

The chemistry of student success

Self-examination, proactive support and professors who challenge

At JMU, we are always looking in the mirror. A continuous process of self-examination informs our desire to become ever better at what we do — educate students. We owe this kind of ongoing attentiveness to our mission, to our students, our employees, our donors, the taxpayers of Virginia and, quite frankly, to intellectual integrity. We don't take a step without it.

When we broke ground this fall on our future bioscience building, for instance, we had already asked soul-searching questions to get us to this stage. What is the future of biology? Where will the pioneering activity in the life sciences be centered? What will our future biology majors need to know when they graduate? How do professors need to array themselves in a biosciences headquarters in order to teach them, mentor their research and conduct their own research? What equipment will they need? How will they collaborate? On what scientific topics of investigation? The level of examination led by College of Science and Mathematics Dean David Brakke, and professors Judy Dilts and Mark Gabriele and involving the entire biosciences faculty, prepares Madison to educate the students who will occupy the building when it opens in 2012.

It is in the nature of our JMU faculty to investigate deeply. Our professors continuously challenge themselves, and their students, and our undergraduates rise to the occasion with an impressive student retention rate. Freshmen who entered JMU in 2004, the most recent student cohort for whom we have complete data, took an average 4.12 years to graduate, while 82.4 percent of students who were freshmen in 2004 graduated in six years. A similar 82 percent graduation rate among freshmen who entered JMU in 2002 ranks JMU 11th nationally along with three other institutions, putting us in the 94th percentile among the other 193 universities of similar size and scope.

The reason JMU maintains such a remarkable retention and graduation rate is twofold. First, the same formidable faculty minds that continuously challenge and raise our academic standards are just as dedicated to student success. Our professors tell us they enjoy teaching undergraduates and guiding their development into mature adults and scholars. Our students have compassionate Ph.D. mentors who deliver intellectual challenge.

Augmenting the work of our faculty is JMU's proven program of Student Success, resources increasingly sought out early by students in their academic careers to hone efficient intellectual habits and seek new skills that will serve them as the demands of their



JMU President Linwood H. Rose says the university's Student Success program is lauded among higher education administrators as a "national model."

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programs of study progress and evolve. Our Student Success program is the best of the best. The work that Associate Vice President Randy Mitchell is leading, which begins with freshman Orientation, is regarded across higher education as a national model.

The program establishes a tone of support and sends a message that success — rather than a weeding out of those who can't cut it — defines the Madison Experience. Our students *can* cut it. Our admissions data prove that we have bright and capable students.

Even so, some students do leave for a variety of reasons. Our mutual investment is not lost, however, as those who earn four-year degrees elsewhere increase the graduation rate of the JMU freshman Class of 2004 to 92 percent.

The academy was once regarded as an aristocracy only the most intellectually elite were welcome to join and from which they were then vigorously culled. Today, however, Madison is at the forefront of grasping that it takes a successfully educated citizenry to make informed decisions and address the world's problems.

Those twin, some might say contradictory, pillars of student success and academic rigor highlight the complexity of a developing mind. Both success and high standards together — and decidedly not one without the other — will enable society to create a bright future.

To further ensure that we serve our students well, JMU undertakes a six-year reaccreditation process through the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools every 10 years. An in-depth self-study, to be followed by a SACS review, is under way. It involves every unit on campus and measures us against our very reason for being — student learning. A new component has been added to this all-consuming process. After thorough vetting, we will select a theme for a Quality Enhancement Program capable of galvanizing the entire JMU community and directly benefiting student learning. The process of input and selection has begun, under the leadership of Associate Provost Lee Sternberger, to determine what topic will further transform us in our ongoing quest to educate students. You will hear more about this QEP in the spring, as our process of self-examination continues.

LINWOOD H. ROSE
President
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