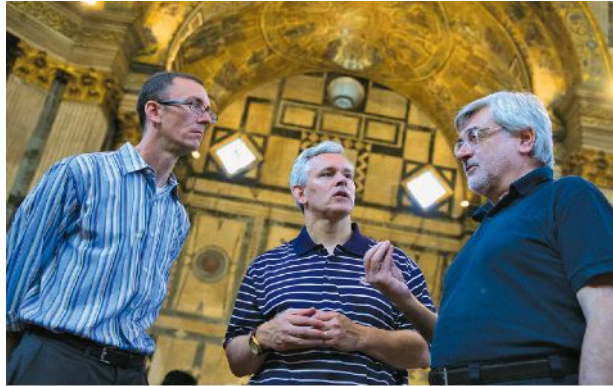


DIRECTIONS

Critical thinkers, innovators and problem solvers

Majors matter, but society needs these three kinds of graduates the most

As part of the continuing “Why Madison?” Presidential Listening Tour, this summer I visited Madison’s Study Abroad programs in Spain, Italy and England. The trip was designed to give me just a taste of our international programs as JMU has a strong presence not only in the European Union (the world’s largest GDP), but also around the globe. On Page 14 of this issue of *Madison*, Morgan Robinson (’13) explains how her Study Abroad in Germany changed her life.



Benvenuti! JMU Political Science Professor John Scherpereel talks with President Jonathan Alger and Semester in Florence Director Alessandro Gentili in the Florence Baptistery.

It was important for me in my first year as president to witness for myself the exceptional opportunities JMU provides our students to gain international experience in preparation for an increasingly globalized community and economy.

I was deeply impressed.

But you may be surprised by something that I heard while abroad.

I met with leaders in European higher education and without exception they professed great admiration not only for JMU, but also for the American system of higher education in general. Despite the gloom and doom in our own domestic media about the current state of our colleges and universities, once you leave the United States you discover that our system of higher education is the envy of the world.

One important reason for this reputation is the well-established system of advocacy for American higher education. While many national associations work to help higher education constantly improve, one of special

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relevance to JMU’s mission is the Association of American Colleges and Universities. The AAC&U is a national organization concerned with, among other issues, the public

standing of undergraduate liberal education. Carol Geary Schneider, AAC&U President, writes the Guest Editor’s note in this edition of *Madison*, and she describes the critical importance of a liberal education in a democracy and increasingly interconnected global community. I agree wholeheartedly. Students and families trying to decide which college or university to attend should read her words. Proud Madison alumni interested in their alma mater’s status nationally will appreciate Schneider’s respect and praise for JMU’s programs.

If you’re unfamiliar with the term “liberal education,” it has nothing to do with contemporary politics. In fact, the roots of a liberal education in Western culture run all the way from ancient Greece, through the Middle Ages and then the Age of Enlightenment, and

into modern times. The term derives from *liber*, the Latin word for “free,” and describes an education designed to cultivate free human beings by equipping them with critical thinking skills. President James Madison himself believed deeply that liberty and learning were interdependent. He wrote in a letter to a friend, “Knowledge will forever govern ignorance. And a people who mean to be their own Governors, must arm themselves with the power which knowledge gives.”

What’s more, U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics data suggest that not only political freedom, but also economic

freedom depends on the power that knowledge gives. During the worst of the recent “Great Recession,” unemployment among those with a bachelor’s degree or higher never rose much above 5 percent. These data may not surprise you, as the connection between the level of educational attainment and employment has long been clear. But what may surprise you are what skills employers find most important today.

National research in the April 2013 AAC&U report, *It Takes More Than a Major*, found that nearly all employers surveyed (93 percent) say that “a demonstrated capacity to think critically, communicate clearly, and solve complex problems is more important than [a candidate’s] undergraduate major.” These are the capabilities built mainly by a liberal education, and why at JMU all students must complete our general education program regardless of their major or professional program. On Page 40 of this issue, Lee Ward explains why helping students become problems solvers and critical thinkers is part of the JMU academic advising process.

Because employers are beginning to more clearly see the connection between success in an innovation-driven knowledge economy and hiring employees equipped with the lasting skills built by a liberal education, the AAC&U created the “Employer-Educator Compact,” which many major for-profit and nonprofit employers have signed. JMU will help to further this effort. Learn more at www.aacu.org.

This issue of *Madison* includes many more features about professors, students and alumni. Seven students share their stories beginning on Page 22. A running theme throughout is the impact that a liberal education is having on their ability to comprehend an increasingly complex world and act in it freely and successfully.

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