



Students and 1787 Orientation facilitators explain the Madison Collaborative in their own words

It's complicated.

BY PAULA POLGLASE ('92, '96M)

A category 5 hurricane, Sharon, strikes the northeast coast of the United States. Millions are without water, electricity and basic survival needs of food and shelter. Thousands are totally isolated and hundreds are presumed dead. As part of 1787 August Orientation first-year students took on the role of the Federal Emergency Management Agency's regional response task force, assigned to direct the rescue and recovery of those whose lives remain at risk. There are more requests for immediate assistance than resources to help.

Students debated sending aid to families who chose not to evacuate but are now in peril, a prison that is flooding whose inmates are in danger, personal friends who called to request assistance, government officials demanding resources for their constituents and residents with limited access to public transportation who are at risk.

The point is, "It's complicated."

Students and facilitators responded very positively to "It's Complicated," the 75-minute experience developed by Orientation and The Madison Collaborative, saying it was a valuable experience full of lively and thought-provoking discussion. The students used a talking piece and Eight Key Questions (8KQs) to evaluate the ethical dimensions of the scenario. The key questions explore outcomes, fairness, authority, liberty, rights, responsibilities, empathy and character.

The goal is to teach students to use the 8KQs during their time at JMU and beyond to navigate complicated situations in all aspects of their lives. ■



'As a student and a citizen of a greater community, it will now be incumbent upon you to use the tools (the 8 KQs) you have been provided to evaluate and resolve challenging situations. In a world where we predominately react on reflex, I challenge you to react with reflection using ethical reasoning.'

– TISHA McCOY-NTIAMOAH, *director of orientation addressing students*

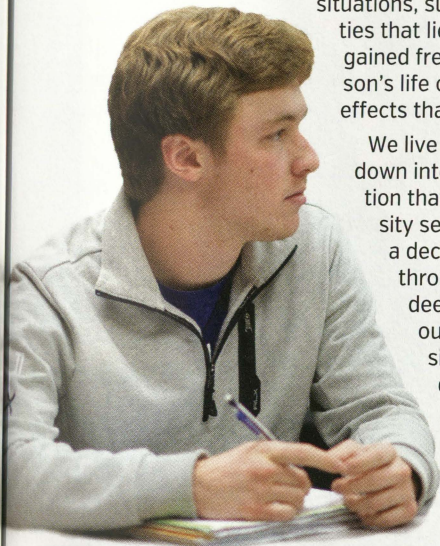
Ethics in action

Personal reactions to the Madison Collaborative

Entering college all that I could think about was all of my newly gained freedoms. I would have freedom from parents, freedom to follow rules and even freedom to eat whatever I wanted. Anything truly seems possible, and in a sense it is. That is the scary part. We college freshman have spent the last eighteen years of our life constrained to limitations and so when we finally obtain freedoms, rarely do we see the ethical dilemmas that arise as consequences to our own decisions. That is what the Madison Collaborative succeeded in showing my overly ambitious 18-year-old brain. As we analyzed and discussed ethical situations, such as a mock hurricane, I saw the parallel difficulties that lie in almost every decision I will make with my newly gained freedoms. I may never have to choose to save one person's life over another, but I will definitely have to consider the effects that my decisions have on other people.

We live in such a technical world that we break everything down into numbers and with that we can miss out on the emotion that lies beneath every decision. James Madison University sees we sometimes neglect the other perspectives of a decision and miss the meaning behind the numbers; so through programs like the Madison Collaborative we go deeper than just those numbers. We gain a balance in our life of the technical and emotional aspects of decisions; so that when we graduate we do not just have a degree, but a well balanced understanding of life and empathy that will lead to us not just becoming the future, but creating a better future.

– JOHN GULLETTE, *physics major, Centreville, Va.*



'I think this will help me with thinking about all sides of a situation instead of going into it headfirst; you think about how you effect other people, how it will effect you. It teaches you good values in life.'

– SYDNIE LONG ('17),
Woodbridge, Va.

'The students were so thoughtful in their consideration of the Eight Key Questions as it related to the Hurricane Sharon scenario. I was amazed at how willingly and deeply each group explored the issues surrounding decision making. I believe the students left the session energized to be a part of an academic environment that encourages healthy, respectful debate in the name of personal growth and community building.'

– STEFANIE WARLICK,
assistant director of Rose Library

'The It's Complicated session helped a lot in understanding what the collaborative is about to get a fuller experience at Madison.'

– JAKE MULLHOLAND ('17),
Swedesboro, N.J.

'I liked that the session gave us a chance to think of real world situations and how we would do that. It's already really different from high school – you're not just a kid anymore, you're in the real world.'

– KATIE HUNT ('17),
Virginia Beach, Va.

I always enjoy the opportunities I have to interact with students and facilitating one of the "It's Complicated" sessions was a great experience. The energy in the room... there was a freshness, a curiosity, an openness that characterized the experience.

Responding to situations with intention is generally more positive than just being reactive. Sometimes, life moves so quickly though, that we are often reactive by default. "It's Complicated" provided students with the opportunity to understand more fully that making decisions in life is not always as simple as black and white. Sometimes you have to use your gray crayon. The scenario had enough nuance and complexity to really allow students the chance to apply the Eight Key Questions. I thought the structure given by using the talking piece – when only the person holding it could talk – was a great device to help students focus on what the one person was saying without interruption.

When they entered the room, the students may have thought that this exercise would be really simple, but going through the process, listening to others, and hearing different perspectives allowed them to leave having a richer appreciation for looking at multiple sides of an issue and dealing with competing priorities. More importantly, I also think they had a deeper understanding of themselves.

– MARSHA MAYS-BERNARD, *associate vice president, Multicultural Awareness and Student Health*

