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Teaching the teachers

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Teaching the teachers

WHAT WOULD ENTICE EXPERIENCED TEACHERS - TOPS IN THEIR FIELD - TO DEVOTE A FULL WEEK IN JULY TO INTENSE STUDY OF HOW TO TEACH THE U.S. CONSTITUTION? And, how could you comfortably mix K-12 curricula? The answers came at the 2003 "We the People" institute co-sponsored by JMU.

"We the People"

Teaching the teachers how to teach civic education

Twenty teachers from Virginia and West Virginia attended JMU's 2003 Virginia Summer Institute, a weeklong teacher development program focusing on civic education. Sponsored by the Center for Civic Education, James Madison's Montpelier and JMU, the institute offers teachers in-depth lectures on the U.S. Constitution and the Bill of Rights (and insights into how to teach these subjects). Teachers also learn about the national civic education program, "We the People: The Citizen and the Constitution," and visit Montpelier, James Madison's lifelong home in Orange County.

More than 26 million students and 82,000 educators have taken part in the "We the People" program since its inception in 1987. At annual "We the People" competitions, students compete in simulated congressional hearings, present testimony on key constitutional issues and answer questions from panels

of judges. The national finals of the "We the People" competition, held in Washington, D.C., involve more than 1,200 high-school students and teachers, representing all 50 states.

At this summer's "We the People" institute, teachers participated in a simulated congressional hearing program that they will use in instructing their students. Judges for the competition included JMU political science professor Anthony Eksterowicz, who has participated in all three summer institutes held at JMU.

Institute participants also learn how to transfer history and democratic principles to students at varying grade levels through hands-on team experiences, a trek to Montpelier and from presentations by speakers like Eksterowicz. Additional 2003 institute faculty included: Virginia Tech political science professor Wayne Moore; David E. Marion, director of the Wilson Center for Leadership in the Public Interest at Hampden-Sydney College; John Patrick, director of Indiana University's Social Studies Development Center; and Barbara A. Perry, director of the Center for Civic Renewal at Sweet Briar College.

After each institute, participants are asked to fill out anonymous evaluations. A 2003 attendee reports, "The most valuable aspect of the weeklong institute was the wealth of knowledge and information shared by all participating."

JMU Parent and Constituent Relations officer and Madison Institutes director Bill Wilson co-directed the "We The People" institute with Andrew Washburn, Montpelier's outreach education manager. Wilson says, "JMU's continued relationship with James Madison's Montpelier and the Center for Civic Education is beneficial to all parties. We've been able to reach nearly 200 school teachers from across the commonwealth and country, and we've guided them in teaching this acclaimed instructional program which focuses on the history and principles of American constitutional democracy. This relationship provides JMU with another opportunity to focus on its core values and its historical roots in teacher preparation."

The Center for Civic Education is a nonpartisan organization dedicated to fostering the development of informed, responsible participation in civic life. Montpelier, home to fourth president James Madison, is the main sponsor of the "We the People" program in Virginia.

Learn more about the program at www.montpelier.org.

- *Michelle Hite ('88)*