembered, "I just knew that in the 1950s, students came from everywhere because Saint Mary's High School was the centralized Catholic high school." The mission of the school was to exercise inclusivity. This played out through the leadership and unwavering service of the Sisters to the students,

Another part of Saint Mary's High School's mission is adherence to a faith tradition. Sarah remembered, "I just felt so blessed to be in a Catholic school where the majority of the teachers were Sisters." She said that the Sisters taught students that, "the strongest values [to be] nurtured are faith and family." Irma believed that the mission of Saint Mary's High School guided her values, her faith and family. Irma also remembered the religious mission of the

school. She said that “high school affirmed all I had come to learn about my faith. She recalled, “[Saint Mary’s] was spiritual” and had a profound religious influence on the students.

### **Mature Alumnae and Mission**

Elena recalled when a new principal was appointed to the school. Systematically, the Sisters would rotate to different assignments and carry out the mission of the Sisters. Having a Sister as principal allowed the mission to continue. Elena stated, “[T]he school was at the top of its game and it was now time for another Sister to come in.” Her mother sent her to Saint Mary’s High School because of the consistency of its mission. She remembered, “I think it paralleled with the message I was getting at home from my mother and my aunt. So, she sent me to a place that was reinforcing that message.” Elena recalled, “The campus minister program was superb when I was at Saint Mary’s High School.” During her time at the school, a man named Father Tom was the campus minister. Elena noted that he made some wonderful changes on campus, including “chapel every morning, the Masses, the traditions, and all that stuff.” No longer wanting to be invisible, Elena joined the choir and participated for four years. Elena also remembered the religion classes and believed she received a unique experience from the classes. She added, “The religion classes were beneficial because of the way they made you think and how to defend it [your position about your faith].” All of these experiences prepared her for life. She asserted that she owed her love of learning and commitment to her faith to these unique experiences. Looking back, she remembered, “We could celebrate our faith and not be judged for it.”

Dora recalled that one of the reasons for the consistency of the mission throughout the school was that, “if a Sister was principal, she was also the Superior of the house.” The principal

made decisions for the school and the house. This consistency in leadership also maintained consistency of the school mission. Dora was the youngest of three girls in her family who attended Saint Mary's High School. She was excited to attend. Dora participated in mission traditions that allowed her to continue to grow. For example, she said, "I never experienced a retreat like the senior retreat. That was like the precursor for me to wanting to be a Sister." The mission, tradition, and spiritual community of Saint Mary's High School contributed to her decision to enter religious life.

### **Young Alumnae and Mission**

Tammy believed in the small school environment. She fondly recalled, "I feel like Saint Mary's High School is what made me who I am today. The mission of the school was to empower young women to be contributors to society." For Tammy, the spirituality was constant. She said that the opportunities she experienced allowed her to explore her faith and grow in it. Tammy recalled, "Those were good times, as well, because there was bonding and a religious bonding with other students." The young alumnae, including Tammy, indicated that the development of spirituality was linked with the nurturing of community, in accordance with the school's mission.

The notion of faith diversity continues into the contemporary era. Tammy remembered that, "Girls from all faiths were enrolled. Catholic, Protestant, Baptist, Jewish, etc.; all faiths are accepted." She believed that while Saint Mary's High School accepted all faiths, the idea of turning to God and making God a part of daily living was ever-present. Tammy believed that the students' religious diversity added to the richness of the faith. She said, "Our classes felt like a constant reminder of religion and were a part of our life."

Sylvia also remembered that, “Everyone had a different religion.” She said that she “wanted to learn more about my religion.” She had a desire to increase her faith, but it was not until her senior year that her eyes and heart were opened. She remembered the girls saying, “I should look into being more Catholic.” She believed that it was the religion classes that made faith real for her. The constant presence of a religious environment, rooted in mission and led by committed leaders, along with community involvement in faith activities, drew together mission, tradition, and community in ways that were profoundly impactful for Saint Mary’s High School students.

### **Summary of Mission Experiences**

All participants’ narratives pointed to the importance of mission in their experiences at Saint Mary’s High School. Mission-driven leadership began with the Sisters and has been transmitted through the generations up until present-day lay leadership. The continuity of leadership and its fidelity to the Roman Catholic faith was important in building the community. When the families first enrolled in the school, they trusted that their faith was protected, and advanced with the values they possessed. They believed that the home life of their children would be supported by their school. Across the generations, the alumnae stated that the mission of faith, academic excellence, the empowerment of young women, and the love of God were beacons during their time at Saint Mary’s High School.

### **Theme III: Tradition**

Tradition, and its impact on the fond memories that young women had of the school, was an important theme across all participant groups.

## **Founding Alumnae and Tradition**

One of the traditions Faith vividly remembered at Saint Mary's High School was the annual Christmas pageant. She fondly recalled, "We sang at the old church along with the high school or the seventh and eighth grade. The school and the church were all community." Faith also remembered the initial installation of the uniform. The uniform became a tradition that most students agreed with. She said, "When the very popular crinoline skirts and poodle skirts were in fashion, there were complaints from the parents. Some parents complained that the girls would be floating down the stairs doing a show for the boys." The traditional school uniform allowed families who struggled financially not to have to participate in the fashions of the time. Faith proudly stated, "The next year, we were in uniforms which was the best thing that ever happened to people like me who did not have giant crinoline skirts or the money to buy everything."

Irma remembered the sports program at Saint Mary's High School. The teams were successful and celebrated: "Oh, we had sports, we celebrated a lot." The football games and homecoming celebrations were traditions that the school began and they were staples in the future of the school. Irma recalled, "There was a game in Los Angeles, and I went to the game. I rode the bus and it was far away. But I went." She remembered that, although the games were far away, they created excitement and community for the school. Irma also remembered that graduating classes were traditionally on their way to college. "I think the majority of the girls went to college out of my class." The tradition of being a college-bound young woman was at the core of the mission of Saint Mary's, then and now.

### **Mature Alumnae and Tradition**

Elena also reminisced about the uniform. Attending a Catholic school usually entailed wearing a uniform. The uniform should be pristine, but this only happened when the policy was enforced. When Elena was at Saint Mary's High School, the principal was a Sister who Elena remembered as "scary, she was very scary." Elena recalled, "She had a very old school, Catholic school feel about her and she commanded and demanded respect and everyone gave it to her. She ran a very tight ship and she cared about the uniform." The focus on the uniform as a tradition was a unifying theme for all of the alumnae. Though it may have been enforced more stringently in earlier years, it is still a tradition that sets Saint Mary's High School students apart. It unifies and democratizes them so that all students appear the same. While many of the alumnae remembered complaining about the uniform when they attended Saint Mary's High School, they looked fondly on it as an important tradition that they were glad to have experienced.

Dora recalled her senior retreat, Kairos, in which all seniors participated. At that time, she remembered it was not as developed as it had become recently. She remembered she was asked to write a letter to herself that the teachers would mail to her in August, right before she would begin college. "It was good to see before going off to college," she proudly recalled.

### **Young Alumnae and Tradition**

One of the traditions of Saint Mary's High School over the years was the small school environment. Tammy remembered, "I liked the more close-knit kind of feel, more of a family kind of feel." Tammy thrived in this small school environment, as it allowed her to participate in many of the school's traditions and ongoing activities. She remembered daily prayer services in

the chapel as a time when she would gain spiritual nourishment to get through the day. Tammy reminisced, “Because of the small school community I was able to join clubs. I was able to be in more focused classes. I was able to be on the volleyball team without being in club sports.” Tammy also remembered that activities such as the homecoming dance, rallies, and Catholic Schools Week were important in the life of the school; she was also part of the Associated Student Body organization. She concluded, “I was able to do so much here that I was able to develop myself.” With these opportunities, she flourished in confidence and conviction. Tammy also remembered the retreats: “Those were good as well because there was a bonding and a religious bonding with the other students. In senior year, Kairos was remarkable. All girls with the purpose of getting closer to one another.” Tammy spoke of the retreat’s emotional significance and the opportunity it provided to bond with her sisters (classmates).

Sylvia, too, felt that the traditional activities were meaningful. “The ASB moderator made it more spirited, like school spirit. Back then, it was really loud, and even though it was a small school, it felt like we had a lot of girls. However, the school did have a growth spurt during these years, because the traditional all school activities had to be held outside instead of in the gym.” Sylvia also remembered participating in the drama productions. She remarked that she noticed her artistic talent grow in these productions. Sylvia remembered entering Saint Mary’s High School as a freshman. She claimed that she was shy and feared being authentic. She joined the drama production in hopes of stepping away from that fear. She stated, “It was fun, exciting, and that day, everyone knew who I was.” Her self-awareness increased and fear of failure diminished.



## **Summary of Tradition Experiences**

The participants talked about the many traditions that have been celebrated and enacted at the school throughout the years. With the small school environment and the lack of competition from boys, Tammy remembered, It was nice not having the boys here. Didn't have to worry about make-up because it took time from studying. And, I didn't worry about what the boys were going to think about me. There were no boys to impress, we were able to work on our own development. With the nurturing attitude of the leadership, the girls at Saint Mary's High School felt that they grew into their best selves, supported by the community. Participants from the Young and Mature Alumnae generations recalled the senior retreats. Since Saint Mary's High School is an all-female school, the retreats created a time for bonding and building relationships that would last a life time.

### **Theme IV: Community**

The participants commented that a strong sense of community was fostered by an emphasis on relationships. Saint Mary's High School's unofficial motto, "We came as strangers and leave as sisters," embodied the participants' sentiments.

#### **Founding Alumnae and Community**

Faith fondly reminisced about her first year at Saint Mary's High School: "You felt a part of the whole community of Saint Mary's High School." During Faith's time, the tradition of uniforms was implemented. Faith believed that this brought the school closer, because there were no more obvious divisions based on appearance. She felt that the uniforms helped the community to coalesce into a cohesive unit around the mission and vision of the school.

Participants' discussions of community centered on relationships. For example, Faith remembered a classmate who was not Catholic. She also knew, "She came from a horrible background." One day, Faith's classmate came to school and hid in the bathroom. She did not want anyone to know that her parents had divorced. Faith was sympathetic to her classmate, who she considered, part of her community and therefore part of her responsibility. To assuage the grief and shame that her classmate felt, Faith told her that most of her classmates would not care if they knew.

Another incident involved Faith's family. Faith remembered when her dad needed full-time care. Her mother had to work and many people came to assist in the care of her dad. Through the difficult times, she continued to live her childhood with friends at school. She believed that the community that gathered around her—the Sisters, her teachers, her classmates—helped her get through this difficult time. She believed this experience was unique to Saint Mary's High School. In fact, the community that was created was so strong that at the time of the interview, Faith still remained in touch with her classmates; they gathered once a month to reminisce about old times.

### **Mature Alumnae and Community**

Elena believed that the community at Saint Mary's High School was inspirational to many students. She said the school was a place where students were accepted regardless of religion or social status. Elena fondly remembered one of her principals who acted fairly and distributed consequence as evenly as possible. "I never encountered her being rude or disrespectful to a student." The fair and just discipline by principals provided a safe environment where students felt they knew the landscape and could predict outcomes for their behavior. This

stability allowed the community to thrive. Elena also believed that the community at Saint Mary's High School provided a unique educational experience for girls where they could "just feel like you can just be yourself and you don't have to be something else." This advocacy of authenticity, of "being yourself," was only possible because of the safe and nurturing community at Saint Mary's High School. Finally, Elena remembered, "Saint Mary's High School was a family." Family is another word for community.

### **Young Alumnae and Community**

For high school students, being accepted into a culture or school is vital. When a ninth-grade student starts attending a new high school, there are many firsts. Tammy remembered, "I didn't want to go somewhere where it was all about the social fit because I knew I wouldn't fit in." Tammy felt comfortable attending Saint Mary's High School. Coming out of eighth grade, she felt like an awkward teenager. She fondly remembered, When I got to high school, the community of Saint Mary's High School helped me develop who I am. There was no judging on the fact that I didn't make as much money or my parents didn't make as much money or anything like that, because a lot of us were in that social financial hardship.

Tammy remembered that students were empowered to be present with one another. She remembered the unofficial motto, "We came as strangers, leave as sisters." She also recalled the retreats. "Those were good as well because there was a bonding with the other students." The school's inclusive environment created opportunities to be a good listener and stay true to oneself.

During Sylvia's senior year at Saint Mary's High School, a tragedy caused the school's community to become closer. In November of 2008, one of her classmates died, and the death

affected the entire school. Sylvia recalled, “Because she (the deceased classmate) was really active, and she was the person you knew that was the most religious because, she just loved God.” She remembers, “when she passed away, it was a shock to the school, because everyone felt something missing. And after that, the school changed and everyone kind of got closer.” The community drew together in its grief.

### **Summary of Community Experiences**

All the participants commented on the centrality of community at Saint Mary’s High School. It was a place they knew they could be themselves. When each student was empowered in their own individuality, she felt she was a stronger part of the whole community.

### **Conclusion**

The four themes that emerged through the analysis of participants’ narratives can be used by Catholic schools to forge new paths for sustainability and viability. Pastoral care was important to the daily experiences of the participants. The consistency of the school’s mission was also central to participants’ positive experiences at Saint Mary’s High School. Furthermore, all participants believed that traditions were significant in rounding out their education; finally, the participants recalled how important community was in their formation as young women, both in academics and in life.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **DISCUSSION**

The central research question of this study was:

How do alumnae perceptions of their experiences in an all-female Catholic high school contribute to an understanding of the sustainability of the institution?

The purpose of this work was to explore perceptions held by alumnae about their time spent at Saint Mary's High School. By analyzing these perceptions, recommendations can be made to improve function, sustainability, and viability for other all-female Catholic High Schools. The findings indicate that four foundational values have persisted over time and have contributed to the sustainability of Saint Mary's High School.

This dissertation included the perspectives of a selection of alumnae from the late 1940s to the present. It showed the implementation of foundational values over the past eight decades, beginning with the founding Sisters' charism and including the mission of the current faculty and staff, have contributed to the sustainability of the school. Participants identified pastoral care, mission, tradition, and community as the four foundational values impacting their experience at Saint Mary's High School. This discussion of findings begins with the research question and the four themes that were revealed and summarized in the previous chapter. Analysis, limitations, and recommendations follow the discussion of findings. The chapter ends with an epilogue in which the researcher shares a personal reflection about this study.

#### **Charism, Mission, and Foundational Values**

It is clear that the founding order of Sisters lent their charism to Saint Mary's High School. A further discussion of Charism is appropriate here to properly situate the findings in

context. The Catechism of the Catholic church defines a charism as a gift from the Holy Spirit to a particular group to complete a special work (Ratzinger, 1994). Charism is a significant component in developing the culture of relationships in the church (Cook & Simonds, 2011). Foundational values that stem from charisms influence teaching style, practice, and school management, as well as relationships throughout the life of educational institutions (Cook & Simonds, 2011). Charism is included in the educational vision and qualities set forth by the religious community serving a school (Cook & Simonds, 2011). The Sisters who sponsored Saint Mary's High School defined its charism as "a living force that unites them as a family with a dynamic mission, a particular way, unique to that community, of being Christ present in the world today. Through this legacy, we dedicate ourselves to the service of God and his people, so that in all and by all, God may be known, loved, and glorified". This statement reflected the foundational values identified in interviews with this study's participants.

Buetow (1988) identified that best practice exists when Catholic educators integrate values rooted in mission and charism within the curriculum. However, institutional curriculum can be both written and unwritten (Whitson, 2018). Curriculum refers to what the school wants to convey intellectually, emotionally, physically and spiritually. Values and morals, derived from the controlling premise of the charism and the mission, directly impact the educational environment and students' sense of self. Students can ultimately grow in an understanding of their goodness and value in society through the embedded mission in an institutional culture (Buetow, 1988).

The Sisters lived out their call to share their charism at Saint Mary's High School. They expressed genuine Christ centered-behavior while dedicating themselves to the service of

making God known to the students. Lay faculty adopted these values through relationships with attending Sisters. The embedded charism was transmitted into the culture and behaviors which formed the foundational values for the school as it evolved over the years. The interview participants revealed how relationships between the Sisters, faculty, and students, along with the presence of charisma and mission influenced alumnae values and may have contributed to school sustainability throughout the decades.

A formal mission statement helps define and guide an institution. Catholic school mission statements in today's culture are usually adaptations of the formal mission articulated in the religious order mission statements (Grace, 2002). These mission statements are created by varied constituents such as religious orders, school board members, parents, faculty, students, and administrators. They amalgamate the local culture, virtues, and social purposes, and characterize desired educational outcomes of the particular school (Grace, 2002). For example, the mission of Saint Mary's High School is: "Saint Mary's High School offers a safe, nurturing, and challenging college preparatory Catholic education in an environment which inspires students of all faiths to achieve academic excellence and develop into confident, service-oriented leaders." The distinctive features of Saint Mary's High School's mission were rooted in the charism of the Sisters who founded the school.

### **Review of the Themes**

Study participants were asked to reflect on their experiences at Saint Mary's High School. Their narratives revealed a set of core beliefs, or foundational values, that have persisted and sustained the institution over time. The experiences of more recent attendees showed to be just as connected to the school's foundational values as the experiences of those who attended

the school decades ago. The following four foundational values, or themes, emerged from the participant data: Pastoral Care, Mission, Tradition, and Community. Using the model of Appreciative Inquiry (AI), participants were asked about their positive experiences and the things they remembered best about their high school years at Saint Mary's High School. The purpose of AI was to collect stories which explicitly illustrate the daily experiences of individuals in an institution.

The first value, Pastoral Care, was mentioned by all participants. Each revealed at least one experience they had when they felt cared for as a person. This genuine attention guided, sustained, and nurtured these students both during the time when religious Sisters served the school and after. The importance of mission was a second value mentioned by all participants. While sharing stories, there was an emphasis on faculty and staff commitment to professionalism and faith. The school's commitment to mission included not just adhering to religious dogma, but to nurturing and caring for each student and providing a rigorous education to prepare them as competent citizens of the world.

The third value revealed by the participants was that of tradition. The participants fondly brought back memories of activities that brought students together, such as dances, liturgies, rallies, and interactions with the Sisters. Structured elements of school life, such as uniforms, school policies and schedules, as well as student-led programs, were traditions that encouraged students to develop maturity and self-confidence through discipline, practice, and accountability. Community was the final value that the participants discussed. The school community functioned as a safe haven for all the participants that allowed students to take risks and exhibit



vulnerability. Through their experiences in the community of Saint Mary's High School, the alumnae were able to explore and develop a sense of purpose and identity.

Pastoral care, tradition, mission, and community profoundly impacted alumnae from Saint Mary's High School. Based on information provided in interviews, it can be inferred that these four foundational values have contributed to the sustainability of Saint Mary's High School over time. This school's longevity can be used as a model for other Catholic schools seeking to realize similar successful outcomes.

## **Discussion of Findings**

### **Care of the Whole Person**

The Sisters who staffed Saint Mary's High School in 1949 wanted the school's curriculum to address the development of the whole person: mind, body and soul. According to the alumnae interviewed, rules and guidelines achieved an orderly school and instill accountability in students. The alumnae indicated that the Sisters did not govern with transactional methods, such as the use of a demerit system. Instead, at Saint Mary's High School the Sisters were concerned with well-being of the whole child. The students appreciated the sincere care for them as a whole person. The Sisters followed the spirit of the rules but did not diminish student life or energy by focusing solely on punishing infractions or enforcing disciplinary actions. The desire to educating the "whole child" meant that the Sisters' were not simply concerned with preparing children for a life in the workforce. Rather, they tried to encourage students' understanding of their God-given potential. The holistic development of children includes intellectual, emotional, social, physical, and spiritual elements. Students who experience holistic education are encouraged to acknowledge and grow in all elements of the

self, cultivate their personal attributes, and strengthen their awareness of their own value in the world around them,

This project has led the researcher to understand that holistic education was central to the experience of all those who attended Saint Mary's High School. The Sisters established a culture and belief system that asserted that all students had potential and could participate as contributors in a caring community. Through their educational and relational experiences at the school, students understood that they, and others, were valued. A holistic approach to education has been passed down through the decades by way of charism and mission and has continued to be a sustaining element within the institution of Saint Mary's High School.

### **Transition from Religious to Lay Leadership**

In 1949, Saint Mary's High School was known for its religious faculty and administration; at that time, Sisters held all levels of leadership at the school. The founding alumnae interviewed for this project were at the school during this time and believed that their experiences revolved around the presence and leadership of the Sisters. The founding alumnae of Saint Mary's High School did not see the transformation of the school's administration (from religious to lay) as it evolved over the years. Beginning in the 1970s, the presence of the Sisters at Saint Mary's High School diminished, and most faculty and administrative roles were filled by lay personnel. The alumnae of this era indicated that the charism of the Sisters was successfully transferred and embodied by the laity. Interviews conducted with the mature and young alumnae did not mention the diminished presence of the Sisters but focused on the same charism that the Sisters had embedded in the school decades earlier. Interviewed alumnae whose mothers also attended the school remarked that their mothers sent them to the school because of the charism

lived out by the sisters during their attendance. Additionally, based on interviews with more recent alumnae, they also believed the charism of the Sisters at Saint Mary's High School was transferred to the lay faculty. Thus, although younger alumnae participants did not mention the Sisters as the contributing factors for the charism, they identified the same foundational values as alumnae who did interact extensively with the Sisters. This showed the need for a strong charism and mission to drive a Catholic school forward. The mission and charism of the school was the foundation upon which all else was built. Without these foundational values embedded in the daily life of the students, the school surely would not have survived.

### **A Changing World View**

The founding alumnae asserted that, in 1949, there was minimal diversity at Saint Mary's High School. Everyone at Saint Mary's High School was Catholic, and Catholicism was the lens through which students understood the world. The founding alumnae expressed a distinctly binary world view: One was either Catholic or not Catholic. And there was no sense that inclusion of other faiths or diverse backgrounds was necessary for the activation of the mission. Alumnae who attended the school in later years experienced more diversity, though not as much as in the wider community around them. More recently, however, the idea that Catholic means universal has become more common. As diversity has increased, students of all backgrounds have entered the school, creating a microcosm within Saint Mary's High School that is representative of the larger world. Attitudes of acceptance and holistic thinking, derived from the school's foundational values, permeated the culture of care in the school. Students were taught to appreciate others' ethnicities, abilities, religious beliefs and values, skin colors, and genders. As

the school has evolved, and its demographic have changed, it has moved even closer to the teachings of the church and an embrace of all God's children.

### **Benefits of Single-Sex Education**

The class of 1963 was the first all-female class at Saint Mary's High School. Students from 1963 on believed that Saint Mary's High School was focused on developing a certain kind of woman. The Sisters, who were the initial teachers, developed relationships that engaged and empowered the all-female campus. Subsequent leaders embraced this value as well. Young alumnae noted that they were encouraged to be strong through challenging and rigorous academic programs, but also through the myriad of resources to help them successfully contribute to the school community, and ultimately, their communities after graduation. Realistically, this meant that alumnae were taught their potential to touch the lives of others, particularly other young women. Students from all graduating years affirmed the value of a single-sex education. They spoke of the safety, the authenticity, the spontaneity, and the general sense of well-being that emanated from being in a community of women. Some said that the strength gained from this environment has benefitted them throughout their lives.

### **Finances and Sacrifices**

Founding alumnae reported that their families made sacrifices to pay for education at Saint Mary's High School. Many told stories of sacrifice and working two jobs. Some said that their families sacrificed for years to provide for multiple children to attend Catholic schools. However, interviewees in the mature and young alumnae groups did not mention finances as a significant factor in their educations. Their focus was more on the academic institution and the status of graduating from a Catholic School. Students and parents both seemed to be less

interested in faithfulness to the Roman Catholic Church but were still concerned with the teaching and experiencing of the values of spiritual and moral growth.

The families of the founding alumnae saw great value in the Catholic school experience and were fully committed despite time and cost. Their loyalty to their faith motivated their investment. Families of the founding alumnae sacrificed time and dollars. They worked two jobs and maybe more, but their fidelity to the faith was paramount. However, it should be noted that during the early years, the cost of attending Saint Mary's High School was reasonable due to the low cost of salaries the Sisters were being paid.

The families of the young and mature alumnae, who were influenced by economic changes in the school, may have seen tuition-based Catholic education as a marker of achievement or status symbol rather than a commitment to their faith. Factors of access and affordability have become a concern as enrollment in Catholic schools has declined; as costs have risen, Catholic education has become attractive to affluent families for reasons of status. At the same time, Catholic schools have become less attractive to those of lesser means, for whom no amount of sacrifice would allow them access to a Catholic education (Notre Dame Task Force on Catholic Education, 2008). Those who want a Catholic education for their children, but cannot afford it, have had to and must request tuition assistance. The request for financial assistance demonstrates the confidence that families have in the mission of the school and the Church and remains as evidence of the supporting foundational values experienced by students.

### **Leadership for Catholic schools**

Catholic means universal and inclusive. The human makeup of our world today must be replicated on our school campus' in order to prepare our children for tomorrow. The school

leader needs to be collaborative, innovative, and courageous, in order to have the dialogues and conversations that will invite and inform those who are interested in a Catholic education. The diversity in our Catholic schools must include an extensive range of ethnicities, religions, cultures, languages and ability levels. Though this can be challenging, when our schools are diverse, we are expressing our faith, and we mirror what God has created.

Many Catholic schools were founded by a unique religious order. Each order's charism was transferred to the school's mission statement. Charism is the great gift that our founding religious orders brought to each school. Over many years, this charism has woven through the actions of living faith and modeling the Gospel values and teachings. The successful transference of charism from one style of leadership to another, and from one generation to another, has proven to be a pertinent factor in sustainability, and should continue to be a guiding force for schools.

Change is constant and necessary. Our school leaders today will need to acknowledge changes in student population, culture, and expectations. Our schools cannot function today as they did over 70 years ago, let alone 10 years ago. The landscape of Catholic education has been changing due to economic forces, religion choices, college requirements, family dynamics, and technology, to name a few. The school leader will be challenged and tested daily, as they were in the beginning.

Leadership can be formed with the right individual with the right support. Our school leaders will need a plan of professional development in order to properly address the challenging concerns of operating a tuition driven Catholic school. Collaboration with other leaders is helpful

in developing discussions and formulating goals. Spirituality and Academic Excellence are vital areas of professional development that need to be priorities.

To summarize, the attributes of an effective Catholic school leader are complex and multi-dimensional. The participant data revealed that leadership was key to success and sustainability of the school over the decades. The leader begins with a commitment to the love, joy and sorrow of our Catholic faith. The leaders must be willing to continuously analyze the changing landscape of Catholic education. They must be willing to embody the charism of the school. This embodiment demonstrates the commitment and vision for the sustainability of the school.

### **Lasting Impacts of Catholic Education**

This study revealed that the foundational values developed by the Sisters were still present today and were a strength of Saint Mary's High School. Catholic beliefs have influenced administrative leadership and staff to respectfully support the inclusion of diverse people and situations, while upholding the foundational values of the original Sisters' charism. All interviewees discussed the consistent care and concern for the entire student by Sisters, faculty, and staff.

### **Appreciative Inquiry**

The methodology of Appreciative Inquiry was used to examine Saint Mary's High School over time. The impact of using this method is to create inquiry which results in a better, more effective and sustainable social system. The highlight of this method was the gathering of the positive experiences of a school culture to provide data for the researcher. Through this

process, this researcher was able to identify the foundational values that were present over time and allowed the school to remain sustainable.

When the interviews began, most participants appeared to mentally drift to a familiar place. Using AI allowed the researcher to encourage participants to focus on predominant memories as starting places for the interviews. As fond stories were shared, the precepts of AI encouraged participants to fully express feelings and meanings of stories. The sharing of stories was not forced or led by the researcher. Since all experiences revealed were positive, the researcher was led to understand that the common values revealed have helped sustain Saint Mary's High School over time. Asking the question, "What were the successful aspects about the school?" inspired the participants to boast about their time at Saint Mary's High School. This set them on a positive path of exploration through their high school memories.

### **Discovery and Dream**

Participants were asked questions about their positive experiences at Saint Mary's High School using the 4D elements of AI: Discovery, Dream, Design, and Delivery. During the phases of discovery and dream, participants were organically steered to discuss their experiences. The researcher asked questions and allowed the participants to reminisce about the personal experiences that left an indelible mark on their heart and soul. Participants wanted to speak about the traditions that were experienced while at Saint Mary's High School. The function of tradition was to influence the future by recalling the past. During the interviews, participants spoke about good times and rarely spoke of negative experiences. In the dialogue, there were moments of laughter and reminiscing of incidences that shaped their morality. At that time in their lives, they did not always see it as a moral truth but as a demand of one of the Sisters. Although the



researcher did not probe, or ask leading questions, the participants expressed little negativity about their experiences.

During the dream phase of the 4D model, the researcher listened to experiences that the participant revealed about the organization and community. By talking about the strengths of the organization, its foundational values were identified. Alumnae talked about how the school's organization, leadership, and policies supported a strong, consistent system of education. During the interviews, participants describe a system of rules and order, and expressed that these were important elements of their time at Saint Mary's High School. As the school evolved, the rules of the dress code, the course selections, the expression of Catholic faith, and other events cemented the notion of a God-centered campus that exhibited order and expectations.

### **Design and Destiny**

In the Design phase, the participants related foundational values that were present when they were in school. The researcher drew connections between the participants' narratives in order to trace the values that have persisted into the present day; these include care for the person, fidelity to the faith, adherence to the mission, and community building. These values have transcended the years and, this study argues, have helped sustain the school.

The Destiny phase of the 4D model integrated information from the first three phrases and began new conversations which were ushered in through the daily personal experiences of interactions, inquiry, and stories. This phase is ongoing and ultimately brings the organization back to the discovery phase. Using this ongoing approach, AI can result in continuous dialogue and continued learning. This approach allowed the researcher to determine the foundational values of the school by analyzing the meaningful, personal stories of participants. During

analysis of the interviews, each personal experience was situated within one of the four foundational values. In this way, the participants' dialogue helped the researcher to understand the positive aspects of the school that should be prioritized in the future.

## **Practical Recommendations for Catholic Schools**

### **Professional Development for the Whole Person**

The founding alumnae of Saint Mary's High School noted that the religious Sisters possessed the qualities of a spiritual counselor, academic expert, and parental figure, all contained in one individual. The Sisters appeared to be all-knowing and all-caring. When the presence of the religious Sisters at Saint Mary's High School began to dwindle, the laity began to fill openings. Participants indicated that some teachers were qualified to teach but not necessarily to counsel. Lay teachers retained the foundational values that the Sisters embodied through their vocations, but perhaps lacked the skills to address the concerns of the whole person. Young alumnae affirmed the high quality of the school's teaching staff, but early alumnae were effusive about the care they received from the Sisters. This may say something about a different level of care, or a different attitude toward leadership, that has developed over the course of several decades. In any case, professional development focused on holistic student care, in addition to excellent academic instruction, would help to sustain the Sisters' legacy at the school. Thus, the recommendation is to provide teachers and school leaders with professional development to help them maintain the school's foundational value of nurturing the student as a whole person.

### **Leveraging Reputation**

A positive reputation is critical to a Catholic school's success. The reputation of Saint Mary's High School has vacillated over the years. Many alumnae revealed that younger siblings

attended the school solely because of the experiences of older siblings or relatives. Healthy schools survive with strong internal and external reputations. The external reputation is critical for the school to become a fixture in the larger community and to keep up robust recruitment and retention. Reputation drives brand recognition that can be used for marketing, development, and advancement. In the current paradigm, the ability to facilitate a positive image in the community is a vital component of school sustainability. Thus, the researcher recommends campaigns that raise awareness about the school's foundational values, pastoral care, mission, tradition, and community, which have helped to sustain the school over the decades.

### **Managing Tradition and Change**

The maintenance of traditions at Saint Mary's High School was essential to its continued success. Traditions are life-giving, spark discussions, and offer educational opportunities to this school community. However, tradition must be balanced with change. Times change. Customs change. Students change. In a conversation the researcher had with the current Bishop of a neighboring diocese, the Bishop stated that change was necessary and constant. He said that a woman he met told him that she was tired of changing and did not want to change anymore. He responded by saying that the world continues to change, and, in order for us to serve our communities, we need to change! She lamented; "I don't want to change anymore." He ended the conversation by saying to her, "I'll pray for your happy death." Change is constant and necessary, but traditions are also necessary; they keep us rooted to our past. The researcher recommends that the school continue to maintain traditions, while acknowledging changes in student population, culture, and expectation. The function of tradition is to influence the future

by recalling the past. Satisfying questions of our origin, gathering knowledge, and understanding the experiences and wisdom of past generations direct us toward purposeful living.

### **Mission Rooted in Charism**

The Charism of the founding Sisters emphasized a unique spirit or prevailing influence that was present when the Sisters began their legacy at Saint Mary's High School. This Charism has continued to transcend and permeate the school, staff, faculty, and community overtime. The influence of the founding charism is reflected in the school's current mission statement. The Sisters daily exhibited their pastoral care to one another and to their students. Caring for the whole person was second-nature to the Sisters. They cared for the spiritual, intellectual, emotional, and physical well-being of each and every student. For them, education was not a transactional effort but a transformational experience. The Sisters embodied charism through their daily actions by living out their faith and modeling how Jesus taught. They exhibited both a gentleness and a strong discipline. The recommendation here is to maintain the mission of the school, as it is rooted in the charism of the Sisters, and to develop an institutionalized body that will be in charge of maintaining the school's strong relationship to that founding charism.

### **Relationship-Based Culture**

In *The Holy See's Teaching on Catholic Schools*, Archbishop Miller (2006) stated that relationship must exist for students among and with Catholic educators. He emphasized this point with Saint John Bosco's quote "education is a thing of the heart" (Miller, 2006, p. 36). Students must be accompanied on their journey by caring teachers. Miller (2006) advised that direct and personal involvement between teachers and students is central to the fulfillment of Catholic schools as institutions of the church. An atmosphere that is truly student-centered

empowers students to learn, to serve, and to know God. In particular, Miller (2006) noted that during the formative years of adolescence, young people should experience and understand how positive living, consistent attitude, and exemplary day-to-day behavior shape maturity. Students learn and model the relationships they experience, and this results in a holistic experience that supports the maturing student.

The religious orders that founded Catholic schools were faithfully, intellectually, and visually Catholic. Devoted religious groups with vibrant charisms edified a lifestyle of respect and dignity for students. These religious educators embodied Catholic teachings and a desire to impart the Gospel message to students. In a time when 95% of Catholic schools are run by the laity, devotion to religious charism, and in particular the devotion to the respect and dignity of each student, is still practiced (USCCB, 2005). According to Jacobs (1996), educators hold a “symbolic role.” They transmit powerful messages regarding the cultural values that influence young lives in moral and social matters. Using relationships as a framework for contemporary Catholic Schools reflects the organizing principle found in scholarly and ecclesial documents addressing Catholic identity. Cook and Simonds (2011) wrote that relationships are the distinct purpose for Catholic schools. In light of this perspective, it could be argued that it is through personal relationships that we understand our relationship with God (Cook & Simonds, 2011). Even though schools have differing charisms, they are all communicated through relationships. My recommendation for Catholic schools is to devote resources and personnel to building a relationship-based culture. This will help students as they build relationships with others, themselves, and God.

## **Commitment to Diversity**

Catholic schools need to mirror the modern world and all its complexities. Catholic school students must be diverse in ethnicity, religion, culture, language, and ability levels in order to model the world outside the school campus. It is in a truly diverse setting that students find a place where families are accepted based on the love of God. The researcher recommends that schools strive for, and maintain, a diverse student population despite the financial complexities,

## **Hiring for Mission**

It is well known that Catholic school teachers are compensated less than public school teachers (Youniss & Convey, 2000). These teachers see their role in Catholic schools as a vocation. Working in the church is a calling and a means to fulfilling a faith-based expression of one's love for God and his plan for mankind. Teachers commit to spreading the Gospel and exhibiting a spirit-led life style. Teachers find great meaning and satisfaction in serving Catholic schools. These qualities are not always obvious during the employment process, and it is necessary to screen potential teachers carefully. Revealing the expectations of a teacher working for a Catholic School is critical in the search for a new employee. Informing the prospective teacher about the role of ministry in the job is paramount, even to be prioritized over the subjects taught. I recommend that hiring practices include questions which will ascertain a prospective candidate's commitment to the mission and vision of the school.

## **Future Research**

The use of the Appreciative Inquiry method allowed Saint Mary's High School alumnae to reflect on the positive qualities of their high school. From these experiences, researchers can

analyze the responses to predict or inform school leaders about the future. Future studies are needed to further explore the values that create sustainability for Catholic schools. The richness of the past can be used by schools to make sound decisions for the future.

Suggestions for future research include:

- The continued use of the Appreciative Inquiry model for schools who are looking to improve their future viability based on the affirmative memories that past students have retained.
- A replication of this study at an all boy's Catholic high school. Once the all boy's school study is complete, the results can be compared and contrasted with studies of all-female schools.
- A study that would allow the parents of Catholic school students to share their perceptions would be profitable in determining parent perspectives of Catholic all-female schools and their effectiveness and viability.
- Research that includes community members and partner schools in discussions to determine how they perceive the school's impact on the students and community would be valuable for developing future sustainability strategies.
- A study addressing how the rising cost of tuition has impacted access to Catholic schools and therefore challenged the ability to diversify student enrollment.
- A study addressing a coed high school with single-sex classes to compare to an institution with a single-sex campus.

## EPILOGUE

In an effort to understand how to sustain and support the longevity of Catholic education at Saint Mary's High School, I conducted a study that would reveal the factors that have sustained the school since its founding. Since 1948, many factors not mentioned here have also influenced the school and have resulted in its ability to manage through the years. In a time when many schools are closing and dioceses everywhere are consolidating, reorganizing, and ultimately, updating to meet the rising cost of education in the US, this reflection offers an informative look at how leaders may be guided towards a successful model for their schools' futures.

My personal understanding and desire to impact Catholic education has caused me to reflect on my own journey. As a young Catholic American from a disadvantaged Mexican-American Catholic family, I was not afforded the opportunity to access Catholic education in elementary and high school. As a child, I personally experienced barriers that kept me from Catholic education. I crossed an academic barrier by attending two Catholic universities and acquired great debt in doing so. As a young professional working for three dioceses throughout my career, I originally dove into the Catholic school educational system as a call to action. With each step in my career, I have devoted myself to learning and supporting the sustaining practices of the schools I have led. I have found that each school, though connected to a diocesan culture, also embodied its own culture. Ultimately, it is my hope that the contributions I make to create stronger, more accessible schools will serve students from all walks of life.

What makes Saint Mary's High School unique is its long-standing ability to sustain. It gives me great satisfaction to know that I have contributed to a conversation with future leaders



at Saint Mary's High School by creating this document as a resource for guidance. The opportunity to affect change for future students by offering a lens through which administrators will be able to utilize to help them preserve the foundational values of the school is invaluable to me.

My leadership at Saint Mary's High School strengthened my belief that Catholic education is vital. I was surprised to learn that even though the religious served fervently, and their dedication was appreciated, in their absence, participants believed the laity were equally effective educators. This should give all those who care for and support Catholic education hope that the qualities necessary for a holistic experience are not generated solely by those who have taken religious vows.

I am grateful to the participating alumnae who helped to inform this study. I thank them for providing a documented outlook of their experience. I also want to thank future leaders at Saint Mary's High School for their stewardship of the school. Additionally, I want to take this opportunity to thank all religious and lay contributors who have served Saint Mary's High School over the past 120 years. I offer my prayers for the continued success of the school,

## APPENDIX

### Interview Protocol

1. What were the changes that happened at Saint Mary's High School when you were here?
2. What were the changes meant to solve?
3. What did you know about the leader or leadership?
4. Why do you think the changes occurred?
5. What was the criteria used in the decision making?
6. Were you involved in the transformative change?
7. Who was involved?
8. Did the students like the change?
9. Did the parents/guardians like the change?
10. What were the benefits and challenges of the change?
11. Did the change increase the reputation of Saint Mary's High School?
12. Did the change add to the success?
13. Was the change controversial?
14. What impact did the school have on you?
15. Impact professional life
16. Impact spiritual life
17. Impact identity as a woman
18. What were successful aspects about the school while they were in school?
19. Were you taught the skills to be successful in life?

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