

Why diversity?

In higher education, diversity and excellence go hand in hand **BY MARTHA BELL GRAHAM**

When Jonathan R. Alger came to James Madison University, he brought — along with many notable abilities and aptitudes — a reputation as an eloquent and effective advocate for diversity in higher education. In its Jan. 1, 2012, edition, the *Chronicle of Higher Education* noted, “On the whole, Mr. Alger is one of the most recognizable figures in higher-education law,” citing, among other things, his work for diversity in higher education.

While he was assistant general counsel at the University of Michigan, Alger played a significant role in preparing the university’s case defending a challenge to Michigan’s implementation of the landmark Supreme Court case, *Regents of the University of California vs. Bakke*, in which the court affirmed a university’s right to use race as one factor in establishing a diverse student body. Eventually, the court affirmed Michigan’s right to compose its student body in a way that most effectively supported its educational mission.

It was a significant victory for higher education.

Alger’s understanding of the legal issues — vast as it is — pales in comparison to his ability to thoughtfully and persuasively articulate the case for diversity in higher education, which is about far more than race, a point, which Alger explained in an Oct. 22, 2008, interview with the Rutgers University publication, *Focus, News for and about the Rutgers faculty, students and staff*:

“When we talk about diversity in the educational context, what we’re talking about is not diversity for the sake of diversity, but diversity as a means to an end. And that greater end is educational benefits. Diversity is not just about race,

but also — among other things — about gender, socioeconomic background, geography, special abilities, different life experience and disabilities.”

Alger reinforced that point in an interview for the Winter 2013 *Madison* magazine. “Throughout my career, I have been very dedicated to the proposition that diversity and excellence go hand in hand in higher education,” he said. “The two concepts are not competing with each other, but they are mutually reinforcing. So when I think about diversity, I think about the fact that students and faculty

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president, James Madison University

learn from each other, that they bring different attributes and skills and talents and perspectives to the table.”

A significant factor in any discussion of diversity at James Madison University is how well diversity aligns with and validates the university’s core mission to educate enlightened citizens. Preparing students to enter a world that has become increasingly interconnected is an important task. Alger went on to say: “We want to produce graduates who are prepared for that world of global competition, who are comfortable working in different environments and different contexts with people from different backgrounds. I think we do our students a great service if we can increase the diversity all around them on campus so that once they go off campus and graduate, they will be prepared for that world.”

That kind of preparation, Alger has written, has ramifications far broader than the success of individual students, significant as that is alone. In a 1997 article for the American Association of University Professors bulletin *Academe*, (Vol. 83, No. 1, “The Educational Value of Diversity,”) Alger wrote: “In the post-Cold War world, racial and ethnic tensions have emerged as the greatest single threat to societies all over the globe — ranging from the former Soviet Union and Yugoslavia to South Africa, Rwanda, and even Canada. Face-to-face interaction in the higher education context can play a key role in developing genuine interracial understanding and tolerance to overcome such tensions.”

Diversity, in the final analysis, is about constantly creating and honing the best opportunities for students’ futures and the excellence that engenders. “Once in college together,” Alger wrote in 1997, “... students of different races may discover that their political beliefs or extracurricular interests provide as much or more common ground as does race. No textbook or computer can substitute for the direct personal interaction that leads to this type of self-discovery and growth.”

JMU’s mission to educate enlightened citizens clearly demands a student body that is, as Alger has termed, a microcosm of the world. Seeking diversity looks beyond the easy or the obvious or the status quo to discover what is best for this university and these students in these times and for this future.

President Jon Alger brings to that task a balanced, forward-thinking and deeply reasoned approach that will propel JMU forward as the university continues to prepare students to be citizens of the world. **M**

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