

# 6 Post-Pandemic Learning and Innovation

*By Jonathan R. Alger, JD, President, James Madison University*

**H**indsight is said to be 20/20, and with hindsight 2020 may be remembered as a transformational year in which real innovation took hold across the American higher education landscape. While colleges and universities are often criticized for a reluctance to change, the COVID-19 pandemic shocked the system and necessitated wholesale modifications in teaching and learning, as well as institutional policies and even business practices. As the scope of the crisis became apparent, at James Madison University (JMU) we sought to embrace the opportunity to think creatively about what we do and how we do it.

How do you seize such moments to make real and lasting change? Preparing for innovation requires more than creative thinking and nimble responsiveness to crises. Institutions can develop intentional structures and incorporate design thinking into their very DNA, thus creating environments in which change is built into their long-term business models and in which crises also become innovation opportunities.

What might this kind of intentionality look like? There is no one right answer. One beauty of innovation is that every institution can build on its existing mission and structures to foster an innovative mindset. At JMU, that work begins with our motto of “Being the Change” and our strategic plan, which explicitly includes a core value of innovation and a university-wide emphasis on innovation, creativity, collaboration, and entrepreneurship.

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In 2019, we appointed a Chief Innovation Officer in Academic Affairs, who chaired an Entrepreneurial Mindset Task Force to consider how an entrepreneurial mindset might be integrated across the curriculum for all students. That group built its recommendations “on a theory of change that emphasizes resonance and connection, rather than supplanting existing practices,” and adopted the language of “ChangeMaker” rather than “Entrepreneurial” mindset to exemplify this emphasis.<sup>1</sup> Rather than advocating change for its own sake, this group also tied the changemaker mindset to longstanding elements of the University’s planning and priorities focused on ethical reasoning and social responsibility. They also highlighted the development of a set of skills that transcend disciplinary boundaries,

allow for deeper learning across the entire curriculum, and are inclusive rather than exclusive. While “disruption” has become the mantra of many higher education critics, this approach underscores that meaningful and lasting change can and should reflect and reinforce our fundamental educational mission, vision, and values.

JMU is a residential campus with an educational model centered heavily on in-person interactions, although we certainly use technology to augment these experiences and to offer online and hybrid programs as well. When the pandemic hit and forced the temporary suspension of traditional in-person classes and campus experiences, we knew it would have a significant impact on the progress of many goals and objectives in our strategic plan. Everything from admissions to instruction to fundraising would be profoundly affected.

Rather than ignoring or minimizing this impact, in spring 2020 we added a new strategic priority to our plan on recovering and learning from COVID-19. At the same time, virtually all colleges and universities quickly set up teams to focus on contingency planning to address the pandemic, and we were no exception. But we also formed a separate Task Force on Pandemic-Related Learning and Innovation, which represented all divisions across the institution and included sub-teams focused on technology, academics, management, communications, and impact on (and relationships with) community partners and other constituents.

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We are still in the beginning stages of this unprecedented period of reaction and experimentation, but it’s not too early to identify key areas in which we’ve already learned and innovated. The areas highlighted below are by no means an exhaustive list. In an era of severely constrained resources due in part to the economic impacts of the pandemic, the challenge will be to figure out how to sustain, enhance, and even accelerate this learning and innovation in ways that will be long-lasting.

## Teaching, Learning, and Curriculum

For many faculty members and students, the pandemic produced their most significant experience to date with online tools and formats. Faculty members pivoted quickly to different modes of teaching, and students adapted to learning from remote locations. Among the largely unsung heroes of this transformation at JMU were experts from the Libraries, Information Technology, and Center for Faculty Innovation—all of whom worked tirelessly with faculty and students to help them make necessary adjustments, learn to use technology in new ways, and troubleshoot when inevitable glitches occurred. Going forward, we know that we will need to make strategic investments in these types of support resources—and in training and continuing education—to serve our entire university community.

We’ve seen faculty ingenuity at its finest across many different fields of study. Musicians have found ways to create virtual ensembles and performances. Scientists have shown students how to conduct experiments remotely using readily available materials. Several faculty members even created an interdisciplinary, online summer course about COVID-19. Going forward, we must evaluate what has worked and what hasn’t and share promising pedagogical practices both within and across departments and institutions.

The pandemic also cast a harsh spotlight on significant equity issues that must be addressed. We learned, for example, that we cannot assume universal access to high-quality and reliable broadband, state-of-the-art equipment, quiet places to study, or adequate food or health care. These equity issues need immediate attention to ensure equal access to educational opportunities for students from all backgrounds.

The uncertainty of the pandemic’s duration also raised questions about how academic calendars and curriculum are structured. Many institutions still follow a model that was developed around the needs of a predominantly agrarian society. It’s time for a fresh look at our assumptions about the structure and duration of courses, credits, etc.—structures that are deeply ingrained in accreditation and regulatory requirements.

Given limits on international travel during the pandemic, institutional commitments to global education have also faced enormous pressures. For the short term, we’ll need to find creative ways to connect with colleagues and partners abroad. For the longer term, we should examine how innovations



in technology and scheduling might allow us to broaden and expand access to these relationships and experiences.

Like many institutions, we've already been pursuing curricular innovations in fields like information technology, data and health analytics, and cyber intelligence. The pandemic has also reinforced the urgency across the curriculum to focus on fostering skills and attributes such as problem-solving, teamwork, curiosity, lifelong learning, creativity, resilience, and adaptability.

## Ways of Operating and Interacting

Academic courses were not the only instances in which traditional ways of doing business were disrupted by the pandemic. Every aspect of our operations was affected. At JMU, we learned that we can create high-quality virtual campus tours, orientation experiences, and even summer camps—thus providing opportunities for prospective and incoming students to interact with faculty, staff, and students from a distance. With most travel curtailed, these same tools have also allowed us to engage and interact with far-flung alumni.

Recognizing that student health, wellness, and success depend on what happens outside as well as inside the classroom, we have instituted timely innovations in services such as telehealth, online counseling, tutoring, and mentoring while noting barriers to such advances

that need attention. We've cut travel costs for meetings that do not need to be in-person and now have a much better sense of how to conduct meetings and interviews, share and review documents, and make decisions using tools and platforms readily at our disposal.

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In terms of business practices, we've drastically cut down on physical paperwork and manual sign-offs during the pandemic—making processes faster, more efficient, and less susceptible to certain types of errors. We've become aware of standard provisions in contracts (e.g., “force majeure” clauses), policies, and procedures (e.g., in-person quorum requirements for meetings) that need to be clarified or amended to anticipate future disruptions of various kinds. Telework policies have been reviewed and updated. Coming out of the pandemic, it will be an important exercise for us all to

conduct reviews of contracts, policies, and procedures with these lessons in mind.

Continued attention to infrastructure security will be paramount as we increase our reliance on technology. JMU experienced virtual events that were interrupted by “Zoom bombs” and other forms of hacking, as well as moments when poor Internet connections or other technical problems hampered online meetings. Not everyone could connect securely from home. Cybersecurity and cyber hygiene must be key components of our strategic planning in the future.

James Madison University prides itself as an “anchor institution” and economic engine for its community and region. Community and civic engagement are key components of our strategic plan and are built on close working relationships with people and organizations both near and far. During the pandemic, faculty members and students at JMU identified creative ways to support community needs, such as providing healthcare services to vulnerable populations, manufacturing personal protective equipment and hand sanitizer for local medical facilities, putting literacy programs online, housing the local homeless population in a campus facility that allowed for adequate physical distancing, and even helping the local farmers’ market find a new way to operate using technology. Faculty and staff helped local businesses develop reopening protocols. A class focused on the 2020 Census was able to work virtually with community partners to sustain local data-gathering efforts at a crucial time in that constitutionally mandated process.

Coming out of the pandemic, we will need a sort of Marshall Plan for our own economy (and one that addresses equity issues related to race, socioeconomic status, etc.), as well as a civic renaissance to strengthen our democracy and social fabric. Colleges and universities are uniquely poised to play a leadership role in these efforts, which can in turn provide opportunities to improve skeptical public perceptions about the value proposition for higher education in our nation.

## Other Lessons Learned

The pandemic has tested all of us in ways we never anticipated. We’ve had to make consequential decisions with limited time and information and in an environment in which traditional forms of communication and teamwork have been challenged. Our ability to accept, manage, tolerate, and even embrace risk needs to be reassessed in light of the lessons we’ve learned and within a context of continuing financial and human resource constraints that are unlikely to disappear anytime soon. Our

emergency response and communications plans need to be reviewed and updated in light of this experience. And as a sector, we should also take this moment to identify and advocate for changes and flexibility in legal, regulatory, and accreditation requirements that can stifle innovation in ways that we might not have previously anticipated.

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Technology must be viewed as a valuable tool that can help us to become more efficient and effective in everything we do, while not overhyped as a panacea for every challenge we face. We’ve seen how technology can greatly increase our reach by allowing us to teach and learn in ways that transcend traditional physical and geographic constraints in both synchronous and asynchronous environments. At the same time, we’ve also learned that personal relationships built on trust and understanding require intention and effort that no program or “app” can replace.

To be true changemakers, we must also recognize and acknowledge that not all innovations need to be headline-grabbing to make a positive difference. Innovation is not like a light switch that is simply turned either on or off; rather, it is a state of mind. The accumulation of changes both large and small can and will over time transform our institutions. While the pandemic may have forced us to confront and manage sudden and drastic change, we need to take advantage of this once-in-a-lifetime (we hope!) crisis to determine how to be more proactive in encouraging, developing, and rewarding innovative structures and mindsets within and across our institutions. If we do so now, we will be better equipped to prepare for, and respond to, the next extreme disruption with foresight rather than just 20/20 hindsight.

## Reference

- <sup>1</sup> JMU Entrepreneurial Mindset Committee Report, at p.6 (April 2020).

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Jonathan Alger is the sixth president of James Madison University (JMU), a public comprehensive university in Virginia with 22,000 students. Under his leadership, JMU developed a vision to be “the national model of the engaged university: engaged with ideas and the world” and a strategic plan focused on engaged learning, community engagement, and civic engagement. President Alger is a nationally recognized scholar and speaker on higher education law and policy.

President Alger previously served in positions at Rutgers University, the University of Michigan, the American Association of University Professors, the U.S. Department of Education, and a major international law firm. He currently serves on the national boards of the American Council on Education, the Association of American Colleges and Universities, and Campus

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President Alger graduated with High Honors from Swarthmore College and Honors from Harvard Law School.