

Section 5
Conclusions and Recommendations

5.1 Student Study

Students at James Madison University are generally very pleased with their education and happy with their college choice. Based on the survey results, an overwhelming majority of JMU students said that they were satisfied with JMU on an overall basis. If given the chance, a large majority of the polled students would choose JMU again for their undergraduate degree and that JMU had a positive impact of their lives. A majority of the students surveyed also said they would recommend JMU to their friends and family and that they were proud to be receiving a degree from JMU.

JMU students, through their words and actions, appear to be involved students. Many of the senior surveys said they feel a strong level of personal commitment to JMU and are aware of and interested in issues affecting the University. A large percentage are also involved in clubs and organizations on campus and many give back to the community through volunteer service.

There is, however, a disconnect between student satisfaction with JMU and their understanding of the importance of giving back to the University. While a majority of students said they were aware of the Senior Class Challenge, for example, many did not plan to participate. Reasons for their non-participation varied although many students said they simply did not have the money to donate. While this may be true for some students, the real issue seems to be that students do not think the senior class challenge was an important enough venue for their financial investment. Students also were often misinformed about how the money for the Senior Class Challenge will be used resulting in additional, and unnecessary discontent.

Another problem for JMU is that many students do not believe that alumni should donate to the university nor are they confident that they plan to do so themselves when they graduate. This may be attributed to the fact that many students are not aware of the importance of alumni donations to the University. By the time students are approached at the end of their senior year and asked to donate to the Senior Class Challenge, students often feel they have already given JMU enough money in the form of tuition, fees, books, etc. Students who do not see the importance of alumni donations while they are still here, will be unlikely to do so after they join the ranks of the alumni. This sense of giving back must be entrenched into the university culture and done so from the day the student begins their JMU experience.

5.1.1 Student Group Differences of Interest to the University

While there was much similarity among the JMU seniors surveyed in this study, there were also some notable differences that may serve useful to the University as it attempts to develop stronger relationships with its graduating class.

5.1.1.1 Gender Differences

Overall, females were more involved students and appeared to have closer relations with JMU than males. Females were more involved in organizations, established better relationships with friends and professors, showed more interest in communications from the University, and felt more connected with all aspects of JMU. Although there were not any significant differences pertaining to donations, females were more likely to say they planned to attend reunions and join a local alumni chapter/club after graduation. If females are more involved, they may be more likely to donate time or other resources to JMU. It may be wise to try to do some type of campaign or marketing to get males to become more involved and feel more connected to JMU. Males do not feel as strongly as females that communication materials are developed with the students' interests in mind and are less likely to agree that JMU does a good job of keeping them updated on what is happening at the university. JMU may want to try utilizing other media channels and resources to reach its male population. This lack of communication may be why males do not feel as connected or informed.

5.1.1.2 Residential Differences

Interestingly, out-of-state students were more involved with the University than in-state students. Out-of-state students were also more satisfied with their experience at JMU, think that JMU has had a more positive impact on their lives, tended to be involved in more clubs and organizations, agreed that they attended more events/campus activities at JMU, were more likely to say they planned to participate in the Senior Class Challenge, and felt more connected to JMU based on their graduation class year. Out-of-state students, because of their larger financial investment in JMU, may be more proactive in ensuring that their college experience is positive. They may also be more involved in clubs and activities because they are less likely to arrive on campus with a cohort of friends from their area. Out-of-state students may also not have been able to travel home as often as in-state students; therefore, they involve themselves in more activities to keep themselves busy and feel as though they are part of the University community.

5.1.1.3 Volunteering in the Community

Students who have volunteered were considerably more involved and connected to JMU. Those who have performed volunteer service to an organization in the past year agreed more often that they would recommend JMU to others, had a stronger level of personal commitment to JMU, considered themselves to be involved students, believed JMU has had a positive impact on their life, agreed that they were a member of a JMU club or organization, planned to join a JMU regional alumni chapter/club after graduation, would attend a class reunion, and were more likely to say that they will donate money to JMU after graduation. These findings are most likely the result of the driving nature of these types of

individuals. They are very active and involved and have put in a lot of personal time into JMU, therefore; they have a higher level of personal commitment and feel as though JMU has made a greater impact on their lives. They probably enjoy being involved in various activities and receive satisfaction in being an active participant. They feel as though it is important to give back; thus, they are more likely to donate resources to JMU.

5.1.4 Post Graduation Plans

Students who have already obtained jobs after graduation or those who are actively seeking jobs were more satisfied with their experience with JMU overall. These students were also more involved in clubs and organizations, more interested in receiving information post graduation, more likely to be interested in the daily events at James Madison and more likely to believe alumni should support the University by donation. These students have also found JMU helpful in finding post graduation plans and believed that JMU has had a positive impact on their lives. These are the students who are more committed to JMU and would be more likely to choose JMU again if given the opportunity arose. These findings seem to be justifiable as these students are most likely your hard working, driven students. If they already have a job or are actively seeking a job they may simply be more motivated individuals who have a stronger level of commitment to their goals and the things in which they are involved. This commitment in turn reflects their interest in James Madison University and their involvement both before and after graduation.

5.1.2 Student Recommendations

Because students who volunteer through community service are more likely to give back to the campus, it is recommended that JMU create a volunteer program that students can participate in on the JMU campus. This new program would insure that students feel more connected with the campus and the University as a whole. This program should begin during the freshmen year in order to instill the notion in JMU students that giving back is a part of the JMU culture. As individuals who volunteer are more likely to receive employment or be accepted to graduate school compared to those that do not, they are also more likely to be satisfied with the University and more apt to give back when it is their turn to do so.

The University should consider a greater emphasis of involvement in clubs and organizations, especially for in-state students who may be more likely to travel home on weekends rather than remain on-campus. The University should not make moves to limit the involvement the student body wishes to create. Students need activities beyond than the social aspect they can gain from the campus to feel connected to the University. Students should also not be limited in the creation and functions of clubs, organizations, or Greek life. Many students feel that the University limits their involvement in clubs/organizations,

and Greek life, with increased rules and regulations that seem to be pushing the organizations off-campus rather than allowing them the freedom of carrying out the social traditions they have become accustomed to. It is recommended that the University promote on-campus social activities such as tailgating and BBQ's during the football season, Homecoming Weekend, and Alumni Weekend. If a student is given the opportunity to tailgate at a home football game and it is considered "common" then the number of students who attend the football games is likely to increase. An increased participation in the number of students attending activities such as football games is likely to instill a greater feeling of pride within the students that they may not feel in the present environment. The creation of a message board is also recommended. This message board could be placed in a popular spot on campus and could display weekly happenings in on-campus organizations. The message board could contain messages about what is happening on-campus and in the local Harrisonburg community that would encourage individuals to stay at school on the weekends and create stronger bonds to the University.

As freshmen arrive on campus, the importance of giving back to the University should be stressed as well as the benefits of doing so. To ask for donations at the end of the students' college careers without first explaining the importance of them, leaves students feeling bitter towards the school. Students often feel they have a transactional relationship with JMU; they pay their tuition and, in return, receive an education. JMU must create true relationships with its students if it wants students to feel committed to and give back to the University. It might also be helpful if advisors or counselors could sit down with students and parents one-on-one and show how their donations are used and how to donate most effectively. Talking about the senior challenge and why it is important from day one, allows the entire student body a chance to participate in the creation of the project and a better understanding of the tradition behind it.

Many students feel the school is not providing assistance in helping students to find job after college. A required class on preparing for life after graduation (it should be noted that many universities offer orientation classes for freshmen on introduction to university life) as a senior would teach the undergraduate population the skills for locating employment, which services help students prepare for graduate school tests, or other skills that many students are finding more and more difficult to locate on their own. This class could either work toward fulfilling the general education or major requirements, or be offered as an elective. The class content should differ, however, based on the college that the student belongs to. Most seniors do not know how to begin planning their lives post graduation. If the University could help them by providing a class that requires them to create a resume, cover letter, portfolio, and provides directional guidance toward getting a job or going to graduate school, students may credit their post graduation success to JMU and be more apt to give back to the University.