

Nikole Gregg, a student in the Assessment and Measurement Ph.D. program, recently interviewed Dr. Abe Goldberg and Dr. Dena Pastor. Dr. Goldberg is the Executive Director of the James Madison Center for Civic Engagement and associate professor of political science. Dr. Pastor is a professor of graduate psychology and the Associate Director for Assessment Operations in the Center for Assessment and Research Studies (CARS). She is also the assessment liaison to the Madison Center. Their collaboration is helping to make JMU a national model for civic engagement. We hope this interview will shed light on what they hope to accomplish and the role assessment plays in this process.



Dr. Abraham Goldberg

Dr. Goldberg has spent much of his career promoting, creating resources, and building capacity for civic learning and engagement in higher education. Before coming to JMU in 2017, he was the Director of the Office of Service-Learning and Community Engagement at the University of South Carolina Upstate. He was also a political science faculty member and participated in many civic engagement efforts. Dr. Pastor became broadly involved in engagement work at JMU during the 2016-17 year and started working with the Madison Center in 2017. The work of civic engagement is clearly a part of Abe and Dena's foci, but what exactly is civic engagement?

The Madison Center defines civic engagement as *“advancing the legacy of James Madison, the Father of the Constitution, by preparing individuals to be active and responsible participants in a representative democracy dedicated to the common good.”* In its inaugural year, Dena and Abe collaborated with a small committee of faculty and staff to further elaborate on this definition and articulate the goals of civic engagement programming at JMU. Their work resulted in a set of [campus-wide civic engagement learning outcomes](#) centered on the development of civic knowledge, civic skills, civic values and dispositions, and civic behavior.

During the interview, Dr. Goldberg expanded upon the kind of knowledge, skills, and values needed for informed and responsible citizenship. With respect to **civic knowledge**, Abe said it is important for students to understand how our political system works, citizens' roles in influencing decision-making in a democracy, and legal aspects of citizenship and voting in elections. In addition, Abe emphasized that students need to know how they understand a societal issue (*“Why is it that you think what you think?”*) and how to conduct research on an issue.

We have countless societal problems that students can latch onto, so if a student decides that they care very deeply about something ...whatever problem it is that strikes at their heart, ideally before they start to influence the decision-making process, they learn about that problem.

- Dr. Abraham Goldberg

Active citizenship can take many forms, including speaking up at a town hall meeting, raising awareness about a public issue by writing a letter to the editor, or holding a public meeting. Abe noted that to do these things effectively requires **civic skills**, including communication skills, leadership skills, and organizational skills. He added, *“These same skills*

are marketable to employers. So it doesn't need to be: are we preparing citizens or are we preparing workers? We are preparing both. These are transferrable skills."

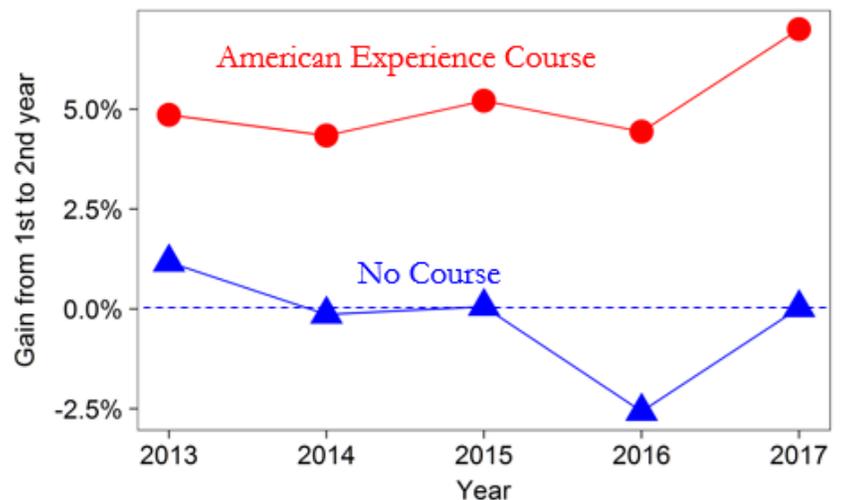
Also transferrable are the **civic values and dispositions** promoted by JMU civic engagement programming. These include political self-efficacy, empathy, open-mindedness and an appreciation of diversity. An important outcome for many of the programs at JMU (including [Debate Across the Curriculum](#) and [deliberative dialogue training](#)) is for students to feel confident in their ability to influence decision making and to engage in conversations with people who disagree with them. Abe notes, *"It doesn't take much to turn on cable news and see that we live in a very polarized political environment where debates often devolve into mud-slinging. And I think JMU students can do better than that. I think we are creating a better model here."*



Dr. Dena Pastor

Setting the foundation for civic learning and knowledge at JMU is the [American Experience](#) general education course requirement, which is taught through the departments of history, political science, and justice studies. JMU is one of only three public universities in Virginia with required coursework in this area. The American Experience requirement has been in place for over a decade with its impact assessed annually. Dr. Pastor remarked on the impact of these classes: *"We've seen that students really do learn as a result of going through those courses."*

Dr. Pastor said the Madison Center's clear definition of civic engagement is incredibly important to assessment as it allows, *"a lot of different people to be on the same page as to what we mean by civic engagement, because it's a term that is hard for people to understand."*



Results from the American Experience assessment administered to the same students at the beginning of their first year and again half-way through their second year. Students who completed the course show greater improvement.

Both Dr. Goldberg and Dr. Pastor have dedicated their resources to the growth of civic engagement at JMU. Now, it is time for the Madison Center's goals to come to fruition. With the help of assessment, there will be results to evidence attainment of those goals. Both Dr. Goldberg and Dr. Pastor have high hopes for the future of civic engagement at JMU. Dr. Goldberg wants students to participate actively in the political process as a function of their education at JMU. He also wants to see people treating one another better and learning to, *"allow political conflict*

to strengthen relationships.” JMU’s civic engagement initiative is well underway, and so is Dr. Pastor and Goldberg’s work towards developing a civically engaged campus.