The soul of Trinity

For two decades, Pat McGuire has been consumed by turning a Catholic college into a model for urban higher ed

by Daniel De Vise
She spent her life transforming Trinity.
So where does Pat McGuire — and the university she rebuilt — go from here?

The Devoted

A dusting of snow had thinned the crowd that turned out to watch the Trinity Washington University women’s basketball team play Valley Forge Military College on a gloomy Saturday afternoon. But one fan at the far end of the court made the most of the game, and followed the players patiently with her camera lens as she cheered a bit louder than everyone else. ¶ The visiting team might have wondered who this woman was, roving the stands in an untucked button-down shirt, laboring with her camera, very nearly the only white figure in the crowd of black and Hispanic faces. But among Trinity students — her students — Pat McGuire needed no introduction. ¶ McGuire, who is in her 21st year as president of this college in the Brookland section of Northeast Washington, is not only the university’s academic leader: She’s the smiling face of Trinity at nearly every game, performance or campus event. She gives out the freshman medals at orientation; she hands seniors their diplomas at graduation. To many of these students, Pat McGuire is Trinity.

Photographs by Katherine Frey
She’s out there hooting your name, chest-bumping, giving you a high-five,” said Charity Blackwell, 22, a freshman on the team. “Stuff like that makes you feel like you’re cared about.”

But McGuire, a 57-year-old Trinity alumna, is more than an endearing chief executive admired by her students and staff. She is known throughout the region as the woman who saved Trinity, by rebuilding a dying Catholic women’s college into a multifaceted university that has reached out to the black and Hispanic women of Washington. She is among the longest-serving college presidents in the area — having marked her 20th anniversary last summer. And, during those two decades, she has overcome the distrust and push-back of some alumnae over a bankrupt business model to teach Washington an object lesson in the education of urban students. “All right, Trinity, we can put it over the top this time!” the president cried, watching the team from the stands on the snowy Saturday. The squad, mostly promising freshmen, was trailing. “Part of the problem,” she confided quietly, “is we don’t have any really tall people.” Then, she was back in the game. “Lots of hustle! Lots of fight! We like that!” A few seats away, a toddler was crying. His mother was on the court. The game ended in a painfully narrow defeat. McGuire swept in among the players, consoled to the vanquished: “You were great! Absolutely fantastic! You were great!”

I would say that this is the poster child for what we need to do in the next 20 years,” said David Warren, president of the National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities. “She has made Trinity University, it strikes me, a national model and an inspiring place.”

Friends and admirers say that McGuire has succeeded by making Trinity her life. She is on campus at 7 every morning. Her evenings are a procession of board meetings, receptions and speaking engagements. She works through weekends. She lives alone. She vacations alone: two weeks every summer in the Adirondacks with her camera and her kayak.

She is an introvert at heart and has had to learn to cope with the very public demands of the job. Yet, publicly, she is outspoken — lashing out last May in a commencement address at the “religious vigilantism” of fellow Catholics who had tried to disrupt President Obama’s speech at Notre Dame, and pushing the limits of what a university president is permitted to say in blog postings and op-ed pieces about such delicate matters as collegiate rankings and graduation rates.

That advocacy has also made her a highly successful fundraiser; her first capital campaign at Trinity, in the late 1990s, yielded more money — $12 million — than her predecessors had garnered in any capital campaign in the previous century.

At a recent luncheon meeting of the Economic Club of Washington, McGuire worked the table, telling the Trinity story over the clatter of cutlery. “It’s my story, too,” she said to a pair of older businesswomen. “I was the first in my family to go to college, to go to
Trinity College opened in 1897 as a sister to Catholic University, the then-all-male institution across the street. Founded by the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur, Trinity educated middle-class Catholic women in an era when they were underrepresented in America’s colleges. In the 1960s, the school vied with Wellesley and Bryn Mawr for the progeny of the wealthy and powerful. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, daughter of the mayor of Baltimore, graduated in 1962. Health and Human Services Secretary Kathleen Sebelius, daughter of the governor of Ohio, graduated in 1970.

But when higher education went coed, aspiring Catholic women found they could attend the same college as their fathers. Scores of women’s colleges closed, merged or opened their doors to men. Trinity’s full-time enrollment dwindled from 1,000 in 1969 to 300 in 1989. Recognizing that nothing was going to bring back the middle-class Catholics, the school’s 12th president, Sister Donna Jurick, balanced the losses and stabilized the budget in the early 1980s.

At the end of the meal, she bused the table herself, piling plates atop a nearby cart when none of the catering staff was looking. It was the start of a busy week, stacked with board meetings (McGuire is much in demand as a trustee).

“This is gala season, too,” she said. “My sequins are getting worn out.”
by opening a weekend college for working women from the District, a racially
diverse population the school had previously ignored. It was the first such pro-
gram in Washington, and it became wildly popular. Within three years, it had
eclipsed the undergraduate program in enrollment.

But Jurick’s solution provoked furious dissent among some students and
alumnae, who drove her from the school in 1987. They quipped that Jurick was
neglecting the school’s liberal arts tradition to court professional students and
their dollars. The school hired James McGrath, the first man and the first lay-
person to lead Trinity. He left after 18 months, unable to heal the rifts.

Trustees then turned to McGuire, a Trinity booster who had served on the board
and as president of the alumnae association. They told her, “Fix it or close it.”

Patricia Ann McGuire grew up in the Philadelphia suburbs the third of
seven children. Her father was Irish, her mother Italian, each the child
of immigrants.

“Neither of my parents went to college, but they had that goal for all
of us,” McGuire said. Her father, an accountant, would make the children recite
their homework every night. Her mother worked as a secretary at Villanova
University and “didn’t realize she was a feminist until someone asked her to
make coffee, and she refused,” McGuire said.

McGuire won a full scholar-
ship to Trinity and marks it as “a
turning point in my life. Being
able to leave home and come
to Washington was unbeliev-
ably exciting for a girl like me
who loved politics but had never
really spent time away from
home.”

She enrolled in fall 1970, “a
conservative kid from a Nixon household,” still wearing skirts and knee socks.
She didn’t own a single pair of blue jeans. A faculty member gave her until the
end of her first semester to “get radicalized.” It didn’t take that long: By the
second month of school, she was buying her clothes at Sunny’s Surplus, and by
November she had joined the antiwar movement. She majored in political sci-
ence and played basketball beneath the college chapel on a court so small that
a foot had to touch the wall to be out of bounds.

Three years after graduating from Trinity, McGuire earned a law degree at
Georgetown, but she found law boring. She started working in a Georgetown
clinical program that sent law students to D.C. high schools to teach real-world
legal concepts. Funding dried up under the Reagan administration, so she
moved to fundraising and found she was good at it. She soon became director
of development, then assistant dean at Georgetown Law. She led a $15 million
campaign to build the Edward Bennett Williams Law Library.

At 36, a dozen years into her career as a lawyer and mid-level administrator,
McGuire was nowhere near the pay grade of college president. Then again, the
Trinity presidency was hardly a plum job.

“I was the sixth person in eight years in the president’s office,” she recalled.
It sounded to her like “a good job for a kid with a short
attention span.”

But McGuire had spark. She had broken out as a
legal commentator on the educational “30 Minutes” on
CBS and the newsy “Panorama” on local WTTG-TV. Ten
months before becoming president, McGuire had called
out The Washington Post in a letter for implying in a
news article that Trinity had “collapsed.” She recalled the
How Trinity’s graduation rate stacks up
Compared with area colleges that have similar percentages of black students and federal grant recipients

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<tr>
<th>Trinity Washington University</th>
<th>Other D.C.-area colleges</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Trinity student population</strong></td>
<td><strong>Percentage of enrollment that is black</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage enrolled by ethnicity</td>
<td>All</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WHITE</td>
<td>62%</td>
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<tr>
<td>BLACK</td>
<td>88</td>
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<tr>
<td>HISPANIC</td>
<td>68</td>
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<td>OTHER</td>
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SOURCE: National Center for Education Statistics

SOURCE: Trinity Washington University

SOURCE: The Washington Post Magazine
The WashingT on PosT  Magazine

afraid to share your story.”

to succeed, and to never be myself, and to never be afraid you can conquer the world.

years at Trinity, you know that don’t know where you’re going in life. But after four freshman, and you’re fresh out of high school, and you don’t know where you’re going in life. But after four years at Trinity, you know that you can conquer the world. … [McGuire] taught me to be myself, and to never be afraid to succeed, and to never be afraid to share your story.”

was dead; the only question was what would replace it. McGuire chose to return Trinity to its roots, serving the underserved.

“We were founded because women could not attend college in 1897 in Washington, D.C.,” McGuire said, addressing an audience of college provosts at a recent event in Foggy Bottom. Now, a century later, a new generation of Washington women was being denied access to college — not because of gender, but because of lack of wealth and academic preparation.

McGuire quickly surmised that professional education, preparing women for jobs in teaching and nursing, was Trinity’s financial pillar. But liberal arts were its soul. “In order to run a college, you need an intellectual anchor,” she told The Post in 2002. McGuire split the college into three schools. The historic women’s college became the College of Arts and Sciences; the lucrative teacher college became the School of Education; and the continuing education classes folded into a School of Professional Studies, which had been
enrolling men since the 1960s. Men now make up 8 percent of total enrollment in all programs.

Black and Hispanic students were applying as undergraduates, unsolicited — because Trinity had never solicited them. “Trinity had been very remote from the city,” McGuire said, “hiding behind the gates and the fence.” But word was spreading, and mothers from the continuing education program were sending their daughters to apply as undergraduates. For the first time, Trinity began recruiting at D.C. high schools.

McGuire began expanding the professional schools, whose combined enrollment would rise from 639 in 1989 to 974 a decade later. Enrollment in the old women’s college rebounded, too, from 280 full-time students to 400.

But a showdown loomed. Just as impassioned Trinity graduates had protested 10 years earlier, a faction of alumnae mobilized against McGuire. The Alumnae Action Committee called for her resignation in 1995. The group alleged she had diluted the school’s Catholicism (60 percent of students were now non-Catholics), had favored the weekend college over undergraduate education and had championed professional studies over the liberal arts. In a Post account at the time, an alumna lamented that the school was “adapting to contemporary society.”

The nuns encouraged her. One advised, “Stop going to the Main Line. Go to Anastasia,” McGuire recalled. But alumnae threatened to withhold donations. The trustees, who backed McGuire, revoked the Alumnae Association’s right to elect board members and placed its budget under the control of Trinity administration. The alumnae backed down.

McGuire does not like to dwell on that tumultuous time. She maintains that no more than a handful of alumnae sought her ouster: “The vast majority were always with us,” she said. But longtime colleagues say the episode left scars. “On one level, I think it hurt her deeply,” said Laura Phillips, a 1980 Trinity graduate who chairs its Board of Trustees, “because she honestly felt it was the Lord’s work she was doing.”

Trinity emerged from the fray to celebrate its 1997 centennial as the private college of choice for the women of D.C. public schools. Today, school enrollment is 67 percent African American, 21 percent Hispanic, 6 percent white and 6 percent international. In a 2004 name change, Trinity College became Trinity Washington University.

“We got to a place where we stopped apologizing,” McGuire said. “Yeah, it’s different. But it’s good different, and it’s right.”

In the bowels of the Main Hall, students prepared for finals inside a repurposed classroom called the Cyber Cafe, so hot that it was cooled by a window air conditioner in December. The basement is a warren of old couches and computers, with students toiling in every alcove. There are sign-up sheets for a Women’s Student Action Coalition and for free walk-in tutoring. The student mailboxes are decorated with Roosevelt-era eagle emblems and secured with ancient combination locks. Upstairs, an old black-and-white photo depicts some Trinity women in a daisy chain, circa 1925. Another shows a basketball game around 1910. Every face is white.

The new women of Trinity are proud of their accomplishments and protective of their school, just as their forebears were. Mothers and grandmothers refer to the school as “a high-class place,” a sanctuary. It’s quite a change from the days when black women entered Trinity only as maids.
On a recent evening in Trinity’s tiny auditorium, students performed an end-of-semester recital of song, dance and art. It was a special night for the students, most of whom had come to Trinity with no experience in the performing arts. McGuire was there, of course, taking pictures.

One student performed a spoken-word dance:

It took years for me to know myself.
They called me everything but my name.

Had they mistaken my beauty for their ugliness?

Morgan Kellman, a junior from Frederick County, enrolled at Trinity “for the sisterhood of it all.” She has immersed herself in women’s studies — studying African American women’s history and women’s roles in law and leadership — and she has embraced the school’s traditions, such as the Well Sing, an annual Christmas ritual in which the classes gather on the Main Hall stairwell to sing seasonal songs.

Like many Trinity women, Kellman likes the feeling that she is noticed, that she matters. “If you get a haircut, everyone from the cafeteria workers to the president will comment on it,” she said. She feels McGuire’s presence everywhere. “If you walk through the Trinity Center, there are all these photos of athletes, and she took all of them,” she said.

Some alumnae have never reconciled with the new Trinity. To this day, there are a few who won’t set foot on campus, said Sue Numrich, a physicist, 1967 Trinity alumna and president of the Alumnae Association. “I think there was a wish, a hope, that the school could continue to be what people perceived it to be when they were there,” Numrich said. “I have friends in my own class who still say their degree is no longer worth what it was worth when they graduated.”

Under McGuire’s leadership, Trinity has grown into one of the most successful urban education centers in the nation. The school serves a needier student population than any of the historically black institutions around Washington, its socioeconomic peers, with two-thirds of students receiving Pell grants. Yet, Trinity has a higher graduation rate than several of them. The share of bachelor’s degree candidates who graduate within six years ranges from about 40 to 50 percent. Trinity’s annual tuition is $19,360, but the average student contributes $1,000 to $2,000, with the remainder coming from federal and local grants and from tuition discounts.

With a disadvantaged student population and a modest endowment, balancing Trinity’s budget can be “incredibly challenging,” said Peggy O’Brien, a Trinity alumna and D.C. Public Schools administrator. Low overhead is key: Faculty salaries average $60,000; McGuire earns $202,000 and does not have an expense account. Rather than a presidential residence, she told an audience in a recent speech, “I have a very nice orange parking cone.”

McGuire’s many fans say her school cries out for the national recognition that has mostly eluded it. But McGuire herself has emerged as a higher education leader at the national level, known for her willingness “to speak out on topics that other college presidents won’t touch, such as the reasons why tuition prices go up and why rankings are a bad idea,” said Ann Pauley, the college spokeswoman. McGuire has testified before Congress on college costs and student loan reform. She speaks to education groups, particularly on institutional change.

Locally, McGuire has been named to various lists of powerful Washingtonians. She received the coveted Leader of the Years award from the Greater Washington Board of Trade. At that 2007 ceremony, Washington
Perhaps the most tantalizing detail in the story of Pat McGuire’s Trinity is that the best results may be yet to come. The school’s current core curriculum has been in place for three years, not long enough to affect the graduation rate. It is tailored for graduates of urban public high schools, many of whom have not been prepared for the rigors of college.

“They all read. They read word for word, one word after another,” said Minerva San Juan, chair of the departments of philosophy and religious studies at Trinity. “But they’re not reading the content; they’re not reading the meaning.” All freshmen take a battery of courses that teach them, in three semesters, how to read critically, how to write college-level essays and how to decode the language of scholarship.

In a critical reading seminar on a recent afternoon, San Juan led three students in a discussion that ranged from the metaphysics of “Star Trek” to the film “Imitation of Life” to the works of racial philosopher Naomi Zack.

“Is race a biological category?” San Juan asked. Or is it shaped by culture?

Mercedes Player, a freshman, considered the question. “All of you are black,” she told her classmates. “But the lighter-skinned you are, the more superior you’re viewed.”

San Juan asked if anyone recalled the concept of racial hierarchy.

“That’s like that triangle of who’s on top and who’s on the bottom,” said Champale Butler, another freshman.

The professor tossed out another concept: cultural paradigms. Did the students understand how the mixed-race girl in “Imitation of Life” had fought against societal standards of race?

“That was the paradigm, that she wanted to be white, so she’d do anything at any cost, even to her mother, to be white,” Butler said.

Through such conversations, Trinity faculty hope to build comprehension and, ultimately, retention. The goal of the university’s $1 million First Year Experience initiative is to raise the share of students who return to Trinity each year. Freshmen retention is the biggest problem: At the start of the initiative, about half returned for their sophomore year. Typically, the problem was not just money but also academic stress. These days, Trinity keeps a closer eye on its freshmen. Each takes a course taught by her adviser to build their relationship. There is an early alert system for struggling students with mandatory intervention for anyone who is earning a C-plus or less, or who misses a full week of classes. Freshman retention has risen steadily under the initiative, from 56 percent in the class of 2010 to 70 percent in the class of 2012.

That push to improve academic achievement is among several projects that McGuire has pursued to showcase the progress and promise of the urban campus. In 2003, McGuire completed the first expansion of Trinity in four decades with the opening of the Trinity Center for Women and Girls in Sports, a $21 million complex. Her team raised $12 million, more than Trinity’s $8 million endowment, more than the college had collected in any fundraising campaign in its history.

Most of the money came from older alumni, reflecting a resurgence of pride “in the institution that Trinity had become,” Pauley said. It was a gamble, staking the school’s future on an athletic facility when Trinity sorely lacked modern plumbing and science labs. The school’s teams were under-subscribed and seldom victorious. “I remember the day when one of the trustees said, ‘I’m not going to spend $10 million on an athletic center for five girls’,” McGuire said.

The center draws more than 30,000 patrons annually, pays for itself in rental fees and has redefined Trinity’s role in its community, bringing in hundreds of African American mothers and grandmothers from the neighborhood for Pilates and yoga. McGuire believes the complex has driven the 62 percent increase in full-time undergraduate enrollment in the past six years.

McGuire is planning an even bigger project: a $50 million academic center, encompassing a new administration and instruction building and renovation or replacement of the library and science building. The project presumes enrollment will grow from 2,000 to 3,000, with most of the increase coming in the professional schools. It depends on $30 million in donations by 2014.

As McGuire enters her third decade in the presidency, her value to the school cannot be overstated. She seems to run every administrative meeting, to attend every campus event, to photograph every basketball game. Pauley once walked in to the president’s office to find McGuire assembling one of the Ikea lamps that light the marble hall in the administration building.

It is hard to imagine Trinity without Pat McGuire. And that could be a problem. McGuire has a tendency to micromanage, colleagues say, and a reluctance to delegate. Some close associates contend there is no one on her senior staff with the right mix of authority and experience to replace her. Virginia “Ginger” Broaddus, McGuire’s second in command, was appointed permanent provost in December.

“I do not believe she has a full leadership team behind her,” said Numrich, the alumnae leader. Several other associates privately concurred.

McGuire says she has groomed Broaddus, former chief academic officer at two-year Garrett College in Western Maryland, as a potential replacement, and three “very good” academic deans behind her. She notes, though, that in higher education, “there is no such thing as an automatic internal successor,” and her departure would surely trigger a full nationwide search.

“As for that micromanagement stuff,” she said, “I just call it ‘management.’ ... Perhaps a more stable institution would not need such careful presidential attention to details, but Trinity has needed firm guidance, and I make no apologies for that.”

Broaddus said one of her fondest memories of McGuire is from last year’s commencement rehearsal. There McGuire was, leading the ceremony, handing out the mock diplomas and photographing the graduates for posterity.

“She’s standing there in her Trinity 2009 T-shirt,” Broaddus said, “and she’s calling out their names, and she’s taking their pictures.”

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Trinity Washington University offers a full range of undergraduate and graduate programs for students of all ages, with a special emphasis on women's education and the liberal arts in the College of Arts and Sciences, and professional development in the coeducational School of Education, School of Professional Studies and School of Nursing and Health Professions.

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