

# Scholarly Activity at James Madison University: Seeking a Common Understanding

A report from the Role of Research Subcommittee

**Introduction.** The issue of faculty time is paramount to an institution of higher education. The dimensions are intricate and carefully constructed to those inside the academy, and sometimes puzzling to those external to higher education. James Madison University prides itself on celebrating superb teaching at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. Madison is also a unique institution in the academy because the reward system is tangible, yet flexible enough to allow faculty to pursue alternative scholarly avenues ranging from basic research to innovative outreach programs. Understanding and rewarding how faculty spend their time are significant factors in maximizing student learning and attaining institutional priorities.

Institutional reward systems don't always keep pace with faculty creativity however, and it is recognized that incentives, in the form of modifications to the existing reward and recognition system, will be needed. Therefore, we have initiated what we trust will be one of many conversations about how best to protect and nurture faculty creativity, and ensure that institutional processes and procedures keep pace with the dynamic quality of faculty teaching and research.

**Background.** The Role of Research Subcommittee was created at the behest of Dr. John Gilje, Interim Dean, College of Education and Psychology, and Dr. John Noftinger, Associate Vice President for Academic Affairs; Research and Program Innovation. We met regularly during the spring of 2001 as a subcommittee of the Research Advisory Committee. We were charged with articulating JMU's research and teaching mission in a way that suits our unique faculty culture, and for purposes of future planning. Although we each brought different definitions of "research," "scholarship," and "teaching" to the table, we agreed that the traditional definitions of these activities did not well suit the JMU profile. We found traditional models to be too linear, and too much a one-way street from research to teaching, with few avenues for application. Traditional models of research and teaching do not capture how exploration (theory, research), expression of results (publication, scholarship) and practice (teaching, application) inform and energize one another. So, we turned our attention to the question of what structure and what descriptors were more congruous with who we are, and who we want to be.

**Common ground.** As we've talked with our colleagues about research and scholarship, we've found great differences from college to college and amidst individual faculty about the appropriate role of research and scholarship at JMU. One common denominator, however, is the concern to protect and nurture the unique academic environment of JMU, which includes our dedication to undergraduate and graduate education. As we explored this further, this unique academic environment is easy to identify, but difficult to define with any precision. Moreover, this committee did not want to be seen as attempting to micro-manage scholarship and its evaluation. We feel that departments, in the context of their college environment, are the best location for this activity.

We do want to support an invigorating academic environment where faculty are encouraged in their teaching and in their intellectual lives to grow, to create, and challenge the frontiers of knowledge and understanding. We want to continue to support the dedicated, innovative teaching that has made JMU such a remarkable academic undergraduate institution. We want to support partnerships between ideas and application, teaching and research, thought and action. We want to be active participants in shaping the knowledge perimeters of the future, not only by creating new knowledge through teaching and research, but by the creative integration of existing disciplinary perspectives into new windows of opportunity. We want to communicate the excitement of thought, research and application to our students, and involve them in the world of discovery and commitment that brought us here in the first place.

**Future Ground.** We cannot comprehensively define what JMU's teaching and research "self" should look like, but we can identify three key markers of what we aspire to. (We follow the lead of Ernest Boyer in the following list.)

1) **Scholarship of Discovery (research, theory, creation) is:**

- a) Manifested in activities such as: laboratory, clinical, and field investigations, library and special collections investigations, and studio activities.
- b) Effective communication of findings in recognized professional venues: publications, conferences, grant writing, shows, performances.
- c) Effective communication and implementation of findings in teaching and application settings.

2) **Scholarship of Teaching and Application is:**

- a) **Teaching.**
  - i) Innovative pedagogies; effective use of technology where appropriate.
  - ii) Creative and visionary curricular and course development. The scholarship of teaching does not include routine classroom preparations typical for any faculty member. We take for granted that one stays current in one's field.
  - iii) Opportunities for undergraduate and graduate research.
  - iv) Classroom and laboratories and studios extended to field projects that relate ideas to real life. This could take the form of service learning, so that academic life opens and is open to a larger community of ideas and actions.
  - v) A citizenship of academic life that addresses commitment to community and the larger social good.
- b) **Application**
  - i) Projects that address cross-disciplinary problems and pressing social issues.
  - ii) Emphasis on service learning, so that academic life opens and is open to a larger community of ideas and actions.
  - iii) Partnerships and alliances that bring campus life in closer collaboration with the community.

### 3) **Scholarship of Integration is:**

- a) Cross campus conversation, partnerships, and alliances about discovery, teaching, and application.
- b) Cross-disciplinary conversation, partnerships and alliances about discovery, teaching and application.
- c) Creation of new courses, programs and disciplines through these integrated partnerships.
- d) An environment that encourages risk-taking and innovation in scholarship, teaching and application. This would include departments creating merit and reward systems that recognize faculty who stretch the boundaries of their disciplinary training and who are making original contributions to human knowledge and community.
- e) Integration of discovery and teaching by encouraging undergraduate and graduate research.

We wish to make clear that these three areas of academic excellence are not locked identities for faculty. No single faculty member or department has to achieve all things, equally and at all times. Faculty will rotate among areas as their interests and life energy carry them, knowing that JMU values their intellectual daring and flexibility, and their steadfast commitment to undergraduate and graduate achievement. We also wish to emphasize the interconnectedness of these areas. We feel that JMU is outstanding precisely because we have created an academic environment where faculty can be proud of the integration of discovery, teaching, application and thoughtful citizenship. By encouraging departments and colleges to recognize and nurture this unique environment, by striving to better articulate and strengthen our ideals, we are confident that James Madison University will assume national prominence as a champion of innovative, thoughtful undergraduate and graduate education.

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