

Teaching Responsibility

by Daisy Breneman

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One year ago, Justice Studies, the JMU community, the local community, and the global community lost [Dr. Terry Beitzel](#). Terry was deeply committed to work around justice, peacebuilding, and [responsibility](#). The central question of his work and life was “[who is responsible to do what for whom?](#)”

That question resonates at this particular moment, as the pandemic continues [its terrible toddlerhood](#), offering still more unpredictability, stability, and loss—but also [opportunities for positive change](#).

As teachers, we find ourselves in the position of balancing multiple and sometimes conflicting responsibilities, always, including legal, ethical, personal, and professional, and to a wide variety of stakeholders, such as our students, our institution, our [disciplines and fields](#), students’ future employers, and our communities. And, we also have [responsibilities to ourselves](#) (which are so easy to forget).

Particularly in a time when [democracy is in peril](#), reflecting on our civic responsibilities and prioritizing society as a stakeholder reminds us that JMU’s [core mission](#) as “a community committed to preparing students to be educated and enlightened citizens who lead productive and meaningful lives” often requires us to make difficult decisions.

Through the pandemic, our many [responsibilities have changed](#) and intensified. We are responsible not just for teaching, and [teaching well](#), but also for keeping our students and communities safe; for heightened attention to issues of [justice, equity, and diversity](#) in times of crisis; for providing [accessible](#) and [inclusive](#) learning materials and opportunities in [a variety of formats](#); for responding to rapidly shifting conditions and needs. Add those to the increasing and changing demands and needs of the other stakeholders to whom we respond. Add, also, that we are deeply exhausted, struggling, and conflicted ourselves.

Philosopher John Rawls’s “[difference principle](#)” holds that just arrangements are those that most benefit the least advantaged. Terry often reminded me that, as teachers, we owe the most to our struggling students—the ones who often fall off our radars, or least participate in the learning situations we create, or frustrate us the most. It’s easy to teach to the “good” students (the ones like us, usually!), but we can’t forget that often those aren’t the students who need our energies and attention the most.

Reflecting on our responsibilities as teachers, we also have the responsibility to teach students responsibility and to give them opportunities to reflect on their own obligations to themselves, each other, and their various communities. [JMU's Ethical Reasoning in Action](#) offers opportunities and resources for helping students develop ethical reasoning skills, putting responsibility in the context of other ethical and justice considerations, such as fairness, rights, and empathy. We can also raise students' awareness of programs of study that focus on such complex questions, such as the [Ethics Minor](#) or [Justice Studies](#).

Here are more ideas for teaching responsibility:

- Build in conversations about our [responsibilities for learning](#), and to each other, in early-semester and ongoing community-building activities in class. This can be a way to move away from dictating classroom “rules” to [cultivating students' sense of responsibility](#) to each other. (For example, instead of forbidding disruptive behaviors, we can talk about how we owe it to each other to avoid distractions.)
- Consider building in [community service-learning](#) and community engagement opportunities for students. The [Community Service-Learning](#) office offers resources and support to build meaningful opportunities for students to apply their learning and reflect on their responsibilities to the community. CSL can [support faculty](#) in making sure the opportunities we build are not extractive, but rather prioritize community needs.
- [Accountability](#) is, of course, an important dimension of responsibility. Encourage awareness of and compliance with standards, agreements, and codes of conduct, including with the [JMU Honor Code](#) and [JMU Student Handbook](#). The Honor Council and the Office of Student Accountability and Restorative Practices ([OSARP](#)) offer resources for explaining and enforcing those standards to help students learn and grow from mistakes. Likewise, we can model responsibility by owning our mistakes and the harm we cause, insisting on accountability from our own institutions, governments, and communities.
- Share resources from offices such as [CMSS](#), [ODS](#), and [SOGIE](#), and invite peer educators to class, to help students reflect on their own responsibilities in relation to their privilege and positionality with regard to marginalized identities.
- Create a [community of care](#) in the classroom. Especially during challenging times, we all need—and owe—each other.
- Incorporate [civic engagement](#) and [career readiness](#) activities in courses, as appropriate, to [offer students resources](#) that would help them to align their strengths and skills with community needs and that would allow them to imagine and work toward more just, equitable futures.
- [Support colleagues](#), particularly those with [marginalized identities](#).

Recently, a mutual friend and I were discussing Terry's ability to just make everything better, with his presence and with his kindness, patience, unique humor, and deep commitment to bearing one another's burdens. Terry steadfastly believed, even as the world seemed like it was collapsing, not only that we can make it better, but also that it's our responsibility to do so. We can honor Terry's call, and his legacy, by reflecting on our responsibilities, including as teachers, and encouraging our students to do the same.

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