

CHALLENGES TO POLITICAL LEARNING & DEMOCRATIC ENGAGEMENT AT JMU

Results are based on focus groups with administrators, faculty, staff and students to understand whether the climate at JMU is conducive to student political learning and participation in democracy



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The focus groups were conducted as part of an initiative focused on improving political learning and engagement on college campuses. JMU is one of 12 campuses partnering on this initiative with AASCU's American Democracy Project (ADP) and the Institute for Democracy and Higher Education (IDHE) at Tufts University.

11 2-hour focus groups were conducted between April and September 2018.

Questions and methods for transcript analysis were supplied by IDHE/ADP.

Facilitators and analysts included Abe Goldberg (Madison Center), Dena Pastor (CARS, Grad Psych), Lori Britt (ICAD, Communication), Emma Thacker (Education), Kristen Shuyler (Libraries), & Jamie Williams (CSL).

- Students (4 groups) & Student Leaders
- Student Affairs Personnel
- Vice Provosts & Deans
- Department Heads & Center Directors
- Madison Center Advisory Board
- Faculty-tenured
- Faculty-untentured



KEEP IN MIND

- The findings are based on consistent themes that emerged across focus groups, but the results might not generalize to the entire JMU population.
- The themes are the perceptions of the focus group participants as interpreted by the analysts.
- The findings indicate that some aspects of JMU's campus climate do not support – or may even inhibit – the potential for student political learning and engagement.

FINDINGS



Many opportunities exist at JMU for political learning and engagement, but participation is not pervasive



Student interest in political learning and democratic engagement is mixed



In-class discussions about political/societal issues are challenging



Varying perceptions exist regarding JMU's policies on free speech and activism



JMU's political climate is affected by the national political climate



Many features of JMU's climate likely affect political learning and democratic engagement on campus

Student interest in political learning and democratic engagement is mixed



Results suggest students are engaged, as evidenced by their involvement in community service and volunteer work. Their engagement, however, is usually not political.

Students indicated their interest in political and societal issues is not higher because they:

- don't see how issues affect them,
- don't know how to address issues, or
- don't believe their actions would make a difference.

Some students want to avoid politics altogether.

Other students were focused on the private benefits of a college degree and commented that they will worry about “being the change” after graduation when they have a job and money.

“We are citizenship without politics: we are citizens – we get engaged, but we don't take the next step of getting our hands dirty, going to town meetings, writing letters, protesting and making ourselves a nuisance to make change.”

-Focus group participant

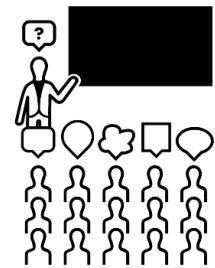
JMU's political climate is affected by the national political climate



Results suggest growing interest in politics and increased civic engagement on campus since the 2016 presidential election. At the same time, results indicated that hyperpartisanship and the national political environment have made it difficult to engage in discussions about political and societal issues.

In-class discussions about political/societal issues are challenging

Many students perceive in-class discussions about political/societal issues as uncomfortable and risky. Students provided various reasons for why they are hesitant voicing their opinions in class:



- not wanting to express that they hold a minority view or what is perceived as being a minority view,
- not wanting to express views they perceive as counter to the professor's opinion,
- fearing being attacked for their views,
- not wanting to offend other students at a time when they are forming a community of friends, and
- fearing that discussions will get out of hand.

Faculty voiced concerns about:

- having the skills to successfully facilitate in-class discussions about political/societal issues, and
- a fear of reprisals from students and the university.

Many features of JMU's climate likely affect political learning and democratic engagement on campus.



Participants reported that the JMU culture is generally one of respect, kindness, and caring. This culture may help attract faculty and students to JMU.



Some participants described the flip side of this genteel JMU culture in more negative terms — including its role in inhibiting political discussion.

Some described JMU as being overly concerned with its image — both with the physical appearance and the university's reputation.



Maintaining the public image of JMU as a beautiful place where everyone is happy may negatively impact attempts to discuss difficult political/societal issues.

Others characterized JMU as being risk-averse and rule-bound.



This risk aversion may be discouraging active participation in political discussions and other efforts related to democratic engagement.