

The JMU Undergraduate Experience: Changes and Impacts

Dr. Frank Doherty, JMU's Director of the Office of Institutional Research (OIR), retired in June 2018 after 31 years at JMU in the same office. He has witnessed enormous changes during his tenure and has overseen the collection and reporting of data to the university community, the federal government and the Commonwealth of Virginia. This Research Note, and three previous ones, summarize many of these changes. The first three notes, "[How JMU Has Changed – Students](#)," "[How JMU Has Changed: Faculty, Staff and Administrators](#)," and "[How JMU Has Changed: Facilities and Finance](#)," are available on OIR's website. This final note focuses on the changes in the undergraduate experience as well as its impact on students. The data for these notes are drawn from official reports and data compiled by OIR since the early 1970s. Where possible, we attempt to use the data from 1987-88, 2002-03 (the 15th year of these data), 2016-17, and occasionally 2017-18. It is our hope that you will find these notes to be informative and useful.

Background and Methodology

In the first three Research Notes, we described how JMU's students, faculty, staff, administrators, facilities and finances have changed in the last 30 years. In 1987, JMU was a mid-sized (10,000+) regional, comprehensive institution that reflected its emergence from a Normal School teacher college to a liberal arts, business, and teacher-education institution. Since 1987, the following students' changes were noted in the first Research Note:

- JMU has doubled in size since 1987. It is a far larger and more complex institution.
- JMU is a more diverse institution than in 1987. The composition of this diversity has clearly changed as the number of self-identified Asian, Hispanic and African-American students has dramatically increased. The number of international students has increased substantially (470%).
- The percent of degrees earned in disciplines such as STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math) and Health grew significantly. STEM/Health degrees now represent approximately 32% of all degrees, up from 20% in 1987-88. JMU now offers doctoral degrees. These changes have placed enormous financial pressure on JMU in the form of attracting qualified faculty and providing adequate facilities for these more expensive programs.
- Technology changes have been immense. As you walk across campus, you see that students use their personal devices, mostly smart phones, very frequently (constantly?). Research studies¹ have suggested that technology has had, and will have, significant impacts on the undergraduate experience.

JMU is a profoundly different institution than it was in 1987, but in some very important ways it is not. In the other three notes we found that the core values of the university, including student-focus, collegiality, and care for others have changed little. One of the purposes of this note is to examine how the JMU undergraduate experience has changed or remained the same and its impact on students.

As opposed to the other three notes in this series, the data for this note are primarily qualitative. We used three methods to gather information:

¹ Dye, Tracy June, "[The Effects of Technology on College Life](#)" (2016). Senior Theses. 119.

- Comparisons of students' responses to two annual surveys. Each of these surveys has been conducted for more than 35 years, and they contain many of the same questions. Thus, these surveys allow us to compare responses over many years both within the same survey and across surveys. The analyses of these surveys may provide hints into the ways our students have and have not changed.
 - The First-Year Student Survey, administered in April and May prior to enrollment in their freshman year, asks students a variety of questions about their experiences prior to enrolling; their attitudes and expectations about JMU; and their personal values. The response rate to this survey is virtually 100 percent.
 - The Continuing Student Survey is conducted during the fall term and is given to a stratified random sample (3,500+) of all undergraduate students. It contains many of the same questions that are in the First-Year Student Survey. The survey is administered within classes, and we have found that the results reflect the diversity of the university.
- Survey of graduating seniors.
 - In April 2018, we conducted a very short survey of graduating seniors to determine their perspectives of how JMU has affected them. The survey contained two questions:
 - "In what ways have you changed as a result of your JMU experience?"
 - "In what ways have you remained the same as a result of your JMU experience?"
 - We received 190 responses. The results were analyzed using content analysis techniques to identify major themes and thoughts of the respondents.
- Focus group
 - Finally, we conducted a focus group of five alums from 30 years ago and seven current undergraduates. Led by two faculty, who have been at JMU for more than 30 years, the focus of the discussion was on how the undergraduate experience has or has not changed in the last 30 years.

Some Observations

This Research Note is not brief because of the important content that was covered, so we thought it would be worthwhile to share our observations on changes first. We placed more detailed summaries of the findings later on in this document.

JMU is a vastly different and more complex institution than it was in 1987-88 in many dimensions, including the undergraduate experience. However, in some ways it is not. What follows is a brief summation of the changes that have occurred in the last 30 years. The changes are organized by the three methods we used to gather these data.

Changes:

First-Year and Continuing Student Surveys:

- Continuing students' perceptions of JMU as "emotionally healthy," "flexible," and "integrated" show substantial declines between first-year students and continuing students in 2016. The perception of JMU being "emotionally healthy" for continuing students dropped by 20 percentage points between 1987 and 2016.
- The personal values of "doing things for others," "money," and "work" changed more than 20 percentage points between first-year students and continuing students. One gets the impression that freshmen, more than 30 years ago, entered JMU with a less practical, "return on investment," "get-a-job"-mentality. However, the undergraduate experience seems to encourage them to develop life-long friendships, look beyond work for fulfillment, and to make a difference in the world.

- Accomplishments considered to be essential declined more than 20 percentage points for first-year students include “receiving a liberal arts education that is of high quality and very diversified,” “becoming an authority in my field,” “helping others who are in difficulty,” “developing a meaningful philosophy of life,” and “influencing social values.”

Survey of Seniors:

- Many seniors told us that they changed in some important ways like:
 - Greater confidence in who they are and what they can do in life,
 - Improved communication and people skills,
 - Self-knowledge and acceptance,
 - More open minded and accepting of the ideas/perceptions of others,
 - Matured thinking,
 - Increased passion and engagement, and
 - Ability to overcome challenges.

Focus Group:

- Technology has impacted almost every area of the undergraduate experience. Registration for classes, getting books, communicating with friends and faculty, submitting papers and projects for class, finding jobs, reading class materials, and taking on-line classes have been vastly impacted by technology and changed the undergraduate experience.
- Students’ experiences within the local community are more varied. Downtown Harrisonburg is now a great place to spend some time, with many shops and places to dine. Many students now spend significant time helping in the community. In 1987, students rarely went downtown.
- The size of the campus and number of students have also affected the undergraduate experience. Many new students find the size of the campus and the number of students initially overwhelming. They increasingly wonder how they are going to find their classes, make new friends, and find their place in a large institution.

Changed Little or Remains the Same

First-Year and Continuing Student Surveys:

- The factors that influence students to come to JMU, their philosophy of education, reactions to cheating, and political preferences have remained steady over the last 30 years.
- Important personal values like “friendship,” “education,” “family,” and “love” remain highly important. Initial perceptions of JMU as “good,” “friendly,” and “progressive” have remained high.

Survey of Seniors:

- Many seniors told us that they have remained the same in important ways like:
 - Who they are as a person – personality,
 - Values,
 - Beliefs, and
 - Life-long learner, love for learning.

Focus Group:

- Students still come to JMU because it is perceived as an excellent place to go to college. This reputation remains strong.

- The core JMU character, often known as the “JMU Way,” still exists. This term means that the student is still the focus of the educational enterprise and decisions are made that maximize the student experience. There is still a strong focus on developing well-rounded students.
- Ways to have fun are similar. Hanging out with friends on the Quad, hiking, outdoor activities, and sports are still frequent ways for students to have fun. Students who lived on campus their first year still find that the friends they made in residence halls are very important to helping them become part of the JMU community.
- The importance of students connecting with faculty continues to be very strong. Fortunately, many faculty know students by name even in larger classes. Most faculty continue to take a personal interest in their students. “Dr. G,” a faculty member in Communication Studies, was mentioned frequently by the students as one who takes a personal interest in her students.
- Choosing a major, getting classes when they need them, and learning organizational and study skills remain as huge challenges for all students. Many students find that their first term grades are not as good as they wished but improve in later terms as they applied their new study skills.
- The friends students make continue to be essential to their successes and feelings about JMU both while enrolled and later in life. After graduation, 99% still say they are likely or very likely to recommend JMU to a colleague, friend or relative.

Frank’s Final Thoughts

Personally, the development of these four Research Notes has fostered my amazement at how an institution as large and complex as JMU has changed in almost every conceivable way since 1987, yet still maintains important common characteristics and behaviors that have, thankfully, remained the same, if not improved.

As I complete these four studies and retire from JMU, I would like to comment on what I think are the major challenges JMU will face in the next 10 to 20 years. Many of these challenges have been examined in more detail in these Research Notes and are well known. The following are entirely my thoughts and are not to be construed as official for JMU or OIR.

I believe there are five major challenges that JMU must continue to address: relationships, size, technology, diversity, and costs. Let me explain.

- **Relationships:** The amazing ways that JMU has changed since 1987 could only have happened through the relationships fostered across campus between students, faculty, staff, administrators, and supporters. Somehow a tradition of caring, called “The JMU Way,” has remained stable for more than 30 years. That is a remarkable achievement considering how size often works to undermine relationships. Size works against relationships because size often results in people not knowing each other well due to physical distance. JMU has somehow retained the small college feel in a large institution. I think the three JMU presidents in the last 30 years have helped foster a tradition of caring. I have heard it mentioned that people who do not “play nicely in the sandbox” at JMU do not stay long.
- **Size:** Let’s face it, JMU is a large institution. It is not going to return to being small. Size has many advantages such as increased efficiencies, diversity, a broad array of disciplines in which a student can major, extensive support programs and organizations for students, and other opportunities that small institutions cannot provide. On the other hand, size often works against: relationships between people, different campus groups and organizations, leadership, and a unified Mission. Size often results in people working in “silos.” It can be very easy to simply come to work, do your job, and go home without understanding or caring about the organization for which you work. You can become a number instead of a person. OIR consisted of three people in 1987, and we now have seven. The work we do is far more complex than it was in 1987. The

increasing demands and complexity of our work could make it very easy for staff to specialize in one or two major things only. This often happens in large institutional research offices across America. The challenge for JMU will be to leverage size for good without sacrificing the things that make JMU great.

- **Technology:** Technology has changed just about everything in higher education and the American workforce. Communication, jobs, politics, medicine, teaching and learning, and just about anything you can think of has been affected by technology. The technological revolution is still in its infancy, with no clear insights into where it could be taking us as a people and as an institution. In 1987 no one had cell phones, tablets or Apple Watches. Now my three-year-old iPhone has far more power than the IBM PC-XT I was excited to find on my desk the first day I began work at JMU. Communication between and among students, faculty and staff was often in-person or on the phone. When you saw two students walking across campus together they were talking with each other. Now, when one sees two students walking across campus they may or may not be talking with each other, but instead could be talking with others across campus or the world. Technology has the potential to draw us together or tear us apart. The challenge for JMU and society in general will be to leverage the good things technology can do for us while keeping the bad things at bay.
- **Diversity:** Our culture is becoming more diverse. JMU may not be as diverse as it hopes ultimately to be, but the diversity of students, faculty and staff is far greater than in 1987. One of the challenges JMU will face in the next 10 to 20 years is the need to enroll a far more diverse population of students and attract, at the same time, more diverse faculty, staff and administrators. The population centers from which many of our students and professional staff come are much more diverse. The traditional “pool” of students from which JMU has historically drawn is shrinking while the more multicultural student populations are increasing. Although JMU has made significant strides recruiting in more multicultural population centers, it is a challenge because these student populations are more likely to be first-generation, represent areas that have been historically underserved, and frequently do not wish to travel far from home to places like Harrisonburg for college. Increasing diversity is critical to the future of JMU, but it will bring demands to support these new students financially and provide expanded services.
- **Costs:** College is not cheap. My wife and I paid nearly \$250,000 to educate our three sons in Virginia. Two attended JMU and one William & Mary. The youngest one graduated in 2009. We were fortunate to be able to pay for their entire education. Our situation is not the norm anymore. I do not think we could afford to pay the full costs for our sons if they were now in college. We have seen the percentage of JMU students needing financial aid grow slowly, but surely, over the last 25 years. The average debt of our graduates in 2016-17, according to SCHEV, was \$26,977 (51% of total graduates). JMU, like all higher education institutions, will have to find ways to control costs in an environment that demands greater services for students and accountability from the public, the Commonwealth and federal government. The Commonwealth of Virginia does not support higher education like it did 30 years ago, making it even more challenging to educate Virginians who must shoulder an increasing percentage of the total costs. I do not claim to have the answers to this vexing problem, but I am concerned that rising costs will make JMU less and less affordable for the students and staff it needs to attract.

Detailed Analyses

What follows are more in depth and descriptions about the analyses completed and what we learned during this study.

First-Year and Continuing Student Surveys

Each survey contains questions about many aspects of the undergraduate experience. We selected questions that were asked each year for more than 30 years and that may provide insights into many important aspects of their experience. The questions include the following topics.

- Major factors which led students to come to JMU
- Philosophy of education
- Student perceptions of JMU
- Aspects of JMU that are emphasized
- Probable reactions to student cheating
- Political preferences
- Important personal values
- Lifetime accomplishments considered to be very important

The methodology for the First-Year Student Survey has not changed in the last 40 years other than responses in 1987 were collected via paper survey (mailed to students as part of their orientation materials) and for the last 10 years has been administered electronically. The response rates have typically been in the upper 90s. The methodology for the Continuing Student Survey (in-class distribution by faculty to a stratified random sample) has also not changed. Still there are important reasons that it is a challenge to analyze these data for meaningful statistical change. However, we believe it is reasonable to point out responses to some questions that can at least foster discussion. We highlighted questions where there were percentage differences either within the same survey or between the two surveys that exceeded +/-20 percentage points.

Why JMU?

There are various factors that influence a student to attend college. They include academic reputation, overall reputation, supportive atmosphere, size of JMU, costs, the physical campus, athletics, family members, location, and the people. So which of these are the most important to JMU undergraduates, and have these factors changed over the 30 years? As can be seen in Table 1, the two most important factors for our students are JMU's academic reputation and the supportive atmosphere.

Table 1: Major Factors Which Led Students to Come to JMU

Reason	1987	2002	2016
Academic reputation	1	2	1
Overall reputation	2	3	3
Supportive atmosphere	3	1	2
Size of JMU	4	5	5
Campus	5	4	4
JMU has low tuition	6	6	6

Purpose of higher education

Over the decades, the perception of the purpose of higher education has varied. At one time, many considered that the purpose of a college education was to teach a liberal arts education, but in the last 30 years the pressures from politicians, the media and parents have emphasized that college should, most importantly, prepare students for work. Many students come to JMU with some expectations of what they wish to learn and why. Below are the four educational philosophies from which each new student was asked to choose.

- **Vocational:** Education is primarily a preparation for an occupational future. Social, intellectual and extracurricular activities are less important. Commitment to a particular field of study is high and college is seen primarily to obtain training for a chosen career.
- **Social:** Extracurricular activities, group parties, athletics, social life, rewarding friendships and loyalty to college traditions are emphasized and are viewed as important and necessary for the cultivation of the well-rounded person. Occupational training and/or scholarly endeavor are less important, though not ignored.
- **Intellectual:** The greatest emphasis is on the scholarly pursuit of knowledge and understanding. Involvement in course work or independent study beyond the minimum is sought. Social life and organized activities are relatively unimportant.
- **Artistic:** Emphasis is placed on ideas, art forms and individuality. There is often either a conscious rejection of commonly held value orientations or a search for meaning in one's life. Many facets of the university's activities and administration are seen as unimportant.

For more than 30 years, at least half of the first-year and continuing students have selected a vocational philosophy of education. A social philosophy has generally been the second choice followed by intellectual and artistic. While an artistic philosophy generally has the lowest percentages in both surveys, it is the one that appears to show the most percentage increase between the first year and later years.

Table 2: Philosophy of Education

	First-Year Survey			Continuing Student Survey		
	1987	2002	2016	1987	2002	2016
Vocational	62%	46%	51%	51%	50%	50%
Social	27%	41%	25%	22%	14%	18%
Intellectual	6%	8%	18%	17%	23%	14%
Artistic	5%	6%	6%	10%	13%	17%

Perceptions

Perceptions are so important because they often dictate how we behave. JMU's fourth president, Ronald Carrier was insistent that the campus be extremely inviting aesthetically, including flowers, landscaping and building maintenance. This priority was continued by his successor, Linwood Rose, and the current president, Jon Alger. The appearance of the campus enhances the perception that JMU is a high quality institution. Dr. Carrier told me that he started a football program to change the perception that JMU was primarily a women's college in order to attract more men.

On both surveys we ask students about their perceptions of JMU on a variety of aspects. Over the last 30 years "Good," "Friendly," and "Progressive" have been the most important perceptions on both surveys. As shown in Table 3, the initial impressions of JMU are amazingly high. As in most human relationships, perceptions can and do change over time. In the Continuing Student Survey, "Good," "Friendly," and "Progressive" are still rated toward the top, but the percentages are marginally lower.

There are a few changes worth noting, however. The following percentages dropped more than 20 percentage points between the two surveys: "Emotionally Healthy" (88% to 50%), "Flexible" (88% to 64%), and "Integrated" (80% to 55%). We cannot say exactly what these changes mean, but it could be worthwhile to explore the meaning of these terms with current students.

Table 3: Student Perceptions of JMU

	First-Year Survey			Continuing Student Survey		
	1987	2002	2016	1987	2002	2016
Good	97%	96%	97%	88%	80%	86%
Friendly	94%	95%	97%	88%	81%	86%
Progressive	92%	91%	90%	84%	72%	79%
Right Size	90%	80%	85%	75%	71%	76%
Challenging	90%	86%	83%	83%	71%	78%
Open and Accessible	87%	92%	92%	77%	69%	76%
Supportive	86%	91%	96%	74%	61%	77%
Emotionally Healthy	86%	87%	88%	70%	51%	50%
Flexible	86%	85%	88%	70%	52%	64%
Intellectual	83%	83%	91%	69%	64%	79%
Sensitive	80%	78%	73%	53%	52%	56%
Integrated	78%	74%	80%	46%	47%	55%
Traditional	52%	39%	52%	26%	37%	35%

Emphases

In the eyes of our students, what do they think JMU emphasizes the most? As can be seen in Table 4, over the last 30 years the responses to this question has remained, in general, stable. “Relationships with other students, student groups and activities,” “development of academic, scholarly, and intellectual qualities,” and “personal growth and self-awareness” have remained as the highest emphases. There are no emphases that changed by 20 percentage points.

Table 4: JMU Places a Significant Emphasis On

	First-Year Survey			Continuing Student Survey	
	1987	2002	2016	2002	2016
Relationships with other students, student groups, and activities	60%	59%	56%	46%	49%
The development of academic, scholarly, and intellectual qualities	58%	59%	56%	67%	67%
Personal growth and self-awareness	56%	56%	59%	29%	51%
The personal relevance and practical value of your courses	41%	38%	48%	42%	38%
The development of vocational and occupational competence	33%	38%	45%	32%	33%
The development of esthetic, expressive, and creative qualities	32%	34%	44%	27%	28%
On being critical, evaluative and analytical	24%	29%	47%	42%	47%

Ethical Decisions

The ability to make ethical decisions is crucial for a “productive and meaningful life.” The Madison Collaborative: Ethical Reasoning in Action is a program developed by the university to help students learn to make wise and informed ethical decisions. Cheating has long been a concern to higher education leaders. The survey contains questions related to cheating to ascertain how our students might react. So, when presented with an incident of cheating, what actions do our new and continuing students prefer to take? Have their reactions changed in any meaningful ways?

Table 5: Probable Reaction to a Student Cheating

	First-Year Survey			Continuing Student Survey		
	1987	2002	2016	1987	2002	2016
I would express my concern only to the student I discovered cheating	30%	31%	24%	14%	13%	17%
I would speak to the appropriate teacher or other authority without naming names	22%	23%	22%	15%	15%	13%
I would be disturbed, but whether I took any action would depend on who the student was	21%	17%	16%	21%	19%	24%
I would be disturbed, but would do nothing	14%	16%	12%	33%	31%	23%
I would report the student to the appropriate teacher or other authority	11%	8%	21%	9%	11%	10%
I would not be disturbed and would do nothing	3%	4%	6%	9%	11%	14%

Table 5 displays the six possible options that a student might consider when faced with evidence that a fellow student cheated. Student reactions to cheating appear to change over their years at JMU. For first-year students prior to enrolling, 43% indicated that they would notify the appropriate teacher or authority. The percentage of continuing students who would notify the teacher or authority declined to 23%. The percentage of first-year students who would do nothing was 18%, but the percentage of continuing students who would do nothing is 37%. These differences from first-year to continuing students have remained steady for 30 years.

Political preferences

We live in a hyper-politicized time in our country where it is not uncommon for political pundits to say that college makes students more liberal and less religious. However, several studies have shown that going to college does not necessarily make a student more liberal or less religious (Matter, 2012). This appears to be the case at JMU, also. In Table 6, you can see that first-year students' views are relatively spread across the spectrum from liberal to conservative. This percentage shifts slightly to more middle of the road for continuing students.

Table 6: Political Preferences

	First-Year Survey			Continuing Student Survey		
	1987	2002	2016	1987	2002	2016
Middle of the Road	46%	47%	37%	50%	44%	43%
Liberal	28%	28%	32%	26%	36%	30%
Conservative	26%	26%	31%	24%	20%	27%

Personal Values

College serves many purposes, and JMU hopes that the undergraduate experience will produce “educated and enlightened citizens.”² On both surveys, students were asked to rate the importance of several personal values. Table 7 shows that “Friendship,” “Education,” “Family” and “Love” continue to be the most important values of our students when they first enroll and during their undergraduate years. Using a 20% change as a barometer of possible meaningful change, we can see that “Doing things for others,” “Money,” “Work,” and “Having children” have shown increases for first-year students over the last 30 years. While “Doing things for others,” “Money,” and “Work,” seem to be more important personal values for first-year students, the levels of importance for these values appear to settle back to historical levels as continuing students. “Contributing to societal change,” while far from the top of these values, are more important personal values of first-year and continuing students than 30 years ago.

Table 7: Personal Values Indicated as Very Important

	First-Year Survey			Continuing Student Survey		
	1987	2002	2016	1987	2002	2016
Friendship	80%	91%	90%	84%	83%	82%
Education	77%	88%	94%	77%	83%	82%
Fulfill myself as a person	77%	86%	89%	84%		
Family	73%	87%	90%	80%	80%	84%
Love	68%	75%	77%	84%	57%	74%
Living a clean, moral life	47%	63%	66%	52%	49%	50%
Creativity	43%	54%	56%	34%		
Doing things for Others	43%	62%	79%	46%	48%	58%
Privacy	33%	39%	52%	34%	36%	46%
Money	32%	36%	55%	37%	31%	32%
Religion	31%	40%	35%	38%	37%	32%
Work	30%	36%	62%	39%	21%	32%
Patriotism	27%	43%	42%	33%	33%	28%
Having Children	25%	48%	57%	56%	44%	55%
Contributing to societal change	15%	32%	37%	13%	34%	33%
Being Close to Nature	13%	19%	29%	22%	21%	24%

Important accomplishments

Students’ personal accomplishments rated as essential include “receiving a liberal arts education that is of high quality and very diversified,” “becoming an authority in my field,” “raising a family,” “being very well off financially,” “developing a meaningful philosophy of life,” “helping others who are in difficulty,” “being successful in a business of my own,” “having administrative responsibility for the work of others,” and “becoming accomplished in one of the performing arts.”

Table 8 shows some noteworthy changes in essential accomplishments. “Receiving a liberal arts education that is of high quality and very diversified” declined by 32 percentage points between 1987 and 2016, and “becoming an authority in my field” declined by 23 percentage points. “Developing a meaningful philosophy of life,” which had dropped from 29% to 15% by 2016 for first-year students, was 37% for continuing students in 2016. “Helping others who are in difficulty,” which was 28% for continuing students in 1987 rose to 53% in 2016. “Influencing social values” rose for continuing students from 14% in 1987 to 35% in 2016.

² JMU Mission Statement

Table 8
Accomplishments Indicated as Essential

	First-Year Survey			Continuing Student Survey		
	1987	2002	2016	1987	2002	2016
Receiving a liberal arts education that is of high quality and very diversified	48%	36%	16%	40%	33%	31%
Becoming an authority in my field	38%	21%	15%	29%	31%	30%
Raising a family	34%	46%	37%	46%	49%	56%
Being very well off financially	29%	27%	36%	30%	31%	37%
Developing a meaningful philosophy of life	29%	27%	15%	29%	26%	37%
Helping others who are in difficulty	27%	28%	29%	28%	39%	53%
Being successful in a business of my own	21%	13%	14%	21%	20%	23%
Being admitted as a graduate student at a prestigious university	20%	25%	17%	16%	20%	17%
Keeping up to date with political affairs	18%	11%	11%	18%	17%	23%
Obtaining recognition from my colleagues for contributions to my special field	16%	13%	12%	16%	25%	27%
Influencing social values	14%	10%	11%	14%	22%	35%
Having administrative responsibility for the work of others	12%	7%	5%	12%	17%	17%
Becoming accomplished in one of the performing arts	8%	7%	7%	8%	15%	12%
Participating in a community action program	7%	8%	8%	7%	17%	15%
Writing original work	7%	6%	3%	7%	12%	9%
Creating artistic work	6%	7%	4%	6%	12%	10%
Becoming involved in programs to clean up the environment	5%	4%	5%	5%	14%	21%
Influencing the political structure	5%	5%	5%	5%	14%	14%
Making a theoretical contribution to science	3%	3%	4%	3%	10%	8%

Survey of Graduating Seniors

As shown in the First-Year and Continuing Student surveys, students come to college for many reasons. It is virtually impossible for any student not to change in some ways over their years at JMU, whether they enter as freshmen or transfers. We asked seniors simply to tell us in what ways they have or have not changed. Since we have no comparable information from 30 years ago, our focus is on the impact of JMU on current students.

The seniors told us some remarkable and encouraging things about how they changed as well as remained the same during their time at JMU. The results are organized by themes that emerged from reading the responses. Prior to the description of the themes, we display a word cloud that was produced in Qualtrics, the survey software we use, for each question. The statements made by seniors appear in the Appendix.

Important Changes



Seven major themes about change arose: greater confidence; improved communication and people skills; more open minded and accepting of the ideas/perceptions of others; self-knowledge and acceptance; matured thinking skills; more passionate and engaged; and increased ability to overcome challenges.

Greater confidence was the most frequently mentioned theme. The students said they discovered new passions, overcame fears about living and succeeding in a large university, had improved their ability to handle conflicts, increased their willingness to try new things, and learned ways to handle stress.

The second most frequently mentioned theme was **improved communication and people skills**. Many said they are more independent and confident to meet new people, learned different techniques on how to work with people from diverse backgrounds, overcame social anxiety, improved their presentation skills, and learned how to speak in front of people.

Many seniors said they are now more **open minded and accepting of the ideas and perceptions** of others. They mentioned increased ability to respond to people with different ideas and backgrounds, value different traits and problem-solving skills, and learned to understand better the challenges faced by individuals from diverse backgrounds.

Improved **self-knowledge and acceptance** of themselves was mentioned frequently. Many learned to love themselves more, formed networks of friends based on real interests and similarities, discovered friends who make them more confident, learned to love how God made them, learned to be kind and compassionate, learned that there is more to life than money, and developed characteristics that have enabled them to feel more comfortable with themselves.

Many said their **thinking skills had matured**. This included understanding why they hold certain values, improved analytical skills, increased sense of responsibility for themselves, increased thirst for knowledge, learning different perspectives on life and values, improving their ethical reasoning skills, and learning how to use their increased knowledge and skills to help others.

Many seniors mentioned that they are **more passionate and engaged**. They said there are more likely to want to give back to their community, have learned independence, are less afraid of failure, increased their cultural humility, and became less focused on money and prestige.

Many seniors have improved skills that enable them to **overcome challenges**. They gained more friends and became more socially active, learned to handle multiple classes and workloads, and learned from mistakes.

Remained the Same



Four major themes about how they did not change arose: who they are as a person, values, beliefs, and love of learning.

The most frequently mentioned theme was that their **basic personality** did not change. They remained true to who they are, were helped to find places where their personality can best be used, and found people who were like them.

Many seniors mentioned that their **basic values** and beliefs have not changed. Their values and beliefs were greatly challenged, but remained essentially the same, if not enhanced.

Many of the students came to JMU with a **thirst for knowledge**, and it did not change or was enhanced. They learned new ways to seek and gain knowledge. They felt supported and encouraged by faculty and friends to seek new knowledge.

Focus Group

The students and alums had a very lively discussion about how the undergraduate experience has or has not changed. They covered a wide variety of topics and shared openly about their experiences. One of the alums commented, “Yesterday was not just fun, but really enriching. I left glowing with JMU spirit!”

The conversation covered the following topics:

- Why JMU?
- Orientation and first two weeks of classes
- Finding your place, making friends, and having fun
- Biggest challenges
- Interactions with faculty, administrators and staff
- Favorite and/or most impactful memories
- Impacts of JMU on your life.

Why JMU?

It appears that the major reasons students attend JMU have changed little since 1987. These include: word of mouth, campus tours, friends from high school, high school counselors, and family and friends. In 1987, the college ratings guides were just beginning to be mentioned in the media, so the guides were not as informative as they are now. In 2017, campus tours are the most popular source of information about JMU. On the First-Year Survey, in 1987, it was the third highest reason. Again using the First-Year Survey, in 1987, 70% of freshmen said JMU was their first choice, and in 2017 JMU was the first choice of 80%.

Orientation and first two weeks of classes

New student orientation, now known as 1787, is more focused than in 1987. It includes a series of classes focused on important transition issues like alcohol and sexual abuse. Students now move in over two days, beginning on Tuesday. Freshmen are very involved in orientation from Wednesday through Sunday, and classes begin on Monday. In 1987, there was a 1.5 day orientation in summer in which the students lived in a residence hall. Freshmen moved in on Friday and classes began on Monday. Alums mentioned the long lines freshmen had to deal with to register for classes, buy books, and get into D-Hall. In 1987, freshmen were required to take an interdisciplinary Freshman Seminar for which they had to read five books during the summer. Today, there is nothing comparable besides the “It’s Complicated” one-hour session on ethical reasoning and decision-making. The General Education program today is more structured than it was in 1987. Alums mentioned the friend-building aspects of groups like the Marching Royal Dukes (MRDs). You wonder whether standing in line was such a bad idea as it encouraged communication and problem-solving among new students. It was a shared memory.

Finding your place, making friends, and having fun

JMU is known as a very friendly campus, even considered by some as being an “extroverted” campus. The ways freshmen establish friendships have not changed in the last 30 years. The requirement that freshmen live in the residence halls (with a few exceptions for locals) increases the likelihood that students can make friends early in their JMU experience.

JMU is very large, and alums and current students want and need ways to make the experience personal. FROGs (First Year Orientation Guides), Residence Advisors, and other involved in Orientation are trained to provide opportunities for students to make friends. Students living on each floor of the halls, led by FROGs, go in groups of about 20 to many Orientation activities together. Alums and current students say that they met many of their best friends in the residence halls. Campus organizations like the MRDs, religious groups, and clubs that are major-oriented (physics, education, etc.) are very helpful in making friends. There are nearly 400 registered student organizations covering a vast array of types and purposes.

Alums and current students also have many of the same ways to make friends such as clubs, sports, intramurals, Greek Life, hiking, movies, etc. Downtown Harrisonburg is now a great place to go with many shops and places to dine. In 1987, students never went downtown. Students have fun hanging out on the Quad, participating in outdoor activities like hiking, sports, etc. In 1987, Valley Mall was a major destination for fun but not so much now.

Biggest challenges

Both alums and current students said that time management and self-discipline were two of their biggest challenges. The differences between high school and college are significant on a variety of levels, and college students are expected to be more responsible. Learning how to effectively study for college-level classes was and is a challenge for many students because often they did not have to study very hard in high school to get good grades. More than half of freshmen will change majors at least once. They change majors when they

discover that they did not like their major, encountered difficulties with some classes or professors, or simply did not make the “cut” into a major. My son did not make the “cut” into SMAD, so he had to scramble to get into another major (WRTC). Studies conducted by OIR found that changing majors once has little effect on how long it takes the average student to graduate (4.15 years). Some alums and current students found it challenging to be able to complete a minor, often due to challenges getting into the classes they wish at the right times. Getting overrides into some classes is still possible, but not guaranteed. Unlike 30 years ago, there are some popular majors that have placed caps on the number of students they can handle (nursing, College of Business, psychology). This causes challenges to switch majors at times because the new major they want may have a cap.

Interactions with faculty, administrators and staff

Relationships are critical to the success of JMU undergraduates. The alums and current students have found that JMU faculty, in general, take time to help their students succeed. Faculty generally are around for their office hours and will work with students far beyond these hours. Younger faculty are particularly interested in working with students. They want to make students feel special. It was mentioned several times that JMU faculty realize that they are here to teach, not to do extensive research. The differences between the attitudes of JMU faculty and faculty at other large research universities is significant in how they interact with undergraduates. Several alums fondly remember Dr. Carrier and the influence he had on students. His presence at student events and around campus meant a lot to them.

Favorite and/or most impactful memories

What will alums tell their children about JMU? Often what they tell are favorite memories. The alums described many favorite and impactful memories. The most impactful ones mentioned were: the Electric Zoo in Godwin Hall, study abroad (uncommon 30 years ago), college friends who remain life-long friends, and summer mission projects. The current students' memories are similar to the alums'. Current students mentioned study abroad, a variety of friendships with diverse groups, nightlife in the Village, religious organizations, and the culture of JMU that encourages relationships and use of skills learned.

Impacts of JMU on your life.

The alums described many ways in which their times at JMU impacted them, including: group projects in class that fostered collaboration; the fact that there is no JMU mindset, so the entire person is developed along the ways they were created; and the perceived fact that JMU instilled in them a confidence and optimism that they could do anything in their lives and careers. The current students also mentioned many impacts, including: the total JMU experience prepares them for life; students are not just a number, but are important; the career advice that is available is excellent; and the people skills learned by being on a campus like this will last a lifetime.

Thank you for reading these Research Notes. I pray they have been insightful and useful.

Questions about this Research Note can be directed to Dr. Frank Doherty at dohertfj@jmu.edu.

Appendices

Changes mentioned by seniors:

Greater confidence

- Discovered new passion for leadership, more confident in my identity.
- JMU has pushed me to grow in many ways. When I first transferred here, I was nervous to be on a big campus with so many people, but having to find where everything was, and having to go outside of my comfort zone to ask for help was actually beneficial for me. I met new people and became more confident in talking to people I don't know and asking for help. I have also been pushed academically.
- More confident in myself/sure of myself. Better able to handle conflict. More accepting of who I am/how God made me.
- It's made me more confident and pushed me out of my comfort zone. I'm also better at researching and finding information for myself.
- I have become more independent and more open to new experiences. I have tried new things and grew confident. I've met so many friends and learned a lot about myself by the way I handle stress and the work I complete.

Improved communication and people skills

- I have become more independent, professional, and outgoing. I have become more comfortable with stepping out of my comfort zone especially when it comes to meeting people.
- I have become more confident in my opinion and in myself. I have picked up different techniques on how to work with people in other majors with different backgrounds.
- I used to have a lot more social anxiety, and now I'm more outgoing and confident.
- I am a stronger, better person. I'm more confident and JMU has given me great presentation and social skills that I can use in the workplace.
- I have become way more confident and more socially aware. My problem-solving skills have improved in both relationship and academic realms. I've also learned how to speak in front of people without much anxiety.

More open minded and accepting of the ideas/perceptions of others.

- I have become much more open minded as I have been able to communicate with people of all different cultures, backgrounds, and beliefs. While mine have generally stayed the same, the way I react to other people's differences has drastically changed.
- I also have had my eyes open to different ways of looking at the same thing and have begun to value traits like problem solving and critical thinking even more.
- I became more of a logical and accepting person who does not focus on what other people think as much as I did when I started here. I improved my interpersonal skills as well as my writing and editing skills.
- I am more aware of the challenges faced by those who are different to me and I am more committed to working with them to overcome those challenges. I am more comfortable working with others I have been able to receive help for my mental health and speak out on my own struggles.

Self-knowledge and acceptance

- At JMU I have grown to love myself more. I have formed networks of friends not based on common classes (such as in high school) but based on real interests and similarities; a group of friends who both makes me more confident and pushes me to do better every day.
- More accepting of who I am/how God made me.
- JMU has altered me in every way imaginable. JMU has taught me to be kind and compassionate. I have learned so much about myself and about the world while at JMU.
- I have grown stronger in who I am and have found passions I did not know I had.

- Being a part of JMU made me realize that I'm in it for the outcome, not the income. There's more to life than money, and that I wanted to make a difference in people's life.
- I know myself better, I've found myself and I've grown into an older version of freshman me.
- I have also developed characteristics that have enabled me to feel more comfortable with myself. My career choice has changed- I went from a marketing major to a psychology major after realizing that money in business didn't mean everything to me.

Matured thinking

- A lot of my values have remained the same while at JMU, but I have matured in my thinking and understanding behind them which has brought both breadth and depth to my beliefs.
- I've become more analytic and insightful, and I've learned to look deeper into different issues. I've met more people who view things the same way I do and have learned about a lot of other different perspectives.
- I have become a more well-rounded individual with a greater understanding of responsibility, a thirst for knowledge, and a compassionate view on society.
- My critical thinking and ethical reasoning skills have improved.
- My first semester I took a class that looked at protest movements from 1955-1979. I was exposed to the civil rights movement, the countless college student led movements, and the later changes that happened in the Middle East. This class caused me to be more comfortable challenging my own beliefs and I wholeheartedly believe I am more attuned to social issues, am way more comfortable addressing my privileges in society, and have become much more anti-racist due to this.
- However, JMU did more for me than simply help me understand what I want as a career; it helped me understand how I want to utilize the knowledge that I've gained both inside and outside the classroom to benefit others around me and (hopefully) society.
- Everything's now seen through new eyes.

Increased passion and engagement

- JMU has instilled in me values that I truly believe will benefit me in the future. I have learned so much about giving back to the community I am in since being here and I have seen how much good you can do with just a little bit of time, effort, or money. JMU has taught me that as an individual I can make an impact on the world around me through small everyday actions that better the lives of those around me and in turn better my own life.
- I have learned an incredible amount of independence and the importance of failure. I am now more confident in who I am, I no longer compare myself to others, and I am able to let go of negative relationships. I see the value in community service and going beyond the classroom. As much as I have learned in my classes, I learned more about life and myself.
- I am more interested in community service after my alternative spring break. I also don't want to stay in my hometown and want to move to Virginia or somewhere abroad. I think I have more cultural humility, professional work experience and more extensive skills like research, language abilities and gratefulness for experiences.
- In terms of career, I've realized that I will only be happy with my career if it helps people as it's a problem I've seen come up in coursework as well as learning to judge the news and my world more critically. In terms of community, I've learned to adopt the "be uncomfortable in order to make others comfortable" attitude which helps a bunch in situations.
- My motivations have changed from monetary successes to impacting global development abroad. I feel more fulfilled than I could have imagined and I feel that the route my life is taking is much more productive than I had seen it before JMU.

Ability to overcome challenges

- I have become more outgoing and socially active. I have more of a social life and more friends than I had in high school because I met so many new people and had so many opportunities to get involved with something.
- I have become more adept at handling multiple classes with heavy workloads.
- While at JMU I took on challenges and responsibilities that were well beyond what I felt I could achieve, and in many cases I exceeded those expectations. I learned and grew from my mistakes, always trying to improve in both

academics and my social life. Now I am a capable leader. JMU has prepared me for my next step in life, and it has helped me realize what that next step is.

- As a result of my JMU experience, I have matured and grown as a young adult. Before coming to JMU, I was naive and shortsighted. I feel like as a part of the experience I have been able to learn more about myself and just how much I can challenge myself academically. Though I had to take off for one semester, I was still able to challenge myself by taking a full course load and graduate on time with my friends, something which I value dearly.
- Moving half way across the country is what I did when I decided to come to JMU yet it was the best decision I've ever made. JMU taught me to mature quicker, manage my time, be more independent, and be a better person. The majority of people on JMU's campus are so welcoming and considerate, I wanted to be one of them.

Theme	#
<p style="text-align: center;">Who I am as a person - personality</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I am still me. I still maintain having good grades and my work ethic. • I have stayed true to who I am by accepting who I am and focusing on my passions and interests. I found people at JMU who are interested in similar areas and they have become my closest friends. • The ways I've remained the same are mostly personality traits. I came to JMU as somewhat of a neat freak and have not budged a bit. • I have remained the same in the sense that I have always been the kind of person who stands out and isn't ashamed of it, and JMU has helped me find places where I can really shine and be myself. • I feel as I'm the same person overall just gained a lot more knowledge and life experiences. • I've remained the same by staying down to earth, being friendly and kind to everyone. I have constantly worked to improve how I handle situations and feel as though I've stayed the same in the aspect that I continue to improve my own wellbeing. • I am still a shy, sort of quiet person but I learned that it's okay to be like that, not everyone is super outgoing. I have found plenty of people that have similar personalities to me and they are still successful. • No matter what ways I change, I will always be me. 	50
<p style="text-align: center;">Values</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Never let go of my values, still close with family, have the same friends that I had in high school, same career choice. • While being at JMU has definitely challenged some of my beliefs, those challenges caused me to question and think deeper about my values. In the end, this just made my beliefs and reasons for believing what I do even stronger. • I still love my family, friends, travelling, my dog, etc., but with a whole new outlook on life. • I have stayed true to my values and my idea of how the world would be a better place if people had more conversations and less arguing. I have also kept the same idea of how no matter your background, everyone has something valuable to offer. • I think I came into JMU with a passion for service and that has continued and even grown as a result of being at JMU. 	32
<p style="text-align: center;">Beliefs</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I have the same morals, beliefs, and personal goals that I had in high school. I believe in the same God. I have the same standard on personal behavior and participation in nightlife activities. I have the same work ethic. • Continued to hold a few core beliefs of mine (such as: people have the right to choose how they live, daily acts can improve the world no matter how small, snow days with a warm beverage and a blanket are relaxing, face masks are essential). • I still spread my love and kindness to others because I believe that being kind to others goes a long way. I have always done this and I see people here at JMU do the same. 	16

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • JMU allowed me to stay true to my academic nature and gave me the tools I needed to continue my education. • I try and will continue to remain as keen towards new information as I was in my first year and not letting that ego for some kind of achievement overtake humbleness. Honestly, it's difficult to think ways how I have remained same in these four years. • I have always been very serviced minded and I feel that JMU has further engrained these beliefs and helped me solidify what I want to do with my career and keep me true to myself. 	
<p style="text-align: center;">Life-long learner, love for learning</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Service oriented and wanting to be a lifelong learner as those are two of JMU's values that are embedded in the community. • Looking to learn more and really invest my time into people. • I still have a sense of drive, compassion, and honesty and many of the values that my parents drilled into me as a kid have maintained. • I have remained the same for the most part during my JMU experience, as I have always been a self-driven, motivated and open-minded individual. I have always had a passion to learn; JMU has simply pushed me to learn more through engaging classroom experiences and my experiences with a multitude of excellent professors. • I have found friends and have had faculty reassure me that I am on the right path and that validate that my passions are perfect for my future profession, and that I am greatly suited for what I want my career for the next however many years to be. • Never did I let denial from JMU's nursing program knock me down from pursuing a career in nursing. Now upon graduation I will be attending an accelerated program and achieving my dreams furthermore than I already have here at JMU. • I am excited about learning and very passionate about discovering and utilizing new skills. • I'm still very passionate about the subjects that I'm learning and I am still excited to see what is in store for me in the future. 	13

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