

BRIGHT LIGHTS

How to succeed in business

Northrop Grumman President Kathy Warden ('92) talks about perseverance, disappointment and accomplishment

BY JAN GILLIS ('07)

Kathy Warden ('92) began 2018 transitioning to new roles as president and chief operating officer of Northrop Grumman, having previously served as corporate vice president and president of the global aerospace and defense company's Mission Systems business.

Where she is today might have seemed out of reach to the young woman who came to JMU as a first-generation student from Hagerstown, Maryland. "I came to Madison eager to learn and gain experience that would prepare me to step into my career," says Warden. "I received that here."

She focused on computer information systems and economics, both of which have been foundational to her career. "I loved my programming classes in CIS despite the fact that you spent sleepless nights in the lab trying to get those programs to compile. It taught me a lot about how to persevere and think critically."

Madison's emphasis on critical-thinking skills and the ability to think independently proved essential.

"I learned to think about tasks logically and to break big problems down into smaller components. I remember an assignment where I had to try different approaches after realizing that my first attempt to solve a problem was not going to work," she says. Her academic proj-

ects inured her to discouragement when she encountered similar situations in the workplace. "I had learned challenges are just another experience to build upon."

She also appreciates the fact that JMU allowed her to interface with people of different backgrounds, experiences and majors. "In the business world, most of your work is done in teams, and that felt very natural to me based on the experiences I had at JMU."

Her economics classes allowed her to reap another benefit. Warden serves on the board of the Federal Reserve Bank of Richmond. Twenty-five years out of the classroom, "I was able to draw on things that I learned that long ago to help me in my board service," she says.

While a good academic foundation was a primary reason for Warden's decision to come to JMU, she was also looking for an environment that provided ready friendship and opportunities for involvement with other students and the community. "I absolutely found that at JMU," she says, recounting the combination of volunteering in literacy programs, pledging to a business fraternity and working on campus in the computer lab. It was a life lesson. "At JMU, I really learned to balance all those activities," she says. "I continue to practice [that] balance today."

Warden acknowledges the challenges that she and other women in leadership positions face on a regular basis. "One of the most important things for women to remember is to be resilient," she says. "There are going to be times when it's tough. Be confident in your ability to contribute. It's what got you there. It's what will make you successful."

Her advice for today's undergraduates? "Everybody follows their own journey," she says. Warden recommends taking on new challenges, even taking a little bit of risk early in your career. "It's a great time to experiment and learn new things," she says. The payoff is that "for the rest of your life you're willing to take on the things that



Warden talks with early-career employees after a town hall meeting during National Manufacturing Day.



Kathy Warden, Northrop Grumman's president and chief operating officer, addresses the executive leadership team at the company's annual leadership conference.

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other people might shy away from. You really build confidence that sustains you in making tough decisions.”

She cautions that success can come with disappointment. “Professional disappointments come in all flavors: I’ve had setbacks; I’ve not gotten opportunities that I wanted to have. Regardless, it’s important to very quickly move past it, learn from it and recognize that you’ll get another shot. People are watching how you handle disappointment, so it’s important to handle that with professionalism, grace and the ability to move on,” she says. “Do not dwell in the past and how you would do it over again, instead think how you would apply that lesson to the future and the next time you encounter a similar situation.”

development. I find that to be very true here at JMU,” she says.

“It’s a university with a great academic foundation but also a much broader agenda, to be a socially responsible university, to grow students to do great things in the world not just through their education but also through teaching them to be well-rounded individuals and contributors to society,” she says.

Warden is proof that the Madison formula works.

She believes that her kinship with fellow Dukes is universal. “I have never seen anyone who has come to JMU and walked away with a negative thing to say,” she says. “That’s something I’m very proud of: To say I’m a Duke.”

