



## Ursuline Sisters of the Central Province Office of Mission and Identity

### Ursuline Identity Assessment Cycle II 2020-2024

Ursuline Academy of St. Louis, Missouri  
February 21-23, 2023  
Visiting Team Report

#### **Visiting Team**

Angela Jakubik - Ursuline Academy Dallas, TX - Theology Department Chair  
Karen Mortillaro - Central Province - Director of Mission and Identity  
Stacy Shoulta - Mount Merici Academy Waterville, ME - Director of Mission  
Christy Zurcher - Ursuline Academy New Orleans, LA - Director of Mission Integration

#### **General Overview and Observations of Visit**

Ursuline Academy of St. Louis, MO spent a year working through its self-study process focusing on the Essential Characteristics of an Ursuline school to fulfill the Ursuline Identity Assessment Cycle II. Academy President, Peggy Slater, Principal, Dr. Mark Michalski, and Director of Mission Integration, Joni Mullen guided the Steering Committee and the entire Academy through this reflective process. The report was officially submitted to the Office of Mission and Identity in January 2023.

The Visiting Team met via Zoom twice to review the process of the assessment, details of the visit, and the initial review of the self-study. The four Visiting Team members met in person on the evening of February 21 to organize the details of the visit.

The first visit day, Ash Wednesday, began with morning announcements sharing the Lenten theme and virtue of the day, followed by prayer and reflection. The Visiting Team joined the President, Principal, and Mission Director for breakfast followed by a tour of the campus by two senior Ambassadors. They displayed obvious pride in their school while sharing all the ways they feel supported and encouraged. A thoughtfully planned Ash Wednesday school-wide mass was celebrated and concluded with several students receiving awards that exemplified St. Angela's faith-filled heart. During lunch, the Team was joined by a group of students representing all grade levels. They excitedly shared their feelings of community and being at home at Ursuline. The Visiting Team then spent time in classes to witness firsthand the relationship-building that occurs between the students and faculty. At the close of the day, the announcements echoed the Lenten theme and invited students to enter into prayer and reflection upon the daily virtue.

Over the two-day visit, the Visiting Team participated in several focus groups with students, faculty, parents, board members, alumnae, and administration. It is abundantly evident during our time with so many constituents that:

- Saint Angela's spirit was present in our many encounters with students and coworkers. We were privileged to hear many references to Ursuline Academy being a welcoming community.
- The Culture of Belonging is a lived reality among students. It is clear they have committed to "genuine, respectful, and faith-based behavior and communication" and co-workers value the impact on the student body.
- Ursuline demonstrates strong intentionality in considering the uniqueness of each student's mind, body, and spirit by providing robust academic, athletic, and extracurricular offerings, support, programming, and spiritual formation.
- *Serviam* is certainly a way of life at Ursuline. It is a value that is "palpable and lived out authentically" by the Ursuline community.

During our time with focus groups, we observed:

- Students feel Ursuline is a place where they are comfortable being themselves. They feel support and love from their teachers, counselors, campus ministers, learning consultants, and mentors. They each expressed they have at least one adult in the building they could turn to for support and the feeling that their teachers genuinely want them to succeed. They also praised "Chef Marie" for the delicious food she provides, the joy she brings to her service, and her desire for student input in regard to the menu and offerings! Students feel heard by the administration through the Junior Declarations and see that their voices can effect change in the school community. They know they can turn to other students on the Leadership for Diversity committee when they see an issue that needs attention and it will be addressed. The Visiting Team was touched by many sentiments shared by the students such as, "other schools make you be who they want you to be but at Ursuline, you can be yourself" and "at Ursuline there is something for everyone."
- Co-workers are passionate and dedicated. They have spent countless hours creating the Culture of Belonging and making it a lived reality among the students. They are focused on student engagement and well-being and have done an extraordinary job of showing students how to advocate for their passions and beliefs. Faculty enjoy substantial autonomy in the classroom. They enjoy building relationships organically through activities such as days of service, retreats, and social opportunities. Teaching faculty yearn for additional professional development. They recognize the wealth of talent among their co-workers and seek opportunities to learn from one another through observations and professional development.
- Alumnae have pride in their alma mater and credit the Academy with giving them confidence. They recognize that the emphasis on *Serviam* has impacted them in other endeavors in life. It is obvious that they genuinely care for Ursuline. An example of this care is the work currently being done in the archives room. Alumnae remain engaged via

social media, postcards, email, events, and the “ValUAbLe Connections” Facebook group. The caregiver retreat, career day, and Project USS student scholarship provide opportunities for alumnae to give back to the school community. Alumnae affirmed that Ursuline creates an energetic and engaging experience when they return to campus.

- Parents expressed the joy their daughters feel in “being a Bear!” In their own words:
  - Ursuline recognizes the individual and helps her to grow.
  - It takes an army of people to organize service opportunities.
  - Campus Ministry is the place my daughter lands. They are her people.
  - Personal connections by all adults make the difference when a kid is having a bad day.
  - Adult mentorship sets up our students for life.
  - My daughter feels empowered by the Chicago mission trip.
  - I go to work and smile because I know my kids are happy and taken care of.
  - My daughter gets in the car and says, “It’s always a great day to be a Bear!”
  
- Board of Trustees members shared a passion for Ursuline Academy. They recognize the value of an Ursuline education and have witnessed it firsthand in their alumnae children. They unanimously agreed that the Academy meets students where they are and “grows” them. Quoting this year’s theme of “Be Here. Be You. Belong,” one board member recognized that this theme is “really what the school is about.” Board members validated that Serviam “doesn’t stop” when their children graduate. In fact, it has become part of their family life. Members affirmed that mission has been “interwoven” into all aspects of the Academy’s strategic plan. When asked about their engagement on campus and in activities, one member stated: “I fear the day I can’t be on campus when my term has ended.” That same member also feels that global education is what distinguishes Ursuline from other schools and acknowledged that it can also be considered an “untapped resource.” Overall, members were happy to discuss all things Ursuline and reflect on how it has impacted their children.

The first day concluded with a “happy hour” with administrators where the Visiting Team shared some anecdotal evidence of the community spirit witnessed throughout the day. The day ended with a working dinner off-campus for the Visiting Team to begin the official review of the day and the task of formulating this report. The final day concluded with a review of the findings reported in this document to a small gathering of Steering Committee members and administrators, and then with the entire group of co-workers of Ursuline. There is no doubt what was observed and experienced by the Visiting Team was a strong affirmation of all the efforts displayed in the self-study and a strong confirmation of the Catholic and Ursuline identity of Ursuline Academy.

## Endorsement of Strengths

**Essential Characteristic 2:** *An Ursuline school nurtures a strong spiritual formation for its students and co-workers, one that cultivates the faith development of all its constituencies.*

At Ursuline Academy, St. Louis, this occurs through:

- Freshman first-quarter theology class on Ursuline identity, St Ursula, heritage tours, and the graduate profile
- Formal ceremony for freshman induction
- Feast of Saint Angela liturgy planned by Freshman class
- Implementation of Culture of Belonging norms
- Sophomore, junior, and senior theology classes include social justice, scripture, Catholic Social Teaching, Christian lifestyle, vocations, and living your faith in a secular world
- Retreat opportunities for all grade levels during "Retreat Week" in January with individual focuses such as "Go Light Your World" and an optional four-day Kairos retreat for seniors
- Creating a sense of belonging and connectedness with students and co-workers through retreats
- Various service projects and service trip opportunities appeal to various interests
- Discussing various global issues with other Ursuline schools around the world and a planned visit from students at Brescia House school in South Africa
- Beginning and ending each school day with prayer and reflections
- Beginning each class with intentions and prayer
- Bears and Prayer Club
- Monthly, school-wide, and Lenten "House" masses planned by students
- Prayer services, reconciliation, and Stations of the Cross
- Grade-level parent liturgies and opportunities for alumnae participation in several masses
- Ongoing formation for coworkers through Angela retreats, service retreats with built-in time for reflection, and a traditional retreat in the spring
- School-wide community including co-workers and a parent "Prayer Day Relay"
- Parental formation through publications such as a bi-annual magazine, monthly Ursuline parent link, weekly parent newsletter, and parental participation in liturgies and ceremonies
- Caregiver Retreat - run by alumnae who work in healthcare - open to everyone
- Serra Club International award is given for an essay on vocations and includes a cash award
- Ursuline Education Network Serviam award recognition
- Various quotes from St. Angela and other examples of faith were represented throughout the school facilities



**Essential Characteristic 3:** *An Ursuline school fosters respect for the uniqueness of each individual member of the school community.*

At Ursuline Academy, St. Louis, this occurs through:

- Formation of the Diversity, Inclusion, and Belonging Committee, which led to:
  - Culture of Belonging Norms (guiding document that is incorporated into many facets of the school community)
  - Diversity Days (lookism, sexism, racism, and self-defense topics)
  - Spectrum Club (LGBTQ+)
  - Leadership for Diversity Committee (educates and raises awareness of issues involving diversity and inclusion)
- Partnership with BreakDown STL - interactive preventative health education activities
- 2022-2023 school year theme of "Be Here, Be You, Belong"
- Viaggio Days - freshmen orientation program with senior sorellas
- Big Sis/Lil Sis program - an opportunity to build community, make new friendships, and establish a sisterhood
- Sophomore Insieme Day - community building, leadership formation, spiritual development
- House System to build community spirit, promote unity, and create new traditions - named for Ursuline standards (Courtesy, Loyalty, Courage, Service)
- Strategic plan goals for recruitment of diverse faculty/staff and students - Admissions team visit grade schools and middle schools, partnership with Access Academies to assist underserved students, MoReap platform, and diversity job fairs
- A counselor is assigned to each student for all four years
- Two full-time Learning Consultants, Study Skills course for freshmen with learning difference diagnosis, differentiated learning by teachers
- Monthly club session with every student attending at least one - numerous offerings with eSports club and team also being an option
- Curriculum - including electives and career exploration opportunities
- Career Day with alumnae every other year - Alumnae Facebook group "ValUAbLe Connections"
- Global Scholars Program allows students to explore career opportunities from a global perspective
- Financial Aid programs support socio-economic diversity, Multi-Bear Advantage Scholarship for families who have more than one daughter attending Ursuline
- Project USS to support student scholarships - allows alumnae the opportunity to focus on giving back within the community vs. to the outer community
- Tree signing tradition in the cafeteria to welcome and include all new students
- Flexible seating options offered in the classroom
- Junior Declaration Project provides an opportunity for juniors to advocate for topics that they feel are important
- Portfolio/Graduate Profile/Capstone Project - provide opportunities for students to document and reflect on their growth

**Essential Characteristic 4:** *An Ursuline school promotes the development of the whole person.*  
At Ursuline Academy, St. Louis, this occurs through:

- The carefully crafted “Culture of Belonging” is a lived reality for students
- Grief support group
- Mental health initiatives include:
  - Mental Health Week, with a focus on particular topics such as decreasing use of social media
  - “De-stress Day” at end of the fall semester with a wide range of fun activities
  - Breakdown STL presentation, where students learn positive mental health behaviors
  - The President's dog is being trained as a therapy dog
- All students participate in at least one extracurricular club
- The new house system, with a focus on developing values and building relationships
- Method of student leadership development as servant leadership, based upon the charism of St. Angela
- Wide range of sports teams, plus e-sports and additional health/fitness classes
- Support from the Learning Consultants is evident and “person honoring.” Robust support for students with learning differences includes:
  - Two full-time learning support specialists
  - Instructional coaching of classroom teachers
  - Study skills class for all freshmen with learning differences, teaching skills for organization, note-taking, test preparation, and self-advocacy
  - Regular 1:1 consultations with students to provide continued support and skill development
  - Dedicated testing center for students needing extended time and a quiet environment
  - Meeting with incoming freshmen and their parents the spring before matriculation to ensure a smooth transition
- Partnering with several universities for dual credit opportunities
- Curriculum provides opportunities for students to pursue specific personal interests, including business and technology offerings, English and social studies special topics, modern and classical languages, conflict resolution, forensic science, robotics
- Theology and Campus Ministry provide formation on living the Christian faith, with prayer and reflection incorporated into each class session
- Scope and sequence of the theology curriculum include a strong focus on moral development at each level and offer students the opportunity for deeper dives into particular areas of interest during senior year
- Care Team identifies students at risk and develops proactive support plans

**Essential Characteristic 7:** *An Ursuline school ensures the motto of “Serviam” permeates every aspect of the school.*

At Ursuline Academy, St. Louis, this occurs through:

- Service hours completed each year including the junior service project
- Service trip opportunities offered in every grade level focusing on a wide variety of experiences helping students recognize their leadership potential and share their unique gifts
- Long-term partnerships with two special local agencies where students and co-workers participate in acts of service during the Christmas season
- The Haiti Packathon, a community-wide project where parents, students, alumnae, and all members of the community can work together to pack meals for the northern Haiti
- A week-long, student-led, club-sponsored service opportunity called SPLASH Week (Students Positively Lending A Serving Hand) where students work together on campus to help local St. Louis agencies
- International Serviam Day which offers service opportunities to alums of all Ursuline schools who live in the St. Louis area
- Critical reflection on service opportunities provides students with the opportunity to examine and question their beliefs, opinions, and values and prepare for their senior Capstone projects and Global Scholars presentations
- Theology and Ecology classes as well as the Environmental Club which teaches respect for creation and prepares students to preserve the Earth’s resources by responsible use
- Preparing students to be active, informed, critical, and responsible citizens of our multicultural world through opportunities in classes, programs, and efforts of the Leadership for Diversity team
- Co-worker service days bring the motto to every member of the school community

### **Recognition of Challenges**

- In a world that increasingly puts emphasis on the value of personal gain, Ursuline has focused on instilling the essential value of service in each student and the school community through a myriad of service opportunities that “empower students to take risks, to seek out the differences in one another, to recognize the dignity of every person they meet, and to help others with their whole hearts.”
- While teenagers nationwide are in an ever-growing constant struggle with mental health and wellness, it is evident that Ursuline is meeting these challenges in an active and intentional way by developing programming and other methods of supporting students' needs.
- In a post-pandemic world, where retaining long-standing, mission-focused employees is a constant challenge that directly impacts all members of the Ursuline community, the lived reality that students feel supported, affirmed, and loved shows that Ursuline co-workers demonstrate tremendous dedication and effort. “Forward-oriented” (Mark Michalski) co-workers living their vocation and passion for serving the students results in “human beings doing a lot of things over and above” (Peggy Slater) – and being stretched too thin. We recognize that the new co-worker meetings have helped integrate employees into the community and faculty retreats and service days allow for community building.

## Opportunities for Growth

1. Continue to be intentional in your strategic plan goal of recruiting diversity in students, faculty, and staff.
2. Since the foundation has been laid for parent formation by the Mission and Ministry Team and as you move into living with the reality of the "All Things New" Archdiocesan plan, continue to incorporate and develop more spiritual formation for parents/guardians.
3. Explore possibilities for larger spaces for both Campus Ministry and the senior lounge, to accommodate more students since they gravitate to and feel supported in these communal spaces.
4. Continue the important work of developing the Culture of Belonging as it is a lived reality that students feel supported, welcomed, and respected. Further development of these norms can help co-workers feel heard and experience this sense of true belonging and inclusion. As is modeled with students, a focus on the "whole person" would greatly benefit co-workers as well.
5. In order to retain co-workers with a high level of dedication, explore opportunities to provide additional intentional opportunities for nourishment and growth intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually by:
  - Recalling the spirit of St. Angela to listen, discern, and act on which efforts are the best use of time and will best serve the community;
  - Expanding efforts to carry forth St. Angela's spirit of relationship-building by enhancing the valuable new teacher formation program and introducing a program to further co-workers' formation of community and unity;
  - Organizing teaching faculty to have opportunities to observe the myriad of talents among them and benefit from professional development offered by one another.

## Concluding Statement

This report was written collaboratively by the Visiting Team, all of whom offer unanimous consent and agreement. We confirm the strong Ursuline identity which is a lived reality at Ursuline Academy in St. Louis. The Visiting Team wishes to thank the entire Ursuline school community for all that you did to prepare for our visit. We each consider it an honor and blessing to have served on this Visiting Team and have the experience of connecting with the dedicated co-workers, students, parents, alumnae, and trustees of the Academy. This completes our work as a Visiting Team. Ursuline St. Louis will remain in our thoughts and prayers as you continue to "cultivate the vine entrusted to you."

*Karen Mortillaro*

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Karen Mortillaro

In the name of the Visiting Team

March 24, 2023