



Student Academic
Success

2026 Academic
Success Magazine

THE POWER OF CONNECTION

THE POWER OF...

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Front cover: Dr. Andrea Knopp, Associate Director for Graduate Programs in the School of Nursing, celebrates commencement with Elena Ogbe. Photo by Julia Weaver

Inside cover: The JMU Quad. Photo by Steve Aderton.

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VICE PROVOST’S WELCOME

Success is most powerful when it is shared

Student success is not defined by a single moment—it is shaped through a connected journey of access, support, engagement and opportunity. At James Madison University, we are intentional about how these elements come together to help students navigate challenges, discover purpose, and achieve their goals.

What distinguishes our approach is not any single program, but the integration of many working together to meet students where they are and guide them forward. From the earliest stages of college access to the experiences that prepare students for life beyond graduation, our work is grounded in connection: connecting students to people, to resources and to pathways that make success possible.



The stories in this inaugural *Academic Success Magazine* illustrate that journey in action. They capture how students are entering JMU through innovative pathways, building confidence through proactive outreach and coaching, engaging deeply in learning and research, and developing a strong sense of belonging within our community. They also highlight how those experiences extend far beyond the university—shaping alumni who, in turn, invest in the next generation of Dukes.

Together, these stories reflect a broader truth: success is most powerful when it is shared. It is built through relationships, sustained through support and ultimately realized through impact.

As you explore these pages, I invite you to consider how each of us—educators, partners, alumni and community members—plays a role in this journey. At JMU, we are proud to walk alongside our students every step of the way.


Dr. Rudy M. Molina, Jr.
Vice Provost
Student Academic Success

READ OUR
NEWSLETTER



RESEARCH SPOTLIGHT

Students row through JMU's First-Year Research Experience

By Kristen Kelley ('01), Jolie Lewis, Lily Perkinson ('26), and Julia Varverud

Nuanced Numbers: LAURA PASCHETAG

Transferring from one university to another is never an easy feat, but Laura Paschetag made it look easy by immersing herself in classes, extracurricular activities, and research from the moment she arrived at James Madison University.

“JMU was not part of my original plan,” Paschetag said. After high school, she earned an associate degree from Northern Virginia Community College and expected to stay close to home for her bachelor’s degree. “However, when I visited JMU, I completely fell in love with the culture here.”

“I went from being intimidated to tutoring others.”

Paschetag arrived in the Fall of 2023 as a Psychology major with a fascination for the brain, which she calls “the ultimate puzzle.” She initially doubted whether she could dedicate her career to studying the brain because she felt intimidated by the sciences. “To be completely transparent, I didn’t think I was smart enough for a career in neurology or neuroscience,” she said. However, a 300-level neuroscience course stoked both her passion and her confidence.

Paschetag applied to and was accepted into the First-Year Research Experience program, or FYRE, a flagship initiative available to first-year and transfer students at JMU. She worked with Dr. Jessica Salvatore to investigate systemic bias in psychology research stemming from rule-of-thumb numerical reporting practices. She had the opportunity to present her



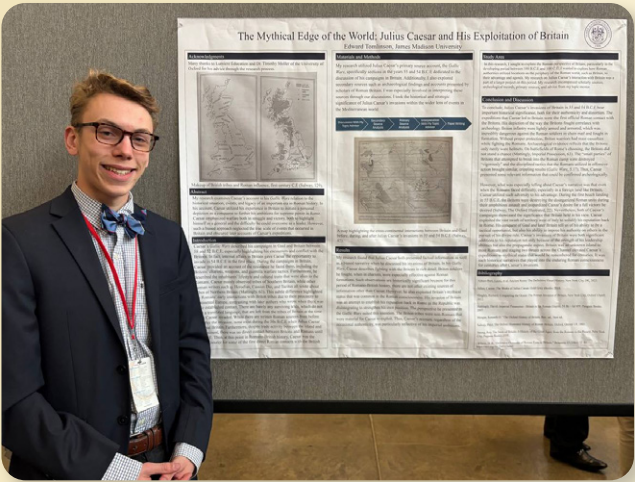
Laura Paschetag showcases her findings at the First-Year Research Experience Symposium. Photo by Rachel Holderman.

findings—and advocate for changes in disciplinary practices—at an international video conference.

Her newfound enthusiasm for research led her to join an evolutionary biopsychology lab, where she began work on her thesis. As she described it, her learning shifted from lecture-based to discovery-based.

Eventually, she added biology as a second major and now plans to pursue graduate study in neuroscience with the goal of becoming a professor. “I never thought I would be giddy at the idea of explaining action potentials or oligodendrocytes, but I absolutely love it,” she said. “I went from being intimidated to tutoring others.”

Historical Analysis: EDWARD TOMLINSON



“If your question does not keep you up at night, it is not a question worth pursuing.” History major Edward Tomlinson embraces this philosophy and chose JMU for its distinctive opportunities to engage in research as a first-year student. His goal of building relationships with professors through his interest in discovery motivated him to apply to FYRE.

Through FYRE, Tomlinson worked with Dr. Jonathan Jones on an ongoing, multi-institutional research project examining the historical connections among the Virginia Military Institute (VMI), the Confederacy and the Lost Cause. As described

Edward Tomlinson’s First-Year Research Experience fueled his passion for undergraduate research. Photo courtesy of Edward Tomlinson.

Facilitative Leadership: GRACE PUMA

Grace Puma is a communicator.

Double-majoring in Philosophy and Media Arts and Design, with a concentration in Digital Video and Cinema, Puma is developing an academic portfolio of communication skills across storytelling platforms. Her participation in FYRE introduced her to an academic storytelling experience typically reserved for faculty.

Eager to engage with the many opportunities offered at JMU, she applied to work in the Spring of 2025 with Dr. Lori Britt, director of the School of Communication Studies, on a multi-institutional project focused on finalizing a textbook.

“I learned so much about the importance of self-awareness as a leader.”

“She would read each chapter, think about what students needed, and write questions to get them to do some nuanced reflection. She did an amazing job.”



Grace Puma contributed to the publication of a book for her research experience. Photo courtesy of Grace Puma.

The book, *Facilitative Leadership: Building Capacity for Diverse Times*, by Britt and co-author Lisa-Marie Napoli, was published a few months later in October 2025.

Through her contributions, Puma learned about both academic publishing and leadership theory. “I learned so much about the importance of self-awareness as a leader,” she wrote in her poster for the FYRE Symposium. “It made me more mindful of my role in guiding groups and ensuring that all voices are heard.”

on the FYRE webpage, the project seeks to support efforts toward reparative justice at Southern Colleges by identifying expressions of the Lost Cause, a movement that attempted to reinterpret and defend the Confederacy.

Tomlinson contributed to the public digital database *Locating Slavery’s Legacies at VMI*. Specifically, he focused on the role of Major General Francis H. Smith—the superintendent of VMI before, during and after the Civil War—in institutionalizing Lost Cause ideology at the institution. Tomlinson analyzed Smith’s writings to critically examine his support for slavery and his efforts to rebuild VMI after the war.

“I chose my project because it is a unique subject that, while I had heard about it, was still unfamiliar to me,” Tomlinson said. “I also wanted to explore a topic that is deeply relevant to where I live and have grown up.”

Tomlinson’s experience in FYRE has inspired him to pursue additional opportunities to conduct and share research. In collaboration with Dr. Rudy Molina, Jr., vice provost of Student Academic Success (SAS), Tomlinson is creating a research database to connect more undergraduate students to research and scholarly projects led by JMU faculty.

“This makes research opportunities at JMU more accessible to students, whose community and voice are growing in the academic world,” Tomlinson said. Through this partnership with SAS, he is bringing his vision of connecting students to research opportunities to fruition.

“If your question does not keep you up at night, it is not a question worth pursuing.”

INSIDE LOOK

Texting outreach engages students

By Regina Wine-Nash and Kristen Kelley

Reaching students at the right moment is essential to providing responsive support. As institutions face increasing pressure to improve retention rates, early intervention strategies offer students the best opportunity to overcome challenges. In seeking innovative approaches to improve retention, James Madison University identified two-way texting as a valuable tool for delivering personalized, real-time support.

As part of JMU’s early student success initiative, the Office of Student Success Analytics (SSA) implemented a series of periodic check-in “pulse” surveys. These brief, text message-based surveys collect actionable data to assess student well-being and provide tailored support.

INVESTING IN STUDENT SUCCESS

JMU piloted the surveys in Fall 2022 in collaboration with the Office of Residence Life. Initially, approximately 450 students in one residence hall received a micro-survey via email; however, low response rates led SSA to pivot to two-way text messaging. Following a successful pilot, SSA expanded the initiative. Currently, pulse surveys are distributed to all first-year students, new transfer students, second-year students and students studying abroad.

“When I feel stressed out, the text gives me motivation to continue with my studies.”

THE SURVEY-TO-HUMAN PROCESS

The early student success working group identified four primary factors contributing to students leaving JMU: academics, sense of belonging, basic needs, and well-being. Pulse surveys are designed around these factors to assess engagement and inform appropriate follow-up actions.

Text messages are sent through JMU’s customer relationship management system. Each message focuses on a specific topic and prompts student responses. For example, students may receive a message asking how they are adjusting to their classes and are instructed to reply “1” if they are doing well, “2” if they are unsure and would like follow-up, or “3” if they are struggling and would like assistance. Students requesting help receive personalized responses that include guidance, recommendations and links to relevant resources. Depending on the topic, SSA collaborates with campus partners to ensure timely follow-up with students who indicate a need for support.

“I got a lot of information I didn’t get during orientation. The texts usually came in time to help me manage what came with being a full-time college student away from home.”

HONORING THE STUDENT LIFE CYCLE

Survey topics and timing are strategically aligned with the student life cycle. During the first several weeks of the semester, students receive messages about their living environment and initial adjustment to JMU. Mid-semester messages address academic rigor and social connections. Toward the end of the semester, messages emphasize self-care and preparation for final exams.

Messages are sent approximately every other week to first-year students and monthly to second-year students. Each communication uses asset-based, affirming language that encourages help-seeking behaviors.

KEY OUTCOMES

Retention improved following implementation of the Early Student Success System. First-year retention increased from 89.2% in 2021 to 90.2% in 2022, marking JMU’s highest rate since 2017. Retention surpassed 91% for both the 2023 and 2024 cohorts.

In addition to improved retention, students reported positive perceptions of the pulse surveys. Nearly 78% agreed or strongly agreed that the text-based check-ins helped them feel supported. Students noted that the messages conveyed care for their well-being and provided assistance during stressful periods. They also appreciated that the messages came from a real person. One student reported that even without responding, the messages served as helpful reminders and sources of support.

Meeting students where they are

- Brief, frequent check-ins
- Real time support
- Building connection and belonging
- Tailored outreach based on student needs and lifecycle

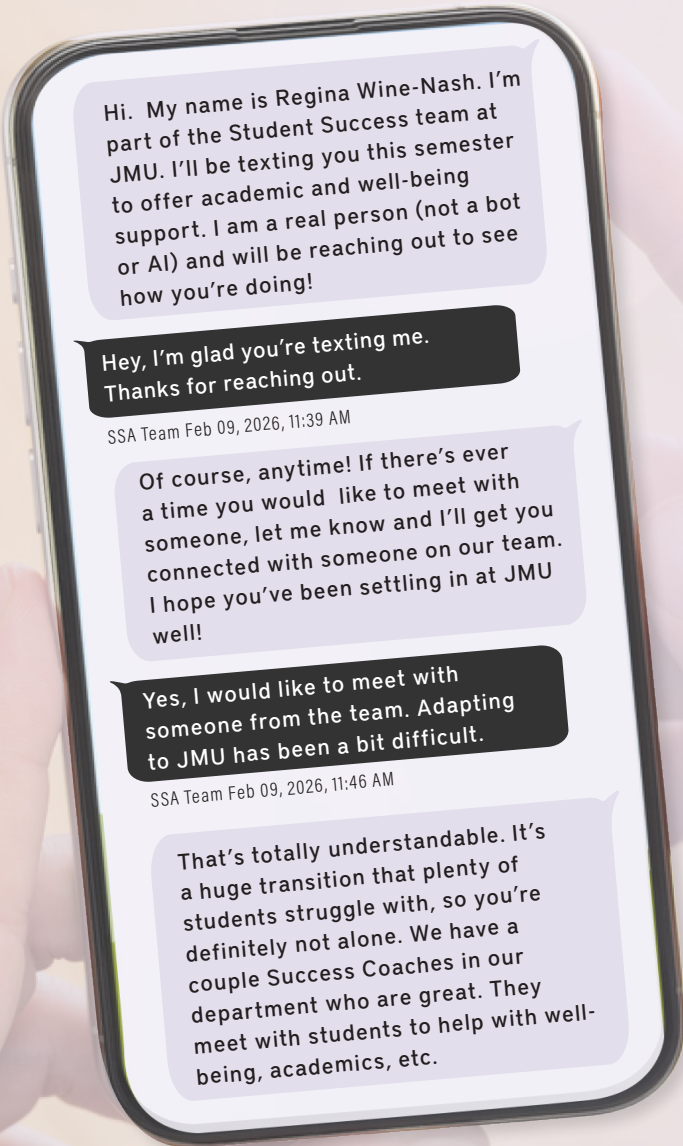


Regina Wine-Nash is the face behind JMU’s texting outreach campaigns. Photo by Lily Perkinson.

“It made me feel welcomed and that someone cares about me specially at this large school.”

CONCLUSION

Although texting is not a standalone solution, it has demonstrated substantial impact when integrated into a comprehensive student success ecosystem. By delivering proactive support directly to students, JMU can continue to address barriers, foster a community of care and improve retention outcomes.

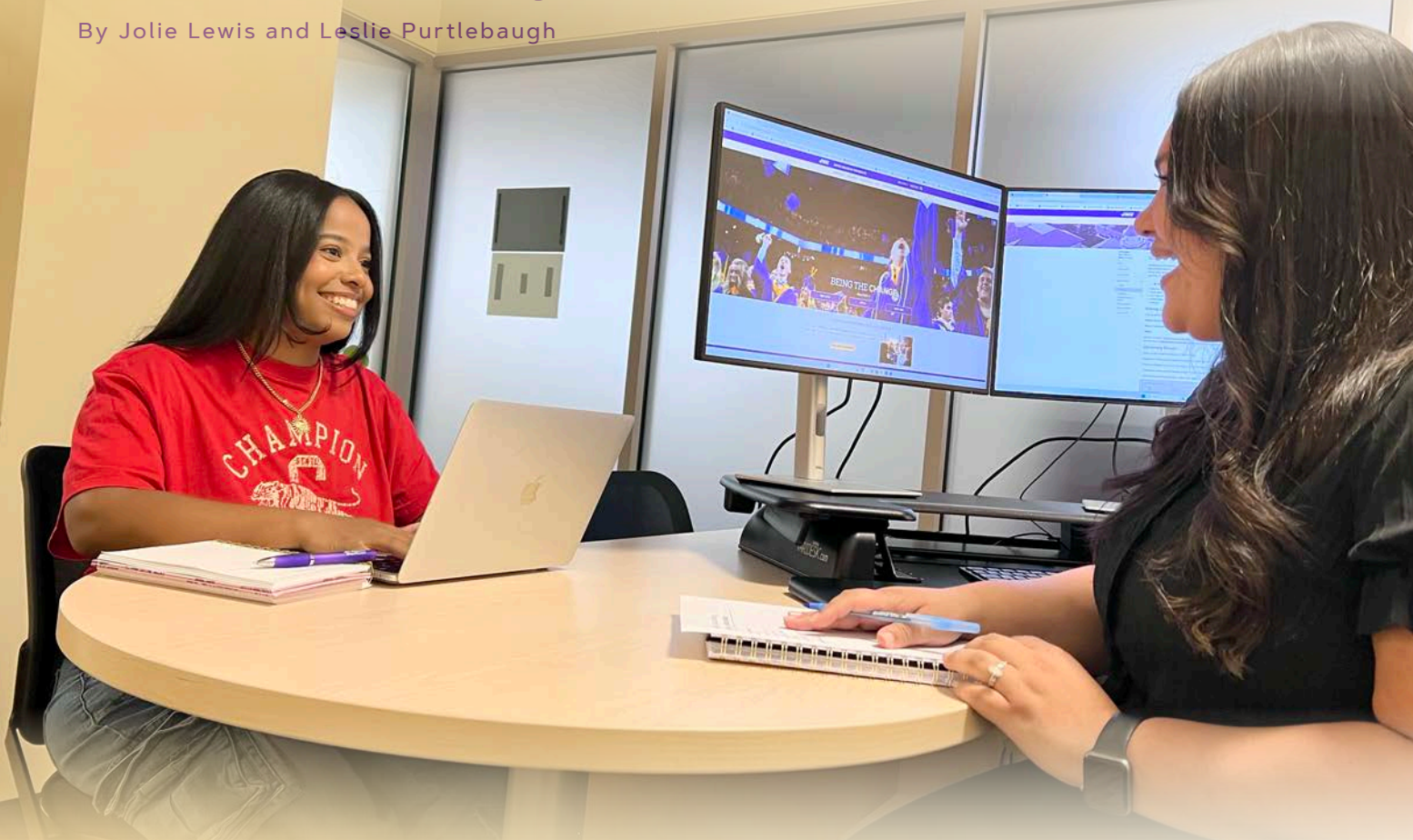


“I like that the texts are from a real person, not automated.”

TRANSFORMATIVE PRACTICES

Success coaching unlocks student potential

By Jolie Lewis and Leslie Purtlebaugh



Dilsy Rodriguez Sanchez moves toward her goals with Success Coach Ashley Gerhardt.

Photo by Kristen Kelley.

Going to high school in Northern Virginia, Sumu Vadrevu ('26) was a star student. She earned top-notch grades and set her sights on becoming a Finance major at Virginia Tech. It wasn't until she was waitlisted at VT that she visited JMU for the first time and fell in love. She committed to JMU the same day.

Vadrevu was proud to be a Duke. But something about not getting into her first-choice school shook her confidence. She finished her first semester on academic probation. By year's end, when she calculated the grades she needed in the coming year for admission into the College of Business, she wasn't sure she could make it. Everyone was telling her to brace herself for disappointment. "I got super depressed. I didn't know what I was going to do," she said.

She knows now what she needed then: a success coach. She needed someone who would work with her one-on-one to help her discover and articulate what was important to her, to sup-

port her on her journey to well-being and to prompt her to set and stay accountable for manageable weekly goals.

At the time, though, she hadn't heard of coaching, and JMU didn't have a formal academic coaching program. So, she did it for herself. She soul-searched. She prioritized her physical and mental health. She doubled down on academics by going to the library, attending office hours and making friends in her classes. She taught herself how to learn. She started a student organization focusing on self-care.

Within a year, not only had she brought up her GPA enough to be admitted to the College of Business, but she was invited to return as a study session leader for one of her most difficult courses. That was how she met Matt Trybus, JMU's Peer Assisted Study Session Coordinator. The next year, he invited



Learn about the Madison Coaching programs.

"[My success coach] was amazing right from the start. I can tell she is intentional and sincere in making me become successful."

Vadrevu to serve as a peer coach for the new Peer Academic Coaching program he was developing. She said yes: She wanted to help other students connect with the same kind of support she had once needed.

The peer academic coaches focus on goal-setting and accountability when they meet with student-clients, specifically through what they call the five fundamentals: sleep, fuel, focus, breathing and movement. Each week, students set goals related to one of those areas to impact their motivation and discipline. When they return for their next meeting, Student coaches ask how it went. "I've had people walk in because they're stressed out, and they don't know where to start," Vadrevu said. "Once that habit builds, they can continue it."

Coaching emerged as a practice in higher education in the early 2000s and has been gaining traction ever since, with nearly 1,000 colleges and universities offering programs by 2020. Success coaching is distinguished by its open doors—any student can seek out coaching—and its shared power relationships. The student and coach form an alliance that calls on the student to take ownership of the process for getting from point A to point B. Coaches offer holistic, individualized, long-term support as students build the skills, confidence and resources needed to realize their potential.

The peer coaching program employs five student leaders and operates in one corner of the Learning Centers. In another part of the center, you'll find the offices of two other success coaches: Maddie Martin and Ashley Gerhardt, who are professional staff members on the Student Success Analytics team.

The professional success coaches use approaches similar to those of the peers, drawing on the strengths-based theories of appreciative advising as they work with students in areas of academics, well-being, basic needs or social support. They see walk-ins, students on academic probation, and students who are referred to them through partners across campus or through email and texting outreach campaigns.

Gerhardt starts meetings with students by "reminding them of their why, reminding them we are rooting for them." Even after a hard week when a student might not meet their goals, she

encourages them to keep the next appointment: "We will pivot from that plan, revisit those ideas, break it down more." She reminds them, "You're already a step closer just by being here."

Dilsy Rodriguez Sanchez, a transfer student who started this spring, met with Gerhardt after learning about coaching through a texting campaign. "JMU is so big and different from community college," Rodriguez Sanchez said. "It was really nice to see that I was able to get help. It was an amazing text for me to get right then."

The peer and professional success coaches all work within the area of Student Academic Success, and they are also part of a broader coaching network at JMU that includes Well Dukes Coaching hosted by the University Recreation Center and Learning Success Strategies coaching hosted by the Dean of Students Office.

Coaches within JMU's network provide one-on-one assistance, group sessions, and topic-based workshops, and they are experts at referral to JMU's vast array of student services. Gerhardt tells

students: "You can work with one, you can work with both, you can work with all—think of us as your support network.' We want to implement those habits inside and outside the classroom that you can utilize for your well-being and success."

Rodriguez Sanchez was grateful for that wider network after Gerhardt referred her to the Learning Success Strategies coaches for specific support with her calendar, time management, study skills and learning strategies. "I didn't imagine I'd have this support system at JMU, and it's been my favorite part about being here," she said. "I feel like I belong here because of the people around me."

Vadrevu lit up as she recounted her first experience as a peer coach. She met with a student whose goal was admission to the nursing program. "Week by week, we would meet. We created a schedule together; we went through study habits together; we studied together," Vadrevu said. "She ended up getting into the nursing program. That was really rewarding for me to see. Not only was she my first appointment, but I saw her discipline, and I saw her achieving the goal that she set for herself. I saw her wearing scrubs the other day, and I was like, 'You deserve that. You earned that.'"

"You're already a step closer just by being here."

100%
Overall satisfaction with workshops

100%
Learned something in one-on-one coaching sessions that could help in life

100%
Satisfied with one-on-one coaching sessions

95%
Learned something in workshops that could help in life



Co-Admission: The best of both worlds

AREA HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS EMBRACE THE NEW BR2JMU PROGRAM

By Lily Perkinson ('26) and Jolie Lewis

Shenandoah Valley students who set their sights on becoming a JMU Duke someday now have a new pathway to make that goal a reality.

Through BR2JMU, high school students from Harrisonburg, Staunton, Waynesboro, Augusta County and Rockingham County can now secure simultaneous admission to Blue Ridge Community College (BRCC) and James Madison University (JMU). The idea is simple but powerful: students begin at BRCC, earn their associate degree, and then transition seamlessly to JMU—no second application, no guesswork about whether they will be admitted.

“It creates a smooth and affordable pathway from high school to a bachelor’s degree,” said Chris Gothard, JMU’s

senior assistant director for transfer admissions. “Postsecondary education can be transformational, and BR2JMU provides access to those opportunities.”

The program is already gaining momentum. It launched in Fall 2025 with 42 students in its pilot cohort, and more than 50 students committed for Fall 2026.

BR2JMU is about more than dual admission. What sets it apart, program leaders say, is the level of support students receive along the way.

“The most important feature is the personalized guidance,” said Rajan Shore, BRCC’s coordinator of transfer programs. Students work closely with academic advisors at both institutions, participate in a clearly defined pathway to any JMU

“It creates a smooth and affordable pathway from high school to a bachelor’s degree.”

major and move through the program as part of a cohort. The relationships they build in their two years at BRCC can continue to grow as they transition to JMU.

For students like Michelle Gonzalez-Tadeo, that structure can make all the difference. After high school, she was unsure about attending a four-year university because she did not yet know what she wanted to study. BR2JMU offered a solution that felt both flexible and secure.

“It has taken a whole lot of pressure off my shoulders,” she said. “To know that I’ll transfer to JMU without any trouble is a wonderful feeling.”

The program was built through a yearlong collaboration between BRCC and JMU as part of the Transfer Student Success Intensive, a national initiative led by the Aspen Institute and the American Association of State Colleges and Universities. The partnership culminated in a formal agreement signed in March by JMU President Jim Schmidt and BRCC President John Downey, underscoring a shared goal: increasing degree attainment across the Shenandoah Valley.

While some students discover BR2JMU through marketing or word of mouth, many are identified early by BRCC career coaches embedded in local high schools.

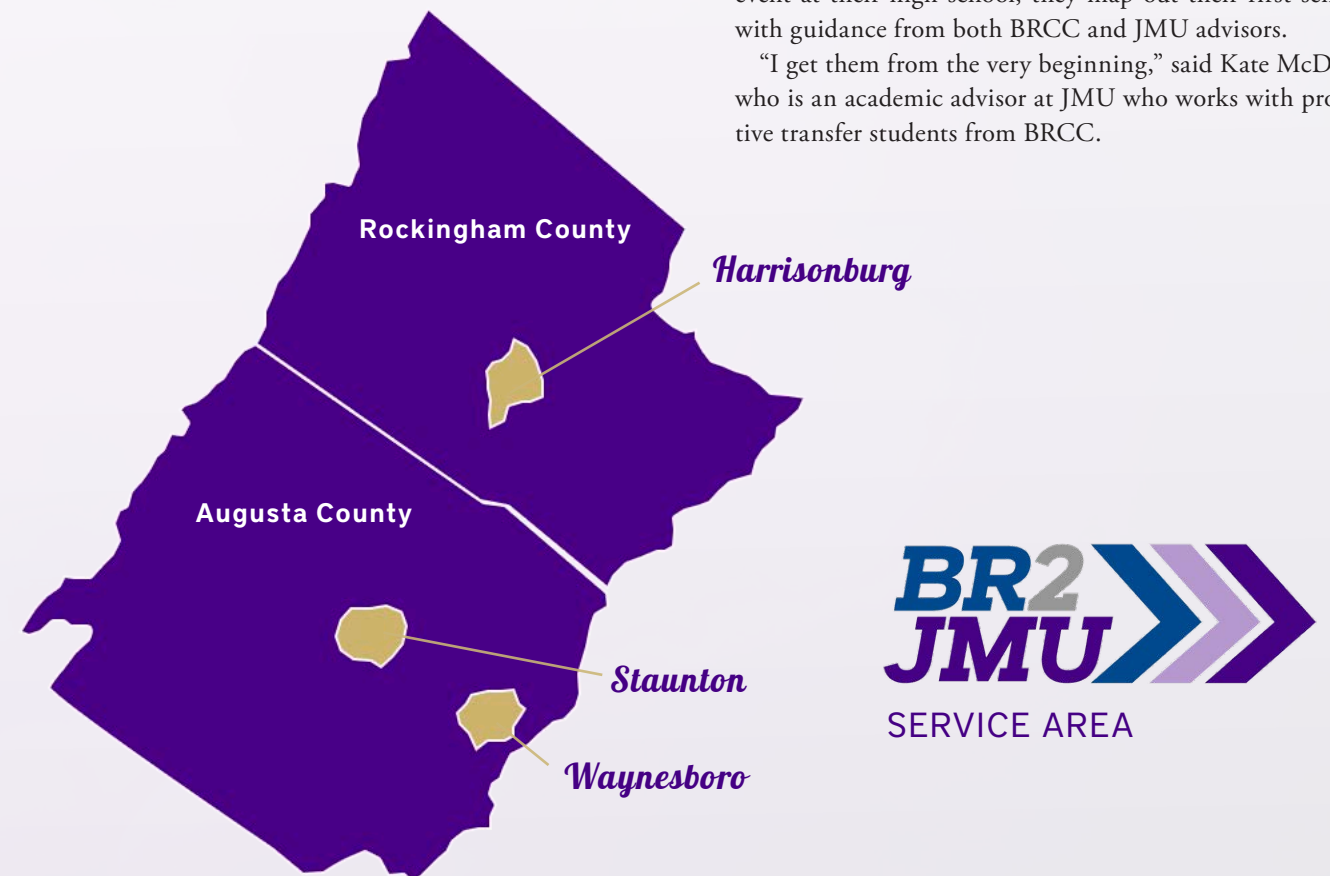


Blue Ridge Community College advisor and transfer program coordinator Rajan Shore connects with BR2JMU student Sandra Rovenska. Photo by Cody Troyer.

“They know the students so well,” Shore said. “They can identify who would really benefit from this kind of opportunity. The program wouldn’t be successful without them.”

Students accepted into BR2JMU begin building their college journey even before they graduate. During a scheduling event at their high school, they map out their first semester with guidance from both BRCC and JMU advisors.

“I get them from the very beginning,” said Kate McDaniel, who is an academic advisor at JMU who works with prospective transfer students from BRCC.



BR2JMU students pose with a life-size Duke Dog during a visit to JMU. Photo by Cody Troyer.



BR2JMU student Solomon Cox talks with JMU President Jim Schmidt and BRCC President John Downey at an MOU signing event hosted by JMU. Photo by Rachel Holderman.

From there, the connection only deepens. She and Shore co-teach a one-credit course in the fall, creating early relationships that continue through regular check-ins and ongoing support.

Another defining feature of the program is the opportunity for students to experience JMU firsthand—well before they officially transfer. Each semester, cohorts visit campus together to explore majors and careers, tour facilities, eat in dining halls, and connect with faculty and current students. Optional trips for athletics, theatre, and other campus events add to the experience.

For Gabby Trainum, who plans to major in art, those visits have made a large campus feel more manageable.

“Even though I’ve lived here my whole life, I had no idea how to navigate JMU,” she said. “It’s nice to start wrapping my head around it before I go.”

Emily Whitmore, who hopes to study hospitality management, said the visits have also provided a clearer picture of student life.

“We’ve talked with students who recently transferred from BRCC,” she said. “It gives you a real sense of what life on campus is actually like.”

As BR2JMU looks to the future, growth is on the horizon—but with careful intention, Gothard said: “We want to expand while maintaining that focus on individual support and belonging.”

If the pilot cohort is any indication, the program is already succeeding in one of its most important goals: building community. Gonzalez-Tadeo said the friendships she has formed are just as valuable as the academic pathway itself. She also credits the program with helping her grow in confidence and communication, preparing her for what comes next.

“This program is one of the best out there,” she said. “It’s helped me meet great people and be prepared—financially and education-wise.” 🌸

“This program is one of the best out there.”

WAYS TO ENGAGE

JMU students focus on making an impact on their world

By Kristen Kelley, Danny Markley and Julia Varverud

JAYDEN WIREDU | STUDENT EMPLOYEE



Jayden Wiredu provides support to an engaged student.

Photo by Morgan Widelo.

Jayden Wiredu may be the smiling office assistant who welcomes you into the JMU Learning Centers.

Wiredu is a member of the office assistant team in the Learning Centers, a flagship academic support center on the first floor of the Student Success Center that provides more than 27,000 student-learning encounters each academic year. Wiredu and other office assistants help students connect to the Learning Centers’ six service areas as well as other campus resources.

Wiredu’s supervisor, Danny Markley, describes him as a consummate professional who brings excellent customer service

and clear communication to his work, helping ensure access for all students to enhance their learning. An Engineering major considering a concentration in Mechanical Engineering, Wiredu attributes his strong work ethic and high motivation to his family’s emphasis on hard work.

“Jayden makes a positive impact on the Learning Centers every time he is here,” said Dr. Laura Miller, executive director of the Learning Centers. “Colleagues and students regularly comment on how welcoming, friendly, and uplifting he is.”

Beyond his work, Wiredu participates in numerous student organizations, including InterVarsity, the African American Association, and Developing Men of Color (DMC). In his free time, he enjoys traveling and exploring new places. He also has an interest in creative arts, visual communication and illustration. After graduation, Wiredu plans to pursue a master’s degree aligned with his goals of designing and developing sustainable technologies, particularly in the areas of vehicle design and greenhouse gas reduction.

When offering advice to first-year students, it is no surprise that Wiredu encourages new Dukes to work hard, but also to have fun and take full advantage of the experiences that JMU has to offer.

YESENIA SALINAS ORTIZ | STUDY ABROAD

Yesenia Salinas Ortiz (’26) plans to use her bachelor’s degree in elementary education to invest in young people during their foundational years. Salinas Ortiz’s own education included pivotal teachers who supported her in learning English as an additional language and navigating a learning disability.

Growing up in Mount Jackson, Virginia, Salinas Ortiz frequently heard about JMU and knew she wanted to attend. Focused on her dream of becoming a teacher, she earned an associate degree from Blue Ridge Community College before transferring to JMU to complete her coursework and earn a bachelor’s degree.

Salinas Ortiz relied on the JMU Next Transfer Advising team to guide her transition to JMU. “They were very helpful when selecting which general education courses to take and which ones not to take,” she said.

Salinas Ortiz also sought opportunities outside the classroom, choosing to study abroad with the College of Education in Guanajuato, Mexico. She joined Assistant Professor Dr. Rudy M. Molina, Jr., and her elementary education peers to visit schools, learn about the Mexican education system, and

interact with students. “The trip allowed me to connect my experience to my major and understand how it can help me support my students,” she said.

After graduating from JMU in May, Salinas Ortiz plans to teach for a year, take a gap year, and then pursue a master’s degree in teaching. Her advice to current students, especially transfer students, is simple: Enjoy your time in college. It goes by quickly, so make the most of every moment.



Yesenia Salinas Ortiz (’26) and fellow JMU Duke Ciara Madden (’25) experience the culture of Guanajuato through the Dukes in Mexico Study Abroad Program.

Photo by Rudy M. Molina, Jr.

ALUMNI JOURNEY

Mackenzie Hammack is building skills one step at a time

By Kristen Kelley



JMU Alumni Mackenzie Hammack at graduation in 2025. Photo provided by Mackenzie Hammack.

James Madison University alumni Mackenzie Hammack ('25M) has a passion for teaching writing. She started working with writers as an undergraduate, extended her learning as a graduate student leader in JMU's University Writing Center and has now advanced to become a fully funded doctoral student in the Writing and Rhetoric program at George Mason University.

She credits her time in the JMU Learning Centers, which houses the writing center, as foundational to her academic trajectory. "I was able to begin to understand writing center work as a field of study," she said. She served as a graduate assistant in 2023-24 and a graduate intern in 2024-25 as she worked toward her master's degree in Writing, Rhetoric and Technical Communication (WRTC).

"Working in the writing center helped me understand what students struggle with in their writing," Hammack said. "I built my teaching philosophy—and the section of WRTC 103 that I taught—around my writing center experiences."

Hammack maintains professional ties to JMU and left a lasting legacy during her two years on campus, said Rudy Barrett, associate director of the writing center. "From day one, Mackenzie brought a genuine, contagious enthusiasm for writing and collaboration that energized our center," Barrett said. "She

"Working in the writing center helped me understand what students struggle with in their writing, I built my teaching philosophy—and the section of WRTC 103 that I taught—around my writing center experiences."

mentored with generosity and care, fostering the welcoming community necessary for writers to feel safe sharing their work and refining their skills."

A key element of the JMU Learning Centers' work-based learning experiences is mentoring students in collaborative research, presentations and professional engagement to develop them as thought leaders in the field. Hammack's scholarly endeavors included conducting writing center research and attending and presenting at disciplinary conferences such as the Mid-Atlantic Writing Centers Association Conference. Those experiences bolstered her confidence and prepared her to present a poster at the Conference on College Composition and Communication the following year.

"The work I completed helped me feel prepared to pursue further graduate study and consider a future as a writing center professional," she said.

As Hammack continues her educational journey, she reflected on how her experiences shaped her professional development. "Once I started teaching, there were many moments when I felt out of my depth," she said. "In those instances, I regularly turned to writing center faculty, and I continue to appreciate their willingness to answer my questions about teaching and more."

Graduate students' time at JMU builds on their K-12 and undergraduate foundation, and Hammack's story illustrates how two years can expand and strengthen that foundation. Whether graduates enter the workforce, public service or further education, their JMU experience informs their future success. Through engagement with faculty in coursework, research, conferences, student services, professional development and work-based learning, JMU graduates gain an advantage that extends beyond their time at the university. ✨



Learn more about Work-Based Learning at JMU.

DONOR SPOTLIGHT

A JMU alumna commits to the next generation of health care professionals

By Rudy M. Molina, Jr.

When Dr. Shelby Pedigo reflects on her path from James Madison University to practicing veterinary medicine, two themes emerge: the transformative power of an undergraduate education and the responsibility to extend that opportunity to others.

A proud JMU alumna, Pedigo graduated in May 2019 with a bachelor's degree in Biology and minors in Honors Interdisciplinary Studies and Pre-Veterinary Medicine. Her academic career was distinguished by her designation as an Honors Scholar with Distinction in Biology, reflecting both her commitment to rigorous inquiry and her engagement in undergraduate research.

Today, Pedigo is an associate veterinarian at Anicura Veterinary Center in Harrisonburg, where she focuses on compassionate, accessible care for animals and the people who love them. Her professional experiences have taken her across the United States and abroad, broadening her perspective on veterinary medicine and service. Despite these travels, her connection to JMU and her appreciation for the mentorship she received from faculty remain strong.

That connection became tangible when Pedigo established a scholarship for JMU students pursuing careers in health care. "Establishing a scholarship felt like a meaningful way to help ease that burden for someone else and to support students who are passionate about veterinary medicine but may need additional encouragement or support along the way," Pedigo said. The first recipient, Leah Friedman, exemplifies that mission.

"Receiving this scholarship strengthened both my confidence and my financial stability," Friedman said. "It has helped prepare me for the next steps in my life, and that is something everyone deserves."

Behind each scholarship like this one is a thoughtful partnership to ensure donor intent aligns with student need. JMU development officers, who administered the gift through the JMU Foundation, work to connect donors, students, and the university's mission so that generosity has lasting impact. The scholarship is a powerful example of what happens when alumni reflect on their own experiences and choose to invest in students who are following a similar path.

For Friedman, the scholarship represents more than financial support—it signals belonging, encouragement, and shared purpose. Her admiration for Pedigo's generosity is clear: "The fact that she received that opportunity and chose to use her earnings as a veterinarian to create this scholarship for students who may one day become her peers is deeply meaningful." ✨



Harrisonburg veterinarian and JMU alumna Shelby Pedigo. Photo provided by Shelby Pedigo.

From Transformation Experience to Lasting Impact

Stories like this underscore a larger truth: strong alumni relationships are essential to student success. Alumni who experienced JMU as a place of mentorship, challenge, and growth often feel a deep desire to give back—not out of obligation, but out of gratitude.

For Dr. Pedigo, JMU was not simply a stepping stone to graduate school; it was a formative environment that shaped her confidence, curiosity, and commitment to service. By investing in a scholarship, she is extending that same sense of possibility to students who may one day follow similar paths in veterinary medicine, health sciences, or other care-focused professions.

"Giving back to JMU specifically was important to me because it played such a foundational role in my journey. The education, mentorship, and sense of community that I experienced helped shape both my career path and my values," Pedigo says.

These connections create a virtuous cycle: students become alumni, alumni become mentors and donors, and future students benefit from a community that believes in them.

As JMU launches its first Academic Success Magazine, this story serves as both celebration and invitation. Celebration of a Duke who turned a transformative undergraduate experience into meaningful action. And an invitation to alumni everywhere to reflect on their own journeys and consider how they might help today's students realize their goals.

Whether through mentorship, philanthropy or renewed engagement, reconnecting with JMU is a way to ensure that the values of curiosity, service and excellence continue to shape lives—one student at a time.

~Rudy M. Molina, Jr.



**Student Academic
Success**

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2026 JMU graduate Arushi Chauhan ascends the steps toward the entrance to Wilson Hall for a graduation photograph.
Photo provided by Arushi Chauhan.