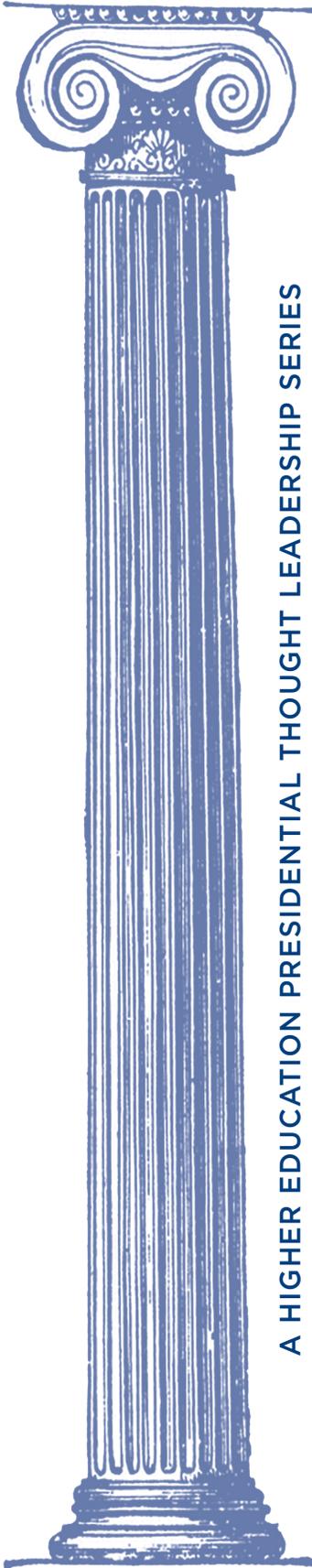
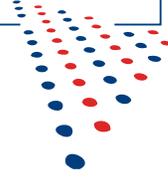


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CHAPTER

4

Transformation through
Active Engagement

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Transformation through Active Engagement

Jonathan R. Alger: President of James Madison University

With its reliance on a highly skilled workforce, higher education is often described as “the next bubble to burst.” Politicians and pundits call daily for “disruptive” transformational changes to bring down costs, focusing heavily on the latest trends in technology. What many in this discussion miss is that higher education is constantly transforming. After all, the new learning technologies heralded as the potential downfall of higher education were developed on the very campuses they purportedly will kill. So as is true with most breathless and contentious public dialogues, a more nuanced assessment of how higher education ought to further transform is in order.

To begin, predicting that technologically delivered content will completely replace traditional forms of teaching and learning is like predicting that watching cooking shows will replace eating food. While cooking shows can help us to make our food taste better, it is preposterous to suggest that watching them can replace the actual consumption of nourishment. In this way, real experiences and nourishing human connections made between students, their professors, and their fellow students may be more important now than ever, as technologies that shorten attention spans and enable shallow substitutes for real, meaningful relationships proliferate.

The critical importance of faculty-student relationships recently was underscored by a Gallup study of more than 30,000 college graduates. The Gallup-Purdue Index found that graduates who had at least one professor who took a personal interest in them and acted as a mentor have double the odds of being engaged at work and thriving with a sense of well-being. Of course, real human connections can still be made with technology in the mix, and many institutions are putting such hybrid approaches in place successfully, including James Madison University (JMU). But a long-term, historical perspective on transformation in education should cause us to reflect on the importance of human interactions and relationships as we seek to prepare students for the 21st century.

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Why Madison?

Like many institutions, JMU already has a long history of evolving in significant ways to meet the changing needs of our society. Founded as a small women's teachers' college in 1908, JMU today is a public, comprehensive, coeducational university with seven colleges, a graduate school, and more than 20,000 students. For us, institutional transformation has been driven first and foremost by a focus on the long-term skill sets and habits of mind we believe students must cultivate to live meaningful and productive lives.

With this as a starting point, and against the backdrop of calls for higher education to transform, JMU recently conducted a comprehensive self-examination first by asking the question, "Why Madison?" In other words, what is the value proposition for a comprehensive university like James Madison today, and what should we be doing to enhance that proposition as the world rapidly changes? We asked these questions on the "Why Madison?" Presidential Listening Tour with university constituencies on campus and around the world just after I became president in 2012.

In listening to alumni of varying ages answer the "Why Madison?" question, I heard repeatedly about the types of characteristics they believed were important to their success. They described skills in critical thinking and analysis, communications (both oral and written), problem solving, creativity and innovative thinking, teamwork, leadership, willingness to take initiative and to keep learning on the job, resilience in the face of challenges and setbacks, and ethical reasoning. And at every stop on the tour alumni foreshadowed the Gallup-Purdue Index findings by crediting heavily the impact of their personal interactions with faculty and fellow students for developing these broader skills and attributes.

Research on what skills and abilities employers want their hires to possess corroborates the importance of those mentioned by our alumni. On behalf of the Association of American Colleges & Universities, Hart Research Associates found that employers believe "a candidate's demonstrated capacity to think critically, communicate clearly, and solve complex problems is *more important* than their undergraduate major."

So, if the knowledge, skills and abilities that matter most to employers are those broader ones that come not necessarily from the major, but from personal interactions, human engagement not only matters, it carries incredible value. Moreover, on the Listening Tour people of all ages expressed a hunger for living lives with meaning and purpose in which they connect deeply with others. For these reasons, we at Madison believe that defining, propagating, and measuring the effectiveness of opportunities for engagement to be the critical transformation necessary to preserve and enhance the value proposition of higher education.

Planning for Transformation

Following the Listening Tour, we developed a new strategic plan through an inclusive process led by the Madison Future Commission—a broadly representative group that included faculty, staff, students, alumni, and community members all who represent constituencies with a vested interest in the university's future. Taking into consideration all the data gathered during the Listening Tour, the Commission identified a set of values, core qualities, and goals that were eventually adopted by our governing board as "The Madison Plan." Leading the plan is a bold new vision for the university to become "the national model of the engaged university: engaged with ideas and the world."

Here is where it starts to get exciting. Three distinct but related facets of real human engagement at JMU emerged from this process that became the cornerstones of our strategic plan:

- Engaged Learning
- Community Engagement
- Civic Engagement



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All three types of engagement are distinctly defined as part of The Madison Plan, yet depicted as overlapping with the other two in a Venn diagram. Once they were defined, we created the Engaged University Council with committees representing each of these three facets of engagement to ensure that we systematically, across departmental and college lines, integrate these forms of engagement across the entire institution. This group also will generate a set of learning outcomes for each type of engagement so that our nationally recognized Center for Assessment and Research Studies can accurately measure their impact on the student experience.

Engaged Learning

The challenge for an institution as large as ours is to allow each academic program to develop its own pedagogical approaches that work best to engage students in that discipline, while ensuring that all students benefit from high-quality, high-touch experiences. Learning communities, undergraduate research projects, courses that are team-taught across disciplinary boundaries, or in which students work on projects as teams, community-service learning, study-abroad experiences of varying durations and internships are just a few such practices incorporated into the curriculum. Voluminous research demonstrates that these active forms of learning help students to develop the skill sets mentioned earlier by alumni and employers, and to become lifelong learners. Another important factor in delivering engaged learning is the student/faculty ratio, which we intentionally maintain at 16:1 (an ambitious goal for an institution of our size and budget). That choice necessitates a substantial investment in people who cannot be replaced by technology.

Community Engagement

At JMU, we stress that engagement includes not just learning theories and ideas inside the classroom, but their active application to real-world challenges. Community engagement, including reflective service-learning—for which Madison is a nationally recognized leader—as well as volunteer activities, enable students to understand and relate to the world and people around them, at all levels of community. Our students pursue alternative break opportunities locally, nationally, and internationally, and participate in service learning while studying abroad.

Civic Engagement

As the institution named for the Father of the U.S. Constitution, we believe that students should also identify and pursue not just their rights as citizens, but also their responsibilities. For us, civic engagement involves an active embrace of one's constructive role in a democratic society—a role the Founding Fathers believed was critical for the health and vitality of this system of government. To bring these ideals to life, we are drawing renewed attention to the principles for which Madison fought—including the need to express and accommodate a diverse array of voices and perspectives in society, and to foster debate, civil discourse and compromise on contentious issues. To help students reflect on their own choices and their broader consequences, we initiated *The Madison Collaborative: Ethical Reasoning in Action*—a university wide program touching every student in Freshman Orientation and infused throughout the curriculum—in which students learn about key questions to ask themselves as they think about the decisions they make in their personal, professional, and civic lives and how those decisions affect the people and communities around them.

Making Transformation Go

Recognizing that we also needed to build a sense of ownership and collaboration from the ground up with the faculty as our frontline educators, we instituted a mini-grant program from the newly created Madison Vision Fund—in which our Faculty Senate reviews and funds project proposals, on a competitive basis, from fellow faculty members that support the new vision and the three facets of engagement. Hiring, promotion, and tenure criteria also will reflect our commitment to engagement.



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To excite alumni and other supporters beyond the university about our direction, we created the Madison Trust—a “shark tank” approach that provides an opportunity for faculty, staff, and students to pitch innovative ideas to potential financial supporters. Already, response to the Madison Trust has been electric. A faculty member in biology who, with a colleague from our industrial design program, successfully pitched an idea to the Madison Trust for helping oysters thrive in the nearby James River, describes the rest of her department as suddenly energized with an entrepreneurial zeal.

This one example represents a critically important outcome of our focused and intentional emphasis of engagement: those engaged develop a creative and innovative problem-solving mindset much in the style of traditional entrepreneurs, but in every discipline. The innovation and creative problem solving taught in entrepreneurship programs typically housed in colleges of business can be translated into programs in health care, the arts, public administration—you name it—by intentionally defining, propagating, and assessing engagement. This is powerful.

Clearly, we are focused on the educational power of human interaction and engagement. But just to be clear, we are no Luddites at Madison. Our Center for Instructional Technology and Center for Faculty Innovation are working diligently with faculty in every program on developing new and more efficient ways to deliver teaching and learning. Thousands of courses at JMU are available online, and departments from nursing to physics are delivering courses in flipped learning formats so that students can move through selected course work faster and learn more. But I firmly believe that while the American higher education system is comprised of a diverse array of institutions with different missions, affiliations, sizes, service areas, demographics, and programmatic emphases, we can all benefit from a renewed emphasis on the educational power and potential of human and active engagement.

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Jonathan Alger was appointed the sixth president of James Madison University in 2012. President Alger previously served as Senior Vice President and General Counsel at Rutgers, and also held prior positions at the University of Michigan, American Association of University Professors, U.S. Department of Education, and a major international law firm. He is a nationally recognized scholar and speaker on higher education policy and law, and has played a leadership role in initiatives on such topics as access, diversity, and academic freedom. He has taught courses at both the undergraduate and graduate level, and currently co-teaches an honors seminar on leadership.

President Alger is the past chair of the Board of Directors of the National Association of College and University Attorneys, which has recognized him with Life Membership and the Distinguished Service Award. He has served on many other national advisory boards and committees including the American Bar Association’s Accreditation Committee and the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Advisory Council for the National Institutes of Health. He currently serves on the Division I Board of Directors for the NCAA, the American Association of State Colleges and Universities’ Council of State Representatives, and Virginia’s GENEDGE Alliance Board of Trustees. He is a graduate of Swarthmore College and Harvard Law School.

