

A Conversation on Democracy with W&J President John C. Knapp



In February of 2019 two students of COM 291: Journalism, Karsyn Jimenez and Leah Segal, met with President John Knapp, Ph.D., to discuss democracy, the value of a liberal arts education, and the future of Washington and Jefferson College. Read some highlights from that conversation below.

Karsyn Jimenez: How is Washington and Jefferson (W&J) currently active in the democratic process?

President John Knapp, Ph.D.: I think first and foremost we prepare students to be citizens who are active in the democratic process and that's been the mission from the very beginning. You know the college was founded in the last days of the American Revolution and we were way out on the frontier here on the other side of the mountains. The people who founded the college had a vision for creating a place that not only raised up needed professionals like doctors, lawyers, ministers, and school teachers —but also could prepare the citizenry to participate in democracy. It was understood very well by the founders of the nation that education would be the key component to ensure we could actually have a functioning republic where citizens make decisions, and so there was a great emphasis on education at that time. Beyond that, through our symposium on democracy, which we started last year, we're really seeking to be a place that brings together thoughtful people to consider that state of our democracy.

K: Do you see any room for further democratic development on campus?

PJK: I think the seeds are there through things like our Conflict and Resolution program for instance, where we really have an intentional focus of developing competencies and values that help people learn how to participate as effective leaders in democratic society. I believe that that's probably more important than ever and that it can be a hallmark of the college to be known as a place that does that well.

Leah Segal: If you had a vision or goal for what W&J looked like in ten years what would it be and how would you implement it?

PJK: Well, we're involved now in a strategic planning process that is eighteen months long and we are halfway through. We are really trying to develop a shared vision of the future. Currently, there are about ninety faculty and staff studying different issues and opportunities facing the college. We are thinking deeply about what the future might look like, where we might need to make some change in order to make sure the college gets better all the time...

For more thoughtful discussion on the state of democracy in the world today, view our additional coverage of the second annual Symposium on Democracy.

This interview has been condensed and lightly edited for clarity.