



Associated Colleges of Illinois

Deep local history, Catholic tradition characterize Benedictine University as it looks to an expanding international future

President Michael Brophy focuses on storytelling, welcoming all to university's campuses



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If you ask [Dr. Michael Brophy](#) of [Benedictine University](#) why he wanted to be Benedictine University's president after 10 years as president at a California university, he'd say that the presidency at Benedictine was a prime opportunity, the best in the country at the time. Brophy, whose professional background is in academia and in the arts, including

music and film making, joined the Lisle-based university in 2015.

"What attracted me was the complexity of our enterprise," Brophy said in an interview with *ACI Reporter*. "We have three official campuses, in the Chicago suburbs and in Springfield and in Mesa, Arizona. We have a very robust online program, and we have on-the-ground programs in both China and Vietnam." Together Benedictine's total enrollment is nearly 9,000. In his role as president, Brophy manages all of Benedictine's campuses.

Brophy came to Benedictine University from Marymount California University, Rancho Palos Verdes, in 2015. He earned educator and citizen of the year awards, among many other recognitions. Brophy wrote, directed and edited three films that have been screened around the world at film festivals and universities – "Tina and Lance," selected to the Mannheim-Heidelberg (Germany), Philadelphia and Temecula Valley Film Festivals, and winner of the Best Feature Award at New York's Capital Film Festival; "Victoria Pool," selected to the Three Rivers Film Festival in Pittsburgh, Pa.; and "Father Brown," a finalist for the 2001 Independent Feature Project Market screenwriting award. In addition, he has accompanied gospel choirs as a musician and performed with students and faculty at



Benedictine University President Michael S. Brophy

recitals. Brophy earned a bachelor's degree in music and a master's degree in English from The College of Saint Rose, Albany, N.Y., and a Master of Fine Arts in Writing from Long Island University. Brophy earned a doctorate in educational leadership and policy analysis from the University of Wisconsin.

Storytelling with simplicity important

Brophy says his career in music and film prepared him for his current role, which requires telling stories. "You're always trying to learn about the dynamics of the university, pick up on its strengths, its aspirations, its themes, and you have to ultimately make it into a compelling story for faculty, students, donors, as they advance the school, whether it's in the classroom or whether it's in terms of fundraising," he says. Most films, he says, focus on two or three main characters to help audiences absorb the message. "It's the same way as a university president.

You need to keep your portrayal of the story as simple as possible, so that it's clear to many people what the central arc is," Brophy says.

The story Brophy tells about Benedictine University is one of strength. Under his predecessor, Dr. William J. Carroll, the university was transformed, quadrupling its enrollment in a 20-year period while focusing on its Benedictine mission. Today, it maintains 56 undergraduate academic programs and 20 graduate programs. "We've built a good thing. We need to make it great," Brophy says.

What Brophy has discovered since he began as president is that many in the Chicago area know of the university through their own personal physicians. For 130 years, science has been an important part of the curriculum. Others know about Benedictine through descendants of the Czech and Slovak communities, integral to the university when it was founded in 1887, Brophy said. "There's definitely a strong contingent of descendants that know us this way. For the first 50 years of our existence, students were taught in Czech. I certainly didn't know that



The university's Kindlon Hall of Learning features an art gallery named for Fr. Michael E. Komechak, O.S.B.

when I came here," he said. Still others know the university as a Catholic institution rooted in the 1,500-year-old Benedictine tradition, which follows "The Rule of Saint Benedict." The school was founded in 1887 by the monks of St. Procopius Abbey, which is still part of the Lisle campus today.

Church connection, Benedictine tradition are vital for university

The importance of the university's connection to the Church cannot be understated, Brophy says. "I couldn't imagine being in business without being Catholic and Benedictine. It's such a long, long tradition. When you join Benedictine University, you take on the responsibility of sustaining that tradition," he says.

An important facet of the school's mission is the idea that while the university is Catholic, all are welcome, Brophy says. Nearly one-quarter of the students at Benedictine University's Lisle campus are Muslim. That's because many Muslims live in the Chicago suburbs, and President Carroll welcomed them to the university, especially in the wake of 9/11.

Recently the university appointed a Muslim faith adviser to help with worship and advising faculty and staff on how to support Muslim students. "We are a proud Muslim-serving school. We're often told that our university has the largest percentage of Muslim students of any Catholic university in the country," Brophy added.

At its Mesa campus, the university serves a considerable number of Mormon students. Brophy says Benedictine University was invited by the City of Mesa to establish a campus there because it is a faith-based institution.

Health sciences, business, leadership among best-known programs

Best-known among its core academic programs is the university's pre-med program. Approximately 30 percent of the students at the Lisle campus are pre-med students, Brophy says, the result of an academic choice the founders made more than a century ago. Related health-based programs have blossomed, such as a master's program in public health, available in-person and online. Along with health programs, Benedictine is known for its academic programs in business, including a growing MBA program and internationally known doctoral programs in values-driven leadership and organization development. "Most Chicagoans know us for human health, science and related areas, and business," Brophy said.

Approximately 42 percent of the total university students are traditional-age students, the president says. The university's offerings in Springfield, China and Vietnam serve mostly older students. As for programs types, Benedictine's MBA and MPH programs are also online and serve national audiences. In China and Vietnam, graduate students learn in-person through faculty in a partnership the university maintains with local universities. Students learn from local university faculty for the first half of their academic programs, and Benedictine sends staff and faculty to teach students the remaining pieces of their academic programs. Brophy credits Carroll for these international programs.

For the future, the university board of trustees has asked Brophy to look into offering programs in other parts of the world. With Dr. James E. Payne, Benedictine's new provost who begins in May, Brophy says the university will study possible programs in South America and Europe.



Rain gardens are a feature of the Lisle campus quad in front of Benedictine's Daniel L. Goodwin Hall of Business, right, completed in 2015.

Under Carroll, the university's infrastructure was upgraded, adding academic and athletic facilities. In the near future, Brophy sees adding new residence halls at the Lisle campus, and in Mesa, he expects the university will lease new spaces to meet student needs. The Springfield campus, he says, already has excellent facilities.

Benedictine University rejoined ACI in 2016

Benedictine University is one of ACI's 23 member colleges and universities, having rejoined the organization in 2016. For Brophy, the importance of the relationship is rooted in two specific programs ACI offers: scholarships and professional development for staff. "We simply will never have enough funding to meet the needs of all of our undergraduates," Brophy says. "ACI obviously helps us on that front. And, professional development budgets are not as robust as they need to be. It's really great to see and watch ACI produce professional development programs that make a difference for our staff." ACI provides funds for more than 325 scholarships to member colleges and universities, and it offers semi-annual professional development conferences for staff at member colleges and universities.

The university's efforts with students throughout its campus system are aimed at making Benedictine University a "top-choice institution," Brophy says. In the Chicago area, there are many excellent Catholic higher education institutions competing for students. To increase the

possibility of being a top-choice institution, Brophy says the university is recruiting students outside the Lisle area.

"We want to paint a story of great opportunity here in Chicago and a great Catholic university," he says. "We want to become more of a top-choice school for students. Top choice allows us to think about greater retention, greater alumni loyalty and a more vibrant community."