

Very Big Numbers

Editorials

What Area Colleges Contribute

It is our annual pre-Labor Day rite of passage in Harrisonburg, as soon after area public schools start, the institutions of higher education return to their routines, welcoming thousands of new and returning students and marking the return to a busy school year routine for thousands of area residents who work at our colleges and universities.

In the past week, we have noted such transitions at James Madison University, Bridgewater College, and Eastern Mennonite University. JMU expects more than 21,000 students this year, and Bridgewater and EMU will likely enroll more than 1,800 each.

Without a doubt, the impact of James Madison University's annual changeover is the greatest, and recent articles in the Daily News-Record have reflected the good and the bad of being in a college town. And, by the way, Harrisonburg is indeed a college town, and that is not going to change.

Earlier this month, Harrisonburg City Council enacted a stricter noise ordinance to address the issue of loud parties within the city limits. There was much debate about the matter, and the measures are clearly intended to address the concern of mostly "old town" residents who have had issues over the years with the noise that will come from having college students living close by.

The concerns were real and the new measures are appropriate, as both the city and JMU must work together to find a way to have a happy marriage of campus and community, as divorce is not an option.

And while city and college officials continue to address this topic, a recent study should reinforce to all the significant benefit that this community derives from the economic impact of James Madison University.

As we reported yesterday, a recent study by the Weldon Cooper Center at the University of Virginia notes that JMU had an economic impact of over \$515 million to the area economy in fiscal 2015.

That's over half a billion dollars that JMU contributes to the local economy each year, to put it another way.

Included in that figure is some \$282 million in local spending by the university itself, and an estimated \$169 million in spending by the students themselves.

Visitors generated by the university (which number more than a quarter of a million people each year) spent millions more, and while some of the university's local spending flowed out of the area, the indirect impact of its spending added tens of millions of dollars more.

Simply put, the impact is huge, and that goes without the reminder that roughly one in seven local jobs is connected in some way to James Madison University.

So, the lesson is this: For all of those who enjoy the myriad and growing shopping and recreational opportunities in the region, you need to be reminded that they wouldn't be here if JMU weren't.

Now, that doesn't mean that city officials should turn a blind eye to the challenges that are part and parcel of being a college town. We don't think that they have, in spite of the vocal opinions of some residents who magically want the benefits of what JMU brings without any of the inherent challenges. Charlottesville shows that we are not alone in dealing with them.

Rather, it means that the issues and the successes of the growth and prosperity that come with being a college town will require more dialogue, communication, and planning on both sides to navigate the waters that will sometimes be choppy.