



JMU's Mission and Ethical Reasoning

James Madison understood democratic government to be both precious and precarious, demanding an educated and engaged citizenry to thrive. In the spirit of the man, James Madison University recently launched an educational program to better prepare students to be “educated and enlightened citizens who lead productive and meaningful lives.”¹ This program, ***The Madison Collaborative: Ethical Reasoning in Action***, will help develop ethical reasoning skills, the signature skill set distinguishing JMU as an engaged university.

Why Ethical Reasoning?

Global news provides poignant reminders of often tragic ethical shortcomings, prompting greater sensitivity to the significance of ethical reasoning skills. For multiple reasons higher education has shied away from ethics instruction, but the public appeals to colleges and universities to do something.

Employers expect that college graduates will have the skills and disposition to understand and tackle problems within the context of economic, cultural, global, and personal challenges. According to a recent survey, employers placed the highest priority on ethics (ethical judgment and integrity) during the hiring process compared to other valuable skills and vital knowledge.² Many **professional organizations** require continuing education in ethics and build an ethics component into admissions tests (e.g. Medical College Admissions Test). And most importantly, **students** want to be prepared to engage in critical analysis of ethical situations in college and after graduation.³

Eight Key Questions

JMU's ***Madison Collaborative*** initiates a new direction for ethical reasoning instruction. Our innovation is grounded in operationalizing the best of humanity's ethical reasoning traditions into a flexible and open framework of ***Eight Key Questions (8KQ)***. The questions, which can be voiced in first or second person and stated using culturally diverse content, highlight eight vital human values: ***fairness, outcomes, responsibility, character, liberty, empathy, authority, and rights***. These values may be expressed by different words, e.g. outcomes as “consequences,” “results,” “the future,” or “karma,” or in different languages, e.g. *consecuencia* (Spanish). Each names a distinctive—we believe cross-culturally common—ethical consideration. In arriving at the core ethical values, JMU vetted the 8KQ with culture scholars and ethics specialists. The resulting ethical reasoning framework was lauded as “genius” by an external ethics expert.

¹ See James Madison University, “Mission Statement.”

² See Hart Research Associates, “It Takes More Than a Major: Employer Priorities for College Learning and Student Success.” http://www.aacu.org/leap/documents/2013_EmployerSurvey.pdf.

³ JMU new students rank ethical reasoning third behind oral communication and critical thinking as skills valuable to their lives after graduation. Center for Assessment and Research Studies. Summary of assessment results - fall 2013.

The Eight Key Questions (8KQ)

Fairness – What action does justice, equality, or a balance of legitimate interests require?

Outcomes – What achieves the best short- and long-term outcomes for me and all others?

Responsibility – What duties and/or obligations apply?

Character – What action best reflects who I am and the person I want to become?

Liberty – How does respect for freedom, personal autonomy, or consent apply?

Empathy – What would I do if I cared deeply about those involved?

Authority – What do legitimate authorities (e.g., experts, law, my religion/god) expect of me?

Rights – What rights, if any, (e.g., innate, legal, social) apply?

Are Students Prepared for Ethical Reasoning?

The 8KQ ethical reasoning strategy aligns with developmental psychology and current experimental findings in choice and decision theory. College-aged students typically are transitioning into stages of moral autonomy marked by a concern for rational reflection. Students need to make ethical decisions based on legitimate values and principles. The decisive power of simple cognitive interventions for determining choices such as asking oneself “what is fair?” is finding widespread support in decision literature. Perhaps this explains why students become excited to participate in ethical case study analyses such as “It’s Complicated.” [<https://www.jmu.edu/orientation/its-complicated/video.shtml>] Students have been overwhelmingly receptive to JMU’s efforts to develop ethical reasoning skills.

Fringe Benefits to JMU’s Academic Community

Furthermore, as an inquiry-based process, the 8KQ strategy of ethical reasoning holds promise of improving overall critical thinking skills, which frequently involves asking the right questions in context. As higher education has become increasingly fragmented by disciplinary specialization, a university focus on ethical matters opens an avenue of academic communication. We anticipate these predictions of better critical thinking and cross disciplinary communication will be born out in the years ahead.

Where Do the 8KQ Apply?

The 8KQ are designed for use in personal, professional, civic, and cosmopolitan settings. Their versatility makes possible a comprehensive and university-wide application. The student affairs co-curriculum and the academic affairs curriculum—both general education courses and upper level disciplinary and especially professional courses—reinforce disciplined ethical reasoning as a practical skill conducive to productive and meaningful lives. As an authentically Madisonian project, ***The Madison Collaborative: Ethical Reasoning in Action*** will foster a skill set that undergirds his cherished democracy.

