



## ***Let the Lace Begin-*** A thematic analysis of first year student reflections on the Spirit of the Founders

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### Background

“Charism” is often defined as a good gift that flows from God's benevolent love. The Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet are contemplatives in action- “moving always toward the profound love of God and love of neighbor without distinction” Theirs is a practical mysticism: God is found in the ordinary, performed with extraordinary humility and charity towards all. This charism is the essence of mission formation and deeply instilled in their ministries including higher education.

**Problem-**Creating a campus environment and life that reflects the mission and charism of Catholic tradition continues to challenge educators and leadership. With the dramatic decrease in the number of religious vocations, lay faculty and staff are being called upon to carefully consider how to create and execute meaningful ways to teach and form a campus climate that authentically embraces and sustains mission-based charism. How do students formulate an understanding of the CSJ charism and mission? How does that charism translate into life- long learning in ways that are significant for a diverse student body? How does the CSJ rich history

of service inform young women and men entering a morally ambiguous, complex global community?

To meet this challenge, MSMU faculty, in conjunction with the CSJ Institute, created a web-based, modular workshop to engage students in exploring CSJ history, mission, identity and charism. An overarching goal of the course was to provide foundational knowledge of the unique legacy of the Sisters' "unstoppable" service for the "dear neighbor". Assignments focused on helping students discern the meaning of these principles in their own lives- from the "First Kitchen" to the "founding of MSMU", students shared their view of charism through reflective writings.

**Methodology and Results-**Open- coding, qualitative analysis of the reflections revealed a connectedness with the Sisters and emerging themes of: poverty, service, gathering, hopelessness, resilience and dreams and an increased sense of power to "help" others/themselves.

**Implications-**Student reflections revealed an understanding, however, we cannot infer a sustainable shift in how students think about how charism affects their lives. A longitudinal study would provide insight into how or if this knowledge is internalized, perpetuating the CSJ mission formation

**“If I have seen further it is by standing on ye shoulders of Giants.”**

**Sir Isaac Newton**

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**Background**

The Congregation of the Sisters of St. Joseph is not a stranger to peril, adversity and violence. In the early days of the 1650's, the sisters lived with great humility among the people and honed their skills and abilities to serve in any way to benefit the "dear neighbor.

The sisters took a radical approach to their mission. They were social activists in the community at a time when majority of women religious remained cloistered. When the sisters found young women who were forced to engage in prostitution to feed themselves and a family, they didn't judge. Instead, they took action and taught the women how to make lace, creating an opportunity for economic stability for these women.

Their mission to serve spanned across land and sea and in the late 1830s, the sisters brought their commitment to empowering women to America. The numerous social movements initiated by the sisters on behalf of women in particular, have changed hearts and minds and impacted nations in the direction of social justice. Through their narratives, storytelling and chronicles, a unifying and mobilizing force has been visible in the education of women for self and others.

**Problem**

Since their founding in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, women's colleges have historically led progress toward equality among the sexes. One reason is that women's colleges offer an environment in which women are the focus and the drivers of academic excellence. Engagement in female-majority learning communities and female mentor networks are just a few of the critical components that heighten academic achievement of women's college graduates. Furthermore, research indicates that similar elements are crucial to creating a sense of belonging, particularly in STEM fields, which in turn predicts greater confidence in one's abilities and greater persistence.

The #metoo movement has intensified the volume of conversations related to equality and social justice. For those who have been exposed to the charism and influence of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet, know the CSJ's have been advocating for these issues since their founding in 1650. Recognizing and believing that one is able to reach out, reach up and be "unstoppable" is a resonating theme at MSMU and the narrative being created within the university community.

Similar to other women's colleges, MSMU launched a course focused on eminent women, their works and original writings. Utilizing the lens of the founding CSJ's, students read about how these women from different backgrounds and generations, viewed their religious vocation as a venue to discern how society viewed women's roles in family, education, work and community and took the charge to empower those with the least entitlement, the most marginalized.

An analysis of student reflections from the Fall, 2018 CSJ Workshop revealed themes that had not been noted in previous years, that is, the resounding reflective voice of students' feelings and perceptions of the power of women, strength of women, generational transmission of female energy, resilience and admiration for the powerful women who came before them, whether it was their mothers, teachers or the sisters.

The reflections of this cohort conveyed a sense of duty to carry forward the legacy entrusted to them.

At any higher education institution, graduates stand on the shoulders of those who came before them. For students of Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet schools, the reflections mirror the notion of "standing on the shoulders" of remarkable women who created a heritage that fosters equality and social justice.

### **Methodology and Results**

Open-coding, qualitative analysis of the reflections revealed a connectedness with the Sisters and emerging themes of: power of women, strength of women, generational transmission of female energy, suffering and resilience and paying forward to others.

## **Implications**

In the 2018 CSJ Workshop student reflections, a deeper understanding seemed to emerge in the context of women's strength, women's voices and women's suffering, however, determining the elements that drove students to reflect on these themes cannot be validated without further investigation of whether the wide spread "#Me Too" conversations and campus receptivity to entertain open discourse was a mitigating influence. A follow-up study would provide insight into how or if these conversations have been internalized, perpetuating CSJ mission formation.