

College of Notre Dame of Maryland and Saint Mary-of-the-Woods College  
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Confusion continues between different and distinct claims made by the College of Notre Dame of Maryland, founded by the School Sisters of Notre Dame, and other Catholic colleges for women as to primacy of place in beginning a four-year, college-level program and awarding the baccalaureate degree.

The College of Notre Dame of Maryland has been recognized in government records and higher education publications as the **“first Catholic college for women to award the four-year baccalaureate degree”** to students, following the successful completion of a four-year, collegiate level academic program.

### References

The principal references which document this claim are:

1. Federal records contained in a government document, *Report of the Commissioner of Education in the Year 1899-1900*, Volume 2, 1901. Washington Government Printing Office, pp. 1944-1953, Tables 31 and 32, “Statistics of Colleges for Women, Divisions A and B.”
2. Catholic scholar and church historian, Monsignor John Tracy Ellis, of the Catholic University of America. *Documents of American Catholic History*, 1956. Milwaukee, Bruce Publishing Company, pp. 545-546.
3. Harvard sociologists and higher education historians, David Riesman and Christopher Jenks. *The Academic Revolution*, 1968. New York, Doubleday and Company, Inc., pp. 375-376.

### St. Mary-of- the-Woods

The canonization of the foundress of the Sisters of Providence, Mother Theodore Guerin, on October 15, 2006, and the subsequent press about Saint Mary-of-the-Woods College, has caused the confusion to resurface. SMWC states in printed material and on its Web site that “In 1846, Indiana granted SMWC a charter as a women’s college – the only one in the state. Today, SMWC is the oldest Catholic liberal arts women’s college in the country.”

The earliest degrees granted by SMWC are noted in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Approval to begin a college is not the same as actually establishing a college by completing all the necessary tasks: obtaining state approval (charter), acquiring financial resources, purchasing property, constructing buildings, recruiting a faculty, developing a curriculum, attracting and admitting students, providing an

approved program of college-level instruction for four years, and awarding students the baccalaureate degree at the completion of the program. A charter to establish a school was received in 1846, and Saint Mary-of-the-Woods functioned as an academy for over seventy years before establishing a college-level curriculum in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Private Catholic academies did not always distinguish among the levels of education, (elementary, secondary, tertiary) provided by the religious community.

## **Documentation**

A reliable reference book addressing dates of charters, state approval and regional accreditation is *A History of Catholic Colleges for Women in the United States of America*, (Washington, DC, The Catholic University of America Publication Service, 1933). On page 51, Sister Mariella Bowler, OSF, states that, “St. Mary-of-the-Woods was empowered to grant college degrees by an amendment to the charter in 1909 and in September of that year registered students in the freshmen classes.” A list of Catholic Colleges for women and important dates, noted in a table on page 128, indicates that Saint Mary-of-the-Woods was recognized as a college in 1916 by the State of Indiana, and was accredited in 1919 by the North Central Association, the regional accrediting agency.

## **College of Notre Dame, Baltimore, Maryland**

College of Notre Dame was founded by the School Sisters of Notre Dame and admitted its first baccalaureate students, intent on pursuing a four-year degree, on September 9, 1895. The General Assembly of the State of Maryland, authorized to approve non-public educational institutions, granted the College of Notre Dame of Maryland the charter to award baccalaureate, master’s and doctoral degrees on April 2, 1896. The General Assembly, at that time, convened only in even-numbered years. The dean of the College had been advised to begin college-level instruction in September, 1895, because the other indicators of probable success – financial capital, property, buildings, faculty, curriculum, and student interest – had been demonstrated over the years since the establishment of Notre Dame of Maryland Preparatory School and Collegiate Institute in 1873. The College awarded its first baccalaureate degrees to six young women on June 14, 1899, the first Catholic college for women to do so, a fact documented many times in government records and public documents.

## **Legitimacy is on Record**

Although the College of Notre Dame of Maryland is proud of its historic claim to be the first Catholic college for women to award the four-year baccalaureate degree – a legitimate “first” which has been recognized, documented and supported by outside authorities and government records, the College refrains from engaging in a public discussion with other Catholic institutions which assert

a claim which confuses what is of substance with what may be true, but of limited value, distinction and importance. In those instances when the College claim about primacy of place has been substantively challenged by another Catholic college for women, the College has successfully asserted its claim and documented its position, resulting in the other institution either withdrawing or clarifying its claim. Notre Dame's assertion is very clear and focused: the "first Catholic college for women to award the four-year baccalaureate degree."

The history of public and private higher education in the United States provides many instances of institutions offering academy-level education before providing a collegiate-level program leading to a baccalaureate degree. In issuing a charter, the state government sometimes omitted a reference to the level of education being approved. Unless clearly stated otherwise, the charter authorized the establishment of elementary and secondary schools.