

CHANGING OF THE GUARD

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In May 2008, **Sr. Mary Jane Benoit, p.m. '53/'56G** and **Dr. Charles Mitsakos** retired from the Division of Education, having served a combined total of 70 years. They offer their perspectives on how Rivier's education programs have grown and changed through the years; new Divisional Chair **Dr. Robert McLaughlin** shares his hopes for the division's future.



In 2001, members of the Education Department established the Sr. Mary Jane Benoit Outstanding Educator Award. Dr. Mitsakos received the honor in 2006.

Sr. Mary Jane Benoit

Some people look forward to an early retirement. Sr. Mary Jane Benoit isn't one of them—even after 55 years at Rivier College, she was adamant that she work through the end of her contract. "There are things that need to be done at the end of the year—you need someone to tend to them," she says.

She knows. She's been tending to all kinds of details at Rivier since 1953.

Sr. Mary Jane says that her family instilled in her a desire to help other people. "My home training was to be of service—I got that at home and carried it on, then I met teachers that were very dedicated and I wanted to imitate them."

During her tenure, Sr. Mary Jane has seen great changes at the College, including changes in her own responsibilities. She's taught, coordinated student teachers, directed Rivier's Graduate Division, held the Academic Dean post, chaired

the Education Department, and directed the graduate elementary and general special education program.

"I was always asked, can you do this; can you do that? With God's grace, you can do anything," she says. "I've enjoyed everything I was asked to do, though sometimes it was very difficult."

—Sr. Mary Jane Benoit

Sr. Mary Jane says she especially enjoyed being a house mother. She tried to create a home atmosphere in the frame houses where students lived before Trinity and Guild Halls were built. "We had a smaller number of students then," she says.

While Sr. Mary Jane has seen a significant increase in the number of students and variety of professors the College has hired to teach, she says the most dramatic change has been the growth and development of Rivier's education programs. Through the years, the department has added new programs and changed curricula to keep pace with innovations and demands in the field. For example, "In the 1980s, it was time to include internships for graduate students—we needed to have that," she says.

One of the difficulties Sr. Mary Jane faced was keeping track of education programs and faculty housed in different buildings across campus. The opening of the Education Center in 1998 brought the division together both literally and figuratively. “Here we can work more closely together—you run into each other in the halls and get to know each other more. There’s community-building in the place where members are housed together,” she says. “You have to have a leader that supports that—Dr. Mitsakos was good.”

Dr. Charles Mitsakos

When Dr. Mitsakos was superintendent of schools in Winchester, Massachusetts, he wanted to find a way to show his appreciation for teachers. He came up with the Superintendent’s Apple Award. “I would go to Purity Supreme and buy the biggest, reddest Delicious apple I could find, put a legal seal on the apple, and go into the classroom and present it to the teacher,” he says. “Then people thought I was into apples—they started giving me apples,” he says. His wife, a designer, put them to use decorating his office. Ironically, students and colleagues have turned the apples that started as a show of Dr. Mitsakos’ appreciation for others into a symbol of their respect and gratitude for him.

Dr. Mitsakos began teaching graduate school administration courses at Rivier in 1977, while he was social studies coordinator for the Chelmsford Public Schools. When he moved on to become assistant superintendent in Andover, Mass. and later, superintendent in Winchester, he continued to teach. Dr. Mitsakos says his children were surprised to catch him at home on a Monday night recently. “Since they were little, I’ve taught on Monday nights,” he says.

In the summer of 1993, Dr. Mitsakos’ Monday night class led to a full-time job as Chair of the Education Department. He led the department through a transition that brought Rivier’s graduate and undergraduate programs together under one roof for the first time. The Education Center opened in December 1993, a tangible sign of how the College’s education programs had grown.

“The Sisters had very high standards and reached out to students—they felt that they were known and valued,” says Dr. Mitsakos. “This was a special place to come.” He says that faculty and staff have worked to keep that atmosphere on campus. “We try to reflect what we hope students will reflect out in the field—people learn it as part of the culture.”

In addition to the culture, Dr. Mitsakos is proud of the way the division has been able to adapt to help educators meet the tremendous demands placed on schools through No Child Left Behind and testing requirements. “There’s been greater pressure in schools to have kids perform well, including pressure on subsets—special ed students have to make the same progress as everyone else in the school,” he says.

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—Dr. Charles Mitsakos

With the support of the Division of Academic Outreach, the education division—and the College as a whole—have increased the number of hybrid courses. In addition, Dr. Mitsakos says the Cho Educational Resource Center offers “a fine collection of software—students can preview and integrate it.” Despite all the technology available, there is an emphasis on balancing technology with face to face interaction to accommodate different learning styles.

“Rivier has always addressed the needs of students,” says Dr. Mitsakos. He cites the CAGS program and the Ed.D. as examples. “Students were asking for education beyond the master’s degree. Faculty conceptualized programs and pitched them to the administration.”

Students can continue to use Rivier as a resource long after they graduate—Dr. Mitsakos has offered them a lifetime warranty. It’s something alumni take seriously. They call and e-mail faculty with questions

and concerns, as well as hiring leads, updates and suggestions for the curriculum. Alumni become a valuable resource for the Division, offering crucial feedback on the College's programs.

Full-time education faculty have established a scholarship in Dr. Mitsakos' honor.

The Dr. Charles L. Mitsakos Scholarship Fund recognizes Dr. Mitsakos' commitment to the field of education and is dedicated to strengthening the learning and teaching of education in an environment that maintains an emphasis on community and public service.

The Fund shall be awarded annually, based on financial need, to a Rivier College undergraduate day or evening student in accord with the following criteria:

- The recipient shall be a full-time day or evening student at Rivier College majoring in education.
- The recipient shall have achieved a grade point average of at least 3.0.

For additional information, or to contribute to the fund, contact the Office of Development and Alumni Relations at (603) 897-8508.

One of Dr. Mitsakos' favorite stories involves a young woman who had graduated, then gone her own way for several years. When Dr. Mitsakos returned from a week-long trip to Antigua one February, his e-mail box held eight messages from the former student. The first one outlined her frustrations with her job. Message number eight thanked Dr. Mitsakos for helping her solve her problem. "I never said a word to her—she just felt like I was listening." Rivier's education program had given her everything she needed to find a solution on her own.



Dr. Robert McLaughlin was recently appointed Chair of the Division of Education. (Photo by Jodie Andruskevich)

Dr. Robert McLaughlin

From the early 1990's on, Dr. Robert McLaughlin has been involved in multistate educational reform projects, including educational leaders in math, science, and technology in New Hampshire. In that context, Dr. McLaughlin says he consistently worked with and heard about faculty at Rivier who were doing wonderful things.

In 1998, the National Institute for Community Innovations, an organization he created and led, secured a 5-year, \$10 million U.S. Department of Education challenge grant to support school-university partnerships to improve the use of technology in schools and teacher preparation. "There was a partnership between Rivier and a school in Londonderry that was strong as any of the 30 across the whole project," Dr. McLaughlin says. "Throughout this project, I heard great things about Charlie Mitsakos and the leadership he was providing."

Now it's Dr. McLaughlin's turn at the helm. Rivier's new Chair of the Division of Education is confident that the College will continue to build on its strengths and serve as a resource for schools and students throughout the region. "We have an opportunity as a highly known, widely respected program in

undergraduate and graduate education to model what it means to prepare leaders to undertake systematic change by ourselves providing systematic support for them,” he says.

Dr. McLaughlin has several goals for his first year as Divisional Chair. First and foremost, he’ll focus on getting the new Ed.D. program off to a great start. He also plans to speak with faculty and students to explore how best to prepare students for the challenges of living in what Thomas Friedman has termed a “flat world.”

“We are at the precipice of profound economic dislocations that will require us to be more rapidly responsive and clear-thinking than we’ve ever needed to be before,” says Dr. McLaughlin. “As teacher-educators, we need to think about what this means for schools, virtual schools, colleges, and other educational organizations so we can prepare our students for the road ahead.”

As part of that preparation, Dr. McLaughlin plans to provide students and faculty greater access to proven and emerging learning technologies. “We’re going to be feisty about getting donations of learning technology so we can make sure our students are well-versed in their strengths and weaknesses,” he says.

Since he arrived at Rivier, Dr. McLaughlin says he’s been “deeply moved and impressed” by the people at Rivier. “I knew of the College’s reputation for integrity and commitment to equity and social justice, but it’s one thing to know about that and another to be immersed in it and experience it directly.” For two decades, he’s worked mostly on his own. “It’s been very heartening to be surrounded every day by administrators, faculty, and students who are also wrestling with the challenge of serving those in need,” he says. ■

* **JENNIFER LISKOW** works as a Public Relations and Web Writer in the Office of Marketing and Communications and teaches in Rivier’s Professional Communications program. Jenn earned her bachelor’s in English and communications from Notre Dame College in Manchester, N.H. in 1996. In 2002, she completed her master’s in writing and literature at Rivier. She began writing in junior high school; since then, she has had poems, short stories, features, and essays published. In her free time, Jenn enjoys practicing yoga, ten-pin bowling, and listening to live music with her husband, Tim.