

# **College of Saint Mary Magdalen becomes Northeast Catholic College, updating its imagine, curriculum and mission**

*By SUSAN DOUCET / Monitor staff*

When Mike Girard began looking for colleges, he found a school named Magdalen College. When he arrived on campus four years ago, it was the College of Saint Mary Magdalen. And when he graduates this spring, his degree will say Northeast Catholic College.

Girard, a senior, never transferred schools. The small liberal arts college that he attends in Warner has changed names twice in five years, most recently last week.

“This is a chance to really build for the future,” said George Harne, president of Northeast Catholic College. “This is about more than simply building a college. This is about building and growing a college that has a kind of transcendent dimension to what we do.”

At a time when small schools across the state and the country have been folding programs and shutting down, the private school is looking to revitalize its image and attract more students. The new name reflects a curriculum change, more emphasis on its Catholic mission and added career services for students.

“I see what we do as being closely aligned with the larger mission of the Catholic Church,” Harne said.

Founded in 1973, the school is located 21/2 miles down Kearsarge Mountain Road. Northeast Catholic College has just six buildings and 63 students, making it the smallest college in the state.

“It’s always been tiny,” Harne said. “We need to change that.”

## **Reinvention**

The name change is just the start for the school. Harne, who has been president since 2011, is thinking about not only the brand of the Catholic college, but also about the programs and services it offers students.

The college previously offered one degree – The Great Books program, in which all students study classic texts. The school has expanded to offer five majors: theology, politics, philosophy, literature and The Great Books. Classes are taught in a Socratic style, where students and an instructor sit around a table for discussion-focused courses.

“It’s a very engaged style of teaching,” said Katie Moffett, director of admissions and communication at the college. “There’s a lot of discovery and uncovering as they ask questions of the tutor and each other.”

Northeast Catholic College also hired a career pathways coordinator to assist students and alumni with internships and career searches. The school did not previously have a career services division.

“It’s bound up in the mission, because the mission of the college is really to form intellectually these students and help them flourish as Catholics in the world,” Harne said. “My sense was the school could do a better job of that.”

Ninety-five percent of the student body is Catholic. Sixty percent of the student body has a homeschool background, and 15 percent of students come from private, charter or Catholic schools.

Harne and administrators announced the new name to the school’s student body in an assembly Jan. 15, days after students returned from winter break. The college held its previous name, which was only a slight differentiation from its original name, for about five years.

“It’s a new institution,” Moffett said. “We think it better represents the school as a whole.”

## **Hope for the future**

Expansion, in addition to the new image and program changes, is a priority for the college.

For the second year, Northeast Catholic College is offering free room and board to incoming students. The offer is equivalent to a savings of \$32,000 over four years. Tuition for this academic year is \$20,600.

The free room and board initiative is an effort to help with the rising cost of higher education, Moffett said.

“We have had some very generous benefactors,” Moffett said. “They were able to financially back that.”

The college is on pace to increase its student body to a total of 85 in the fall.

“I expect (this promotion is) going to bear fruit for a while,” Harne said.

Within a few years, Harne said, he would like to have a few hundred students attending the college. In 2011, Tim Van Damm, the college’s vice president of advancement and admissions, told the Monitor the school hoped to expand to 200 or 300 students within five or six years.

Northeast Catholic College isn't the first school in New Hampshire to rethink its identity.

Thomas Horgan, president and CEO of the New Hampshire College & University Council, recalled a few schools that have updated their names: Rivier College became Rivier University; Franklin Pierce College is now Franklin Pierce University; Plymouth State College is Plymouth State University; and New Hampshire College became Southern New Hampshire University.

"I don't think there's a college president in New Hampshire or in the United States who is not thinking about their brand," Horgan said.

With 96 students, the Thomas More College of Liberal Arts is the school currently closest in size to Northeast Catholic College. That college is still operating in Merrimack. But schools in the state with relatively low student populations have faced difficulties in recent years. The state's Department of Education lists 12 colleges and universities and 15 career schools that have closed since 1972.

Chester College of New England had about 200 students when it closed in 2012, according to the Nashua Telegraph. Two small colleges in the state have announced their closings this year, said Ed MacKaye, director of the New Hampshire Division of Higher Education and the Higher Education Commission. Lebanon College canceled its classes before the start of this academic year and officially closed at the end of December. The American College of History and Legal Studies in Salem is in its final year as an academic institution. Lebanon College had fewer than 40 students, and the American College has fewer than 20, MacKaye said.

"It's a real challenge to try and offer an academic program to that small of a student population," Horgan said.

Unlike many schools in the state, the majority of the students come from outside the region; only about 30 percent are from New England. The college attracts students from states across the country, including California, Texas and Arizona.

"In the case of New England, the largest single factor is the demographic headwinds that institutions are facing," MacKaye said. An aging population and fewer high school graduates are key contributors in this shifting demographic of future college students.

Institutions are addressing cost concerns from multiple angles, MacKaye said. In many instances, schools have attempted to offer more financial aid, as well as reduce their cost structure.

"Everybody on college campuses, they're being asked to do more with less," Horgan said.

Programs and offerings that differentiate them from other schools are also important.

“Institutions are trying to ensure that they have a distinctive mission that is attractive to a distinct cohort of students,” MacKaye said.

Along with a new name, Northeast Catholic has a new crest, a new motto and new website. The first image on the website features a phrase that encompasses the school’s mission: “Community founded on dignity. Find friendships that will last a lifetime.”

“That’s not just marketing copy,” Harne said. “Being small has its own challenges, but I think in terms of what the students gain relationally, it turns out to be a really good thing for them.”

Northeast Catholic College officials have hope for their school based off the recent changes.

“Dedicated people will struggle to ensure that the institution survives,” Horgan said.

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