

DIRECTIONS

The true power of education

As one of the world's youngest democratic republics, Kosovo is working to strengthen its public institutions and habits of governing required to support an open, civil society. A Muslim-majority nation, Kosovo has developed a constitution (modeled in part after our own) and seeks to embrace and celebrate its multicultural and multireligious population. Vlora Citaku, Kosovo's ambassador to the United States, refers to her country as a "secular republic on an irreversible path towards being embraced as an equal member of the free nations of the world."

Making progress down that path requires creating greater economic opportunity for young Kosovars. As this fledgling democracy with an optimistic spirit and clear sense of purpose seeks to build a stronger economy and to reduce unemployment, it faces the daunting challenge of overcoming targeted radicalization and recruitment efforts by foreign-funded extremist networks. Kosovars most susceptible to these efforts are those who see no hope for a self-determined future enabled by employment opportunities. And because of the critical and direct link between employment and education, leaders in Kosovo believe that elevating the robustness of their higher education system is among their most urgent challenges.

In June, I traveled to Kosovo with several JMU faculty members and administrators, building on earlier visits from higher-education leaders from Kosovo to JMU over the past year. These exchanges are part of a formal agreement between JMU and Kosovo that covers areas essential to excellence in higher education—including developing faculty expertise and sharing JMU's experience in academic program review, student assessment and accreditation. The collaboration has grown out of the relationship JMU established initially through our dear friend and colleague Ahmet Shala: the first finance minister of Kosovo, a former Kosovar ambassador to Japan and a doctoral student in JMU's School of Strategic Leadership Studies.


While in Kosovo, we met with leaders from their Ministry of Education, Science and Technology as well as from their public and private universities. They had just experienced a national election that produced some uncertainty about how the nation will be governed in the future, but they were nevertheless determined to move forward with their hopes and dreams for higher education. I was immediately struck by their respect and appreciation for the United States and for its role in protecting Kosovo at its darkest

hour of war and genocide during the late 1990s. The people we met do not take freedom and democracy for granted—they embrace their rights and responsibilities with gusto. They combine this zeal for building for the future with a powerful sense of history. As I interact with them, I am constantly reminded that we have much to learn from and with each other.

I was also struck by the enterprising spirit of the people of Kosovo, who are dealing with the transition from a formerly communist regime (as part of the former Yugoslavia) to a market-oriented economy. They see the development of entrepreneurial thinking as a key to their future success. They also see the value of interdisciplinary teaching and learning to address the most significant and complex issues of our time. These are strengths they see in JMU's educational approach, and why they are so invested in our relationship.

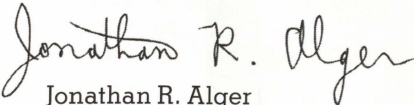
Our interactions here and in Kosovo have served as a powerful reminder that the issues of higher education are at once local and global. They also illustrate the enduring power of relationships that provide inspira-

tion and hope in higher education, and that undergird the entire Madison Experience. Repeatedly, our friends in Kosovo have said that they are impressed with JMU's emphasis on developing both the head and the heart of our students. That is why they see us as an important strategic partner and a leader in the world of higher education.

The real promise of this relationship is perfectly depicted by an interaction Herb Amato, JMU's associate vice provost for academic development and part of the team working with Kosovo, had with a U.S. Army officer on an airplane returning to the states from Kosovo. The officer struck up a conversation with Herb because he was curious, since few American civilians travel to and from Kosovo. After learning about the goal of JMU's relationship with Kosovo, the officer said, "Your approach could make far more progress in Kosovo than we can militarily." What a wonderful perspective! The idea that developing education rather than using force to help a new republic expressed by an Army officer ought to give us all great hope and inspire pride in Madison. 



President Alger (center) in the Kosovo city of Gjakova with visiting JMU faculty member Ahmet Shala (left) and Shaban Buza, rector of the University of Gjakova.


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