

EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW



A rare occasion: Jonathan Alger, J.D., accepts appointment as JMU's sixth president.

Speaking the same language

President-Elect Jonathan Alger talks about democracy, “the engaged university,” JMU’s student-centered culture and a future Madison listening tour

On Nov. 28 something rare occurred at Madison. The JMU Board of Visitors announced a new president to lead JMU. Jonathan Alger, J.D., will take the helm as the university’s sixth president on July 1, 2012. A lawyer who has worked on constitutional issues throughout his career, Alger comes to JMU from Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, where he serves as senior vice president and general counsel. Alger earned his educational degrees at Swarthmore and Harvard Law School.

Even for the Madison community, which embraces change as an integral part of its culture, the appointment of a new president is momentous. In its 103-year history, only five presidents have led the university. Each one has guided the university into a distinctly new phase of its journey and simultaneously upheld Madison’s core values.

Already, Alger and Madison are speaking the same language. In his acceptance remarks last month at the JMU Forbes Center for the Performing Arts, the president-elect spoke extensively of “the engaged university” as his vision for JMU. A movement beginning to take hold in higher education, the engaged university is a concept lived every day by the Madison community. It is regarded as a point of pride among JMU’s 104,000 alumni and as a great promise among 16,000 JMU parents. After the flurry of activity surrounding the presidential announcement subsided, Madison had a chance to speak in depth with President-Elect Jonathan Alger about “the engaged James Madison University,” Madison culture and the future.

Madison: Why is an engaged university important in this day and age?

President-Elect Alger: More than ever, a university has a critical role in preserving and enhancing the heritage of democracy. It is up to us to develop educated and enlightened citizens who will participate actively in the world, who have the knowledge and skills to meet and confront new challenges, and to work with people from different backgrounds. Certainly, higher education can be an economic engine for our communities and the world at large. In the marketplace of ideas that we represent, faculty, students, alumni and others can debate and address the big issues of our time and challenge assumptions. That is how a democracy flourishes and grows.

Madison: Other universities are beginning to embrace the notion of the engaged university, something JMU has embodied for a long time. What is Madison’s role in this movement?

Alger: This is why I am so attracted to James Madison University. The principles of the engaged university are deep-rooted in the JMU culture, summed up so well in Be the Change. Another great strength of JMU is the historic linkage in name to James Madison. He helped build a framework of government in which different perspectives and points of view can thrive. He promoted educated and enlightened citizens who are involved and built structures for diversity and inclusion and progress. As the one university named for him, JMU has a

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unique opportunity to model these principles in action. They are relevant and important more than ever in the 21st century.

Madison: You feel a strong personal connection to James Madison, don't you?

Alger: I do feel a strong connection. As a lawyer who has worked extensively on constitutional issues such as free speech and access, I find that the values James Madison espoused really resonate with me. The whole world today is talking about how to make democracy solve big and pressing problems, and about how government can foster and value human connections and create caring communities who are concerned beyond themselves. Given Madison's Be the Change culture and the strong tradition of student-centered learning, we have the opportunity to really project these values outward. Everyone — faculty, students, alumni — can reflect and enhance those values out in the world through the choices they make in their lives.

Madison: What should parents know about the impact on their students of “the engaged James Madison University?”

Alger: As a parent of a daughter who will soon be headed to college, I understand the parent perspective. When parents send their children to JMU, they can be sure their students will learn how to think beyond themselves, live as part of a community and prepare themselves for lifelong learning. Naturally we want students to engage with ideas in the classroom — to acquire the knowledge accumulated throughout human history. But they are not just passive recipients of knowledge; they are active learners solving problems and tackling big issues, inside and outside the classroom, and acquiring the values of public service. As educators, we are arming students with knowledge, skills and abilities and the courage to use them. To me, that is preparing for a rewarding kind of life in a democracy.

Madison: It sounds as though you are a believer in JMU's student-centered culture.

Alger: It is really important to think of the university as an extended family. When students enter, they become part of that community for the rest of their lives. It is

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— PRESIDENT-ELECT ALGER



In the wings before the announcement at the Forbes Center: future first lady Mary Ann Alger and daughter, Eleanor, 13.

clear that JMU prides itself on student-centered learning in a unique environment, and I am devoted to continuing and deepening that tradition. It is an ingrained part of the Madison Experience. The university combines the very best of the liberal arts tradition — along with interdisciplinary learning, undergraduate research, individual attention from faculty members — as well as the opportunities associated with a large research university — exposure to great minds in a wide variety of disciplines. It is a dynamic and rare combination.

Madison: In your acceptance remarks, you said you would conduct a listening tour of JMU. Will that include alumni?

Alger: Yes, it is very important to me to meet with alumni all across the country. I want to hear from alumni about their hopes and dreams for the future — to hear what Madison has meant to them and how they feel they can be involved in helping to further JMU's goals. I want to make sure alumni feel engaged with what's happening at Madison, to know the ways in which they can be resources — certainly financially — but also as role models and mentors to students and to help the university community think about its impact on the world. I want alumni to feel connected to a Madison that cares about them and that will serve them in important ways and who will also benefit from relationships with other alumni.

Madison: What is the next step for alumni in the life of JMU?

Alger: I'm a big believer in intergenerational learning and in fostering opportunities for alumni to interact with current and prospective students. It is important to learn from one another, and alumni should quite visibly act as mentors and role models. Engaged alumni will help take JMU to the next level of success and prestige. Fostering alumni relationships will constitute a major initiative of mine. For 100 years now, alumni have been rippling outward, taking JMU's Be the Change values into the world. It is critical now for alumni to turn their attention back to the university, and I will be calling on alumni to reach back and help students. It is really important in society that people in different stages of their lives and careers

interact with and learn from one another. Alumni can help students see what they can do with their lives and inspire them in ways no one else can. I want to be very intentional about fostering those interactions.

Madison: Do you see further promise for James Madison's intellectual legacy at JMU?

Alger: Another theme of mine for JMU will be making sure that the university is a beacon for access and opportunity. Fostering diversity and inclusion among students, faculty and staff will help us compete in the global environment and allow people of differing backgrounds, challenges and aspirations to fully develop their potential. James Madison, the man, established those principles in the abstract in the Constitution. It is a tribute to his genius that this living and breathing document continues to evolve and in turn become even more enlightened with diversity and inclusion in the 21st century. ❧

MORE ABOUT PRESIDENT-ELECT JONATHAN ALGER

- Nov. 28 Webcast/Announcement
- Acceptance speech
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