

## DIRECTIONS

# Ethics, engagement and enlightenment

Higher education has a critical role in helping solve society's greatest challenges

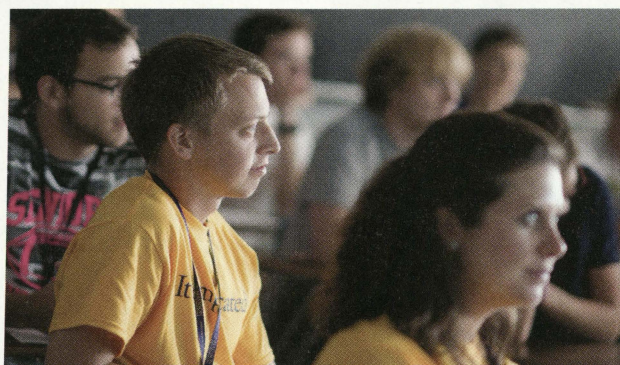
**S**itting in the audience at the Forbes Center during Patti LuPone's stellar sold-out performance earlier this semester was one of my proudest moments so far as president of James Madison University. It was not just because my daughter Eleanor is a huge Broadway and LuPone fan — although it is always nice to be able to impress one's teenage daughter. Rather, it was because of how obviously impressed Ms. LuPone was with Madison. This star of stage and screen does not typically perform with student orchestras, but she agreed to share the stage with ours. Plus, a group of our musical theater students sang back-up for her. At the end of the concert she praised our student musicians lavishly, pointed at the audience with a dramatic gesture and said, "You've got a good thing going here, James Madison." I could not agree more.

Yet another moment of pride came in the same venue a few weeks later on that same stage. Carol Geary Schneider, president of the American Association of Colleges and Universities, spoke as part of a new universitywide lecture series. Dr. Schneider emphasized the importance of a liberal education in a free society and how our country has largely lost sight of the civic and ethical purposes of a liberal education (read more on Page 12). Her remarks

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were part of the Madison Vision Series: Contemporary Issues in an Engaged Society, which is funded by the donors to the Madison Vision Fund. Her speech came during the federal government shutdown this fall. After bemoaning the polarization of political views leading to the impasse, Dr. Schneider praised JMU as a "pioneer" in delivering an education that builds civic equity. "Today, we can carry the foundations you've laid and take them forward," she said of our nationally recognized General Education program. This was another proud moment to be part of the JMU community.

The pride many of us feel in JMU is not based simply upon the positive feeling of being part of an institution that is so often complimented. Our School of Music and General Education programs are just two examples among many that elicit such praise. More importantly, we can take pride in the fact that Madison is becoming more widely recognized as an example of how universities must evolve as the velocity of societal change continues



In August President Jonathan R. Alger told 4,200 new students about JMU's new initiative, the Madison Collaborative. "It's a program that is going to help you think about and manage ethical decisions in your personal, professional and civic lives," he said.

to accelerate. Higher education often is accused of an unwillingness to change as economic and technological forces disrupt and transform other sectors of society. While this accusation may be true of some institutions, it could not be further from the truth at Madison.

You will read in this issue of *Madison* example after example of how our approach to engagement on multiple levels is leading the way for how higher education can play a critically important role in helping face society's many challenges. The

Madison Collaborative: Ethical Reasoning in Action is a prime example (See Page 32). Teaching ethical reasoning skills to every student who attends JMU is the sort of audacious commitment that we make at Madison to confront societal issues. You will also read about how we celebrated Constitution Day and International Week during the same month (Page 40). At JMU we believe that gaining an understanding of our nation's founding principles and other cultures gives our students a clearer picture of their places as citizens in an increasingly complex global community. In our polarized society it's refreshing to see students thrive in their engagement with what often are portrayed in the popular media as mutually exclusive ideas. Yes, you can have a good grasp on American founding principles *and* celebrate other cultures. That's what we mean by enlightened.

The critically important work of the Madison Future Commission also continues. I am happy to report that not only is the work of the commission thoughtful and comprehensive, but it is also producing a level of engagement throughout the Madison community that I find inspiring. An example of the quality of this engagement is that nearly without exception, comments coming to the commission via its website are well reasoned, constructive and signed. Typically, opportunities to provide input via the web can produce some snarky anonymous sniping. Not at Madison. The work of the commission will wrap up in the new year and produce a roadmap for where we are headed during the next six years. It's an exciting time, and I am delighted you are engaged with us.

*Jonathan R. Alger*

JONATHAN R. ALGER  
President, James Madison University