

SPECIALREPORT

'This is a wake-up call'*The importance of balancing liberal arts and professional programs*

BY ANDY PERRINE ('86)

Despite persistently dismal unemployment rates the American economy technically is improving as real GDP has been in positive territory for a few quarters in a row. After so much bad economic news this glimmer is welcome.

But can the American economy simply recover and restore conditions to its former state? Will we return to an economy fueled mainly by consumer spending? Or have the underlying fundamentals changed so utterly that recovery will look nothing like anything we've seen before? If so, do we as a nation have what it takes to thrive in this new reality?

Don Peck's article in the March 2010 *Atlantic Magazine*, "How a New Jobless Era Will Transform America," quotes Heidi Shierholz, an economist at the Economic Policy Institute who said, "We haven't seen anything like this before: a really deep recession combined with a really extended period, maybe as much as eight years, all told, of highly elevated unemployment. We're about to see a big national experiment on stress."

James Madison University Provost Douglas T. Brown believes that the change to our economy and society is fundamental. "I believe this is a wake-up call," he said to me in a recent conversation in his office overlooking the Quad. "Unfortunately there is a prevailing mentality in America where people want to get to work as quickly as possible and be very successful as soon as possible. It was the mentality operating on Wall Street before the recent crash.

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Realistically most things of any significance are built over time and they require a lot of planning and a lot of effort. The production of value is really a much longer-term enterprise than most people believe. And we're now learning that, unfortunately. We're learning it big time."

The provost recently announced his retirement from his post as top academic administrator at JMU. During our extended conversation, he reflected on his 36-year career at Madison and offered his perspective on how the basic realities of education are involved in answering the question,



"Do we as a nation have what it takes to thrive in this new reality?"

Brown's thoughts on the current state of education and how it fits into America's recovery are clear. "I think higher education simply reflects society. That's the shame of all this. The K-12 and higher education systems have really been beaten around by this concept of quick wealth. But no wealth is quick. It can, however, go away quickly, as we've recently seen."

Fortunately, Madison has avoided this trap. Guided by Brown's academic leadership for the last 14 years, an institutional ethos of purpose has pervaded every area of the curriculum. "We've very consciously interlinked our growing set of professional programs (Page 18) with a highly developed liberal arts core. This allows our students to graduate with very marketable skills and a sense of greater purpose."

SPECIALREPORT

One does not need to look deeply to see JMU's balanced approach to developing curriculum. During Brown's time as provost, the arts have been significantly enhanced and made a more integral part of JMU's curriculum. Meanwhile, the College of Business shot up the *BusinessWeek* rankings to 14th best in the nation among public undergraduate business schools. "More and more we know that society needs graduates with excellent technical skills and the ability to think broadly and communicate effectively," says Brown. "Our business students complete nearly half their curriculum in the liberal arts."

Dr. A. Jerry Benson, JMU vice provost and Dr. Brown's interim successor believes that the university's general education program — the portion of the curriculum delivering the liberal arts core — will stand among Brown's greatest accomplishments. "When I think about how the JMU curriculum has changed over the years, particularly in the context of Doug's leadership, the major overhaul of our general education program stands out. What's reflected in this overhaul is his commitment to the core value that we all need a sound liberal arts educational base. Whether we ultimately specialize in one of the liberal arts programs or we go into one of the professional programs, the liberal arts grounds you in terms of your social responsibility and ethical behavior, and also presents new worlds to you so that you're informed from different perspectives."

While JMU's general education program, known as The Human Community, has won numerous national awards for excellence, the most important audience is students. And even they yield a grudging

admiration for the general education program. The Princeton Review's upcoming 2011 edition of *The Best 373 Colleges* says this about JMU's general education program: "Students grumble about the 'Gen Eds,' which require classes in the arts, humanities and sciences and consume about one-third of all undergraduate credits. But students also admire the school's commitment to "educating students in all areas, not just a major concentration" and concede that the classes provide "foundation knowledge every graduating student should have."

Clear affirmation of the university's focus on maintaining a strong liberal arts core came on March 17, when JMU acquired the distinction of becoming home to a Phi Beta Kappa chapter, the oldest and most revered honor society. Phi Beta Kappa celebrates and advocates excellence in the liberal arts and sciences. And fewer than 10 percent of the nation's institutions of higher learning have PBK chapters.

Dr. Meredith Gunter, rector of the JMU Board of Visitors, said in her remarks at the Phi Beta Kappa ceremony, "On the board, we talk about the JMU experience and how much students love it here. We have extraordinary levels of student satisfaction. And when people ask what that is, many assume it has to do with successful sports programs or a great social life or even good food in the dining halls. And while all those things definitely are a factor,



JMU board member Meredith Gunter and provost Doug Brown at the Phi Beta Kappa installation. Brown says, "In a time when society is focused on the intermediate benefits of education rather than its long-term consequences, JMU instead integrated the liberal arts with carefully selected professional programs to meet societal needs."

I believe that when you listen more closely to students, when you dig just a little bit more deeply, and maybe even when you speak to them in private when they're out of the bounds of some of their social conformity, we find in them a love of the life of the mind."

Possessing a broad perspective is really what matters over the long term according to Brown. "Our mission statement describes the outcome we're after. We want students to live productive and meaningful lives. That's why the liberal arts core is every bit as important as the professional programs. Especially when you consider that in the current economy, and whatever is next, specializations will change often. As a matter of fact our graduates likely won't be doing the same thing five years after leaving; and over their lifetimes, they may specialize in five different areas."

Peck writes in *Atlantic Magazine*, "The great recession may be over, but an era of high joblessness is probably just beginning. Before it ends, it will likely change the life course and character of a generation of young adults. Ultimately, it is likely to warp our politics, our culture and the character of our society for years to come."

If Madison alumni negotiate through this warp better than their peers, they may have Doug Brown to thank. He doesn't see it that way, of course, reflecting with his usual humility on his very successful career at Madison: "It's the faculty and staff at JMU. Without a doubt," he says. "Really it's been an honor and a privilege to work with so many very bright people who honestly do care about what will happen to students." ■

JMU professional programs: "A Very Nice Dance"

JMU has successfully balanced growth of its professional programs and the liberal arts core in a response to societal needs. "It's been a very nice dance between JMU and the external world," says provost Douglas T. Brown. "We're probably one of the institutions most responsive to meeting public needs." Society has changed a lot in the last 30 years and look at how much JMU has changed.

Recently added bachelor's programs:

- Biotechnology
- Engineering
- Geographic Sciences
- Health Services Administration
- Information Analysis
- Interdisciplinary Liberal Studies
- Justice Studies
- Statistics

Recently added master's programs:

- Community Counseling
- Political Science: European Union Policy Concentration
- Mathematics
- Occupational Therapy
- Physician Assistant Studies
- Integrated Science and Technology
- Nursing

Recently added doctoral programs:

- Assessment and Measurement
- Clinical Audiology
- Communication Sciences and Disorders
- Clinical and School Psychology
- Performance, Pedagogy and Literature