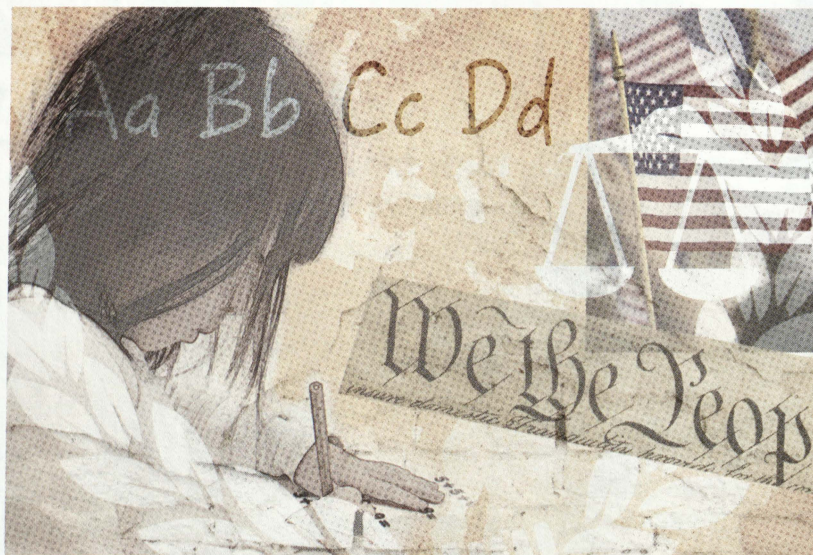


Equality of opportunity

The hope of effective educational reform

James Madison's friend, Thomas Jefferson, and his co-authors of the Declaration of Independence were impressively economical, given that documents written by committee typically are anything but. More importantly, the founders were effective: Their taut, 1,337-word declaration united the 13 colonies and helped provide the inspiration that ultimately liberated the new nation from the



Phillip Wishon, dean of the JMU College of Education, writes eloquently and passionately about the power of education to sustain our humanity. Dr. Wishon believes that the core of effective education reform ought to derive from the belief that “deeply absorbed searches for that which is just beyond our intellectual and emotional understanding are central to the core of our nature

tyranny of King George III. It is the hope and aim of educators that students learn the importance and meaning of our nation's founding principles, especially now. The concepts contained in our founding documents are interpreted in widely divergent ways today, and for any of us who seek to understand various points of view and form our own positions, a grasp of their meanings is critical.

Danielle Allen, a political philosopher at Princeton's Institute of Advanced Study, presents an important idea in her new book *Our Declaration*. She argues that the Founding Fathers believed liberty and equality were co-dependent, and that one could not exist fully without the presence of the other. The book's subtitle, *A Reading of the Declaration of Independence in Defense of Equality*, clearly stakes out her thesis: She means to elevate equality to the same status as liberty in modern dialogues. Allen makes an interesting point. Watch, read or listen to any popular political commentary, and you will hear passionate and utterly certain opinions on what constitutes liberty. But equality is discussed with less frequency and with far less certainty. Even among those who ardently work toward reaching equality, there are no widely agreed-upon means with which to apply the idea, or how to know when equality has been reached.

In this issue of *Madison* you will read several articles on education reform. The topic transcends our individual personal interests and is one the most fundamental challenges facing society. Equality is at the heart of education reform because of the disparities in educational opportunities and quality across our public school systems. Consequently, we as a society risk leaving behind swaths of fellow citizens who are not given full opportunities to develop to their full potential, at a time when economic realities require higher and higher levels of education to prosper. This level of inequality is alarming, because, if Danielle Allen is indeed right, then American freedom may be in peril.

as humans.” Such a wonderful sentiment drives much of Dr. Wishon's work and the work of his colleagues. As a result, JMU graduates entering the K-12 system possess this insight and become individual agents of change everywhere they go. This is how education reform can unfold and how freedom and equality can be secured.

The Founding Fathers may have believed equality and freedom were co-dependent as Danielle Allen writes, and that working toward a society in which people are treated as equals was a moral and ethical imperative (if a distant goal given the circumstances at the time). But Jefferson and his fellow founders could not have foreseen the complexities we face today. Working toward equality of opportunity is now a matter of survival for our republic. Carly Fiorina, when she spoke on campus as part of the Madison Vision Series, captured eloquently why equality should be a practical concern for us all. The former Hewlett-Packard CEO and current member of the JMU Board of Visitors covered a broad range of topics in her remarks, including the elevated importance of a liberal arts education in our increasingly complex world. In particular, Ms. Fiorina said, “Solving our problems or capturing our opportunities, in this complicated, rapidly changing, interconnected world, requires first a profound respect for the capabilities and the potential of others. And the reason that respect is so important is because nothing happens with a single person acting alone. That has always been true, but it is especially true now.” Reforming education requires our collective commitment and effort.

Jonathan R. Alger

JONATHAN R. ALGER

President, James Madison University