



# Vice President for Strategic Communications and Marketing

## Leadership Profile

Fall 2025



*WittKieffer*

## Executive Summary

[James Madison University](#) seeks an inaugural Vice President of Strategic Communications and Marketing (vice president) to lead the development and execution of a bold, integrated strategy that elevates the university's brand, reputation, and voice across all platforms and audiences. This visionary leader will shape and implement comprehensive communications plans that reflect the university's values, amplify its impact, and position JMU as a national leader in higher education.

This search comes at an exciting time at JMU. The vice president will report to [President James Schmidt](#), who joined the university on July 1, 2025. With the full support and partnership of the president, executive leadership team, and Board of Visitors, the vice president will lead a newly centralized division with expertise and passion.

Founded in 1908, James Madison University is a public university located in Virginia's beautiful Shenandoah Valley. JMU is quickly becoming one of the nation's leading institutions in higher education, thanks to students' unusually engaged relationships with world-class faculty who are equally dedicated to teaching and transformative research. This comprehensive institution offers more than 130 programs, an engaged campus and local community, Division I Athletics, and unwavering pride from its more than 150,000 alums.

The units of [university communications](#) and [university marketing & brand](#) were historically embedded in the Division of University Advancement. Under the direction of the new president, these critical divisions will accelerate their charge and centralize the organization to amplify the institution's storytelling, align best practices, and serve as a center of excellence to all university constituents.

The inaugural vice president will convene and strengthen the highly skilled, collaborative, and passionate marketing and communications staff to closely coordinate efforts and produce work that collectively advances the [JMU brand](#). The vice president will fine-tune the work of this cohort, ensuring that information is shared effectively, efficiently, and transparently throughout the university. In a highly collaborative and decentralized environment, the vice president will spearhead brand campaigns, cross-university messaging programs, and current and future strategic initiatives to ensure complete external brand, messaging, and media alignment for its diverse audiences.

The vice president will oversee the university's public relations and media engagement efforts, ensuring consistent, proactive, and strategic storytelling that elevates JMU's visibility nationally and globally. They will serve as the university's chief spokesperson when appropriate. They will lead the development and execution of comprehensive media relations strategies that foster strong relationships with journalists and media outlets. The vice president will also be responsible for crisis communications planning and response, ensuring the university is prepared to communicate swiftly, clearly, and effectively in times of challenge or uncertainty. They will work closely with university leadership, legal counsel, and campus safety teams to manage sensitive issues, protect the institution's reputation, and maintain transparency and trust with both internal and external audiences.

The vice president will also be an accomplished leader in marketing and branding, with demonstrated experience in advancing the reputation of brands and a strong understanding of higher education and its societal impact. They will play a critical role in building and establishing a vision and direction for the team while also helping shape how the Office of Strategic Communications and Marketing will grow and work in the future. They will define and build the JMU brand across a wide variety of platforms and distribution channels, working collaboratively across each school, college, and unit.

To succeed, the vice president will be a dedicated team player, builder, and partner, in addition to being extremely adept at leading through influence, empathy, and consensus-building. The vice president will lead JMU's efforts by driving vision, strategy, and execution toward a clear set of goals.

The vice president and their team will be responsible for measuring the impact of work to increase regional, national, and global awareness and the reputation of JMU, partnering with schools, colleges, and administrative units in meeting their goals and objectives, and will be recognized as an industry leader.

To submit a nomination or express personal interest in this position, please see Procedure for Candidacy on page 14.



## Role of the Vice President for Strategic Communications and Marketing

The Vice President for Strategic Communications and Marketing (vice president) serves as the senior adviser to the president and executive leadership on all matters related to brand strategy, marketing, and university-wide communications. Reporting directly to President James Schmidt, the vice president plays a pivotal role in shaping and elevating the institution's regional, national, and global reputation. With the full support of the president, the executive leadership team, and the Board of Visitors, the vice president leads the university's newly centralized communications and marketing enterprise, developing an integrated strategy that strengthens the JMU story and advances institutional priorities.

The vice president will oversee an inaugural centralized communications and marketing function, unifying these areas within a coordinated division. This centralized leadership structure is complemented by a decentralized communications council that brings together communicators from colleges, schools, and administrative units. Through this council, the vice president ensures consistent alignment, shares best practices, and coordinates messaging across the entire university ecosystem. In the interim, the areas of *University Communications* and *University Marketing & Branding* report to Melinda Wood, Vice President for Enrollment Management.

To learn more about *University Communications*, click [here](#), and *University Marketing & Branding*, click [here](#).

### **Responsibilities and duties include, but are not limited to:**

- Serve as senior adviser to the president and executive leadership on issues of strategic communications, marketing, public messaging, and institutional reputation.
- To succeed, the VP will be a strong team player, builder, and partner, in addition to being extremely adept at leading through influence, empathy, and consensus-building.
- Guide and support the president and other key leaders, ensuring that they are well briefed on key issues and that they are appropriately involved in communications and marketing activities.
- Develop and implement a comprehensive communications and marketing strategy that strengthens JMU's visibility across state, regional, national, and global platforms. Establish clear metrics and targets to evaluate the effectiveness and impact of these efforts.
- Lead and unify the newly centralized division by convening a highly skilled and collaborative communications council, ensuring coordinated strategy, aligned messaging, and a commitment to best practices.
- Define, steward, and elevate the JMU brand by promoting consistency in messaging and visual identity across all colleges, schools, and administrative units.
- Oversee proactive public and media relations and serve as the university's spokesperson, when appropriate. Build strong and proactive relationships with industry partners to highlight institutional achievements and advance the university's reputation.
- Develop and maintain a comprehensive crisis communications plan in close partnership with university leadership, legal counsel, and campus safety teams to ensure clear, transparent, and timely communication during critical incidents.
- Ensure effective internal and executive communications that promote consistency and transparency across a highly collaborative and decentralized university environment.

- Lead major cross-university brand campaigns and messaging initiatives that align with institutional priorities and support schools, colleges, and administrative units in meeting their goals.
- Strengthening collaborative partnerships with the Office of the President, Academic Affairs, Philanthropy and Engagement, Athletics, Student Affairs, Research, Economic Development and Innovation, Access and Enrollment, Administration and Finance, the JMU Alumni Association, and other university constituents to support cohesive storytelling and brand alignment.
- Provide leadership, coaching, and active management for the communications and marketing team.
- Evaluate organizational structures, workflows, and capabilities to enhance effectiveness, service orientation, and strategic impact.
- Steward the division's budget and resources to ensure strategic alignment, operational efficiency, and responsible investment in staff, systems, and services.
- Develop tools, dashboards, and metrics to assess outcomes of strategic communication initiatives and guide future planning.



## Opportunities and Expectations for Leadership

The inaugural vice president joins James Madison University at a moment of extraordinary momentum and institutional growth. JMU's rapidly rising national reputation and retention rate, coupled with an ambitious and visionary new president, make this a rare and special leadership opportunity.

The vice president will help define JMU's next chapter, shape its structure, advance its brand strategy, and foster collaboration during a pivotal moment in the university's trajectory, to help elevate a distinctive institution that is already drawing national attention.

### Shape a Bold and Unified Brand Vision

The vice president will define and elevate JMU's brand identity nationally and globally. They will bring communications and marketing to the table for the first time at JMU and navigate the culture change that accompanies centralization. They will create stronger connections across units, unify historically disparate groups, and align communications, brand strategy, marketing, enrollment marketing, and campus partners under a cohesive and forward-looking structure. Establishing and articulating clear communications and marketing vision that cabinet leadership can champion will be essential.

### Lead Strategic Storytelling

The vice president will amplify JMU's academic strengths, research impact, and student experience through compelling and coordinated narratives. They will develop a university-wide content strategy that spans all units and channels, ensuring that JMU's story is communicated with consistency and resonance. This work involves strengthening coordination with Athletics, expanding brand awareness nationally, and aligning the university's rapid rise with a marketing presence of a similar scale.

### Build a Center of Excellence

The vice president will convene and empower a talented central team and the JMU Communications Council to foster collaboration, innovation, and shared standards across the university. They will create structured synergy through intentional processes, rather than relying on informal or ad hoc coordination. The vice president will support a culture that values autonomy, creativity, and ownership, while providing the structure and guidance needed for cross-campus alignment.

### Advance Operational Excellence

The vice president will address the pace of institutional growth by strengthening systems, improving project management workflows, and ensuring that communications and marketing teams move to consistent and modern platforms. They will develop metrics to evaluate the effectiveness and return on investment of campaigns and initiatives. They will advocate for the staffing and resources needed to meet the demands of a university outpacing its peers. Responsible budget stewardship and a results-driven mindset will be essential.

### Drive Engagement and Visibility

The vice president will advance JMU's brand, expand its recognition, and articulate its societal impact through the use of a wide variety of marketing and communications platforms and distribution channels, working collaboratively across the department and with schools, colleges, and units. They will lead advertising efforts that increase national brand awareness and ensure JMU's marketing presence reflects the university's momentum. Strengthening relationships with media, influencers, and key constituents will be essential to enhancing visibility

and supporting strategic priorities such as enrollment, community engagement, and the upcoming comprehensive philanthropic campaign.

## Fresh Perspectives

The vice president will spearhead bold brand campaigns, collaborative messaging programs, and current and future strategic initiatives. Their team will be responsible for measuring the impact of this work to increase regional, national, and global awareness of these collaborative efforts, as well as their reputation for meeting goals and objectives, and serving as a sector leader in higher education marketing. The vice president will lead a team that aims to be recognized as an industry leader in bold new initiatives and recognized for industry innovation and achievement by their peers.

## Influence Institutional Strategy

The vice president will serve as a trusted advisor to the president and executive leadership team, contributing communications and marketing expertise to major institutional initiatives. They will help the university stay focused on long-range strategy rather than being pulled constantly into immediate demands and will ensure the division's voice is represented at the highest levels. The vice president will also articulate the university's vision to donors and provide a strategic communications partnership for the campaign.

## Steward the Brand

The vice president will maintain consistency in messaging and visual identity across all platforms while preserving JMU's distinctive sense of welcome, friendliness, and excitement. They will ensure the university avoids formulaic or generic approaches and continues to project an authentic and differentiated identity. The vice president will strengthen crisis communication readiness, navigate politically complex state and board environments, and safeguard JMU's reputation with clarity and transparency. JMU has long been known for its deep sense of belonging and place, as well as its pride in its commitment to the community. The vice president must protect and honor this sentiment as it advances the university's messaging.

## Collaborative Partnership

Building strong relationships with academic and administrative leaders will be essential to aligning goals across a decentralized environment. The vice president will serve as a conduit for transparent communication and help teams coordinate their work, ensuring units stop duplicating efforts and begin pulling in the same direction. They will support team members as whole individuals and help preserve JMU's culture of honesty, trust, flexibility, and work-life balance.

The vice president will partner closely with other university cabinet members to ensure that marketing and communications strategies and campaigns are fully integrated, communicated, and utilized across the institution to achieve its optimal success.

## Demonstrate Strategic Agility

The vice president will respond effectively to emerging trends in higher education marketing, bringing recent industry experience and a strong knowledge of modern tools, timelines, costs, and trends. They will provide a steady presence that lifts the team's gaze from day-to-day urgencies toward long-term strategy. The vice president will combine ambition with imagination, structure with creativity, and confidence with a leadership style grounded in listening, collaboration, and shared ownership.

## Professional Qualifications and Personal Qualities

The success of James Madison University is driven by the commitment of its people and the strength of its leadership. As an inaugural cabinet-level role, the Vice President for Strategic Communications and Marketing must bring the experience, vision, and presence to shape a centralized division that advances the university's mission, values, and long-term aspirations. The following qualifications and attributes will position the leader for success.

### Required Qualifications

- A bachelor's degree is required; a master's degree in marketing, communications, public relations, higher education, or a related field is preferred.
- Demonstrated success in relevant leadership roles, including a combination of public/private industry, higher education, and/or nonprofit experience.
- Demonstrated experience leading and developing high-performing teams.
- Proven success in designing and implementing integrated marketing and communications strategies aligned with organizational goals.
- Demonstrated ability to communicate effectively with diverse internal and external constituents.
- Exceptional written and oral communication skills.

### Desired Qualifications

In addition, the university seeks a leader with some or all of the following experience and/or competencies:

#### Strategic Vision and Institutional Alignment

- Ability to see the big picture, set long-range direction, and prioritize work that most directly advances university-wide goals.
- Experience unifying and aligning dispersed communications and marketing functions under a cohesive vision.
- Capacity to articulate a clear brand and communications strategy that cabinet leaders and campus partners can champion.
- Willingness to push the university forward with thoughtful ambition and creative vision.

#### Modern Marketing and Brand Expertise

- Recent experience with contemporary marketing tools, platforms, timelines, and trends.
- Ability to design multi-channel campaigns that enhance reach, awareness, and engagement across digital and traditional platforms.
- Strong understanding of metrics, analytics, and ROI measurement to evaluate impact and guide future strategy.
- Experience developing coordinated content strategies across multiple units and channels.

## Operational and Organizational Leadership

- Experience strengthening systems, processes, and project management workflows to support efficient and scalable work.
- Ability to advocate effectively for staffing and resources that align with JMU's rapid growth and peer benchmarks.
- Skill in creating structured, intentional collaboration between centralized teams and decentralized campus partners.

## Leadership Style and Team Culture

- A leadership approach grounded in listening, transparency, and shared ownership.
- Ability to support professional growth, mentor emerging leaders, and nurture a culture that values creativity, autonomy, and flexibility.
- Confidence to make necessary changes while welcoming input and building trust.
- A stabilizing presence that helps the team balance immediate needs with long-term strategy.
- A blend of structure and imagination, combining analytical strengths with creativity and curiosity.

## Collaboration, Influence, and Acuity

- Ability to guide, support, and brief the president and other key university leaders, ensuring they are well informed on key issues and that the appropriate chief spokesperson is identified, depending on each unique circumstance.
- Ability to build strong relationships across a decentralized academic environment and lead through influence.
- Ability and political astuteness to navigate the complexity of public higher education and the structure of board governance.
- Experience advising senior leaders on sensitive or high-visibility issues.
- An ability to effectively advocate for the division and elevate awareness of its strategic contributions at the presidential level.
- Ability to represent and advocate for the division at the presidential level and elevate awareness of its strategic contributions.
- Strong public and media relations experience, including advising senior leaders and managing crisis communications.



## About James Madison University

### Overview

Founded in 1908, James Madison University is a selective, public, comprehensive university with an enrollment of more than 20,000 students located in the scenic Shenandoah Valley, two hours southwest of Washington, D.C. JMU has nine colleges: Arts and Letters, Business, Education, Health and Behavioral Studies, Honors, Integrated Science and Engineering, Science and Mathematics, Visual and Performing Arts, and The Graduate School. JMU has an excellent national reputation involving strong student-centered undergraduate and graduate education.

The university offers a distinctive educational experience that combines the diversity of degree programs and learning opportunities typically found in larger institutions with an engaged, teacher-centered faculty, a hallmark of selective, liberal arts colleges. The university is committed to addressing complex, real-world problems and contemporary issues throughout its curriculum. JMU has received national recognition as one of the top public master's-level schools in the South (U.S. News and World Report). JMU is fast becoming one of the nation's leading lights in higher education because students enjoy unusually engaged relationships with world-class faculty who are here because they want to pursue knowledge and make teaching their number one priority.

For more information about the university, visit [www.jmu.edu](http://www.jmu.edu).

### University Strategic Plan

Under President Schmidt's leadership, James Madison University is launching an ambitious new strategic plan that captures the creativity, optimism, and forward momentum of the JMU community. Through campus-wide listening sessions, idea forums, and cross-disciplinary collaboration, the university is shaping a bold vision to elevate academic and research excellence, expand access and affordability, and strengthen JMU's regional and global impact. The planning process reflects a shared commitment to innovation and collective action, aligning people, purpose, and resources around a dynamic vision for the decade ahead.

As a key member of the president's cabinet, the inaugural Vice President for Strategic Communications and Marketing will play a vital role in advancing this work, partnering with university leadership to communicate the plan's priorities, engage the campus community, and enhance JMU's national reputation as a leader in public higher education.

To learn more about the planning process for JMU's next strategic plan, click [here](#).

## Academics

James Madison University offers a [rich and expansive academic portfolio](#) that spans the arts, humanities, social sciences, health and behavioral studies, business, education, and the STEM disciplines.

JMU comprises nine colleges and offers 130+ programs of study, including 76 undergraduate majors, 53 master's majors, and eight doctoral programs. The university's academics as a whole invite exploration, creativity, and intellectual rigor. From undergraduate degrees to doctoral research and professional pathways, the university combines the depth of a comprehensive institution with the personal attention of a student-centered community.

A JMU education is defined by engaged learning: an approach that integrates classroom discovery with hands-on experience, undergraduate research, community engagement, and global study. Faculty are deeply committed to mentoring students, cultivating curiosity, and helping them connect theory to practice in meaningful ways.

Whether in a laboratory, studio, classroom, or field site, students are encouraged to ask questions that matter and to apply their knowledge for the greater good.

- [College of Arts and Letters](#)
- [College of Business](#)
- [College of Education](#)
- [College of Health and Behavioural Studies](#)
- [College of Integrated Science and Engineering](#)
- [College of Science and Mathematics](#)
- [College of Visual and Performing Arts](#)
- [Honors College](#)
- [The Graduate College](#)

To learn more about JMU's academic program offerings, click [here](#).

## Students: Facts and Figures

James Madison University enrolls more than 21,000 undergraduate and nearly 1,800 graduate students who together form a vibrant and engaged community of learners. Approximately three-quarters of students come from within the state of Virginia, while the remainder represent nearly every state and more than 80 countries.

JMU students are known for their initiative, curiosity, and collaborative spirit. They engage deeply in research, service, and creative endeavors, often partnering with faculty on projects that address real-world challenges. The university's strong commitment to access and student success is reflected in a 92% first-year retention rate and an 80% six-year graduation rate: among the highest in the nation for public universities.

The student-to-faculty ratio of 17:1 ensures a personalized and supportive academic experience, fostering close mentorship and meaningful connections. Beyond the classroom, JMU students engage in more than 400 clubs and organizations, leadership programs, and global study opportunities that foster community, character, and purpose.

Together, JMU students embody the university's mission of producing engaged citizens who think critically, act with integrity, and make a positive impact in their communities and the world.

To learn more about JMU's students or its "Facts and Figures," click [here](#).

## Athletics

James Madison University competes at the NCAA Division I level and is a proud member of the Sun Belt Conference. With 18 varsity sports, including football, basketball, soccer, lacrosse, softball, and track and field, JMU fosters a tradition of athletic excellence and spirited competition.

The Dukes have earned national recognition for their achievements, with multiple conference championships and postseason appearances across men's and women's programs. Student athletes excel both on the field and in the classroom, maintaining high graduation rates and embodying the university's commitment to integrity, teamwork, and leadership.

Beyond varsity athletics, JMU offers extensive club and intramural sports that promote participation, wellness, and community engagement. Whether competing in Bridgeforth Stadium or cheering in the stands, students, alums, and fans share a strong sense of pride that unites the Madison community.

To learn more about JMU athletics, click [here](#).



## Leadership

### James C. Schmidt, PhD, President



Dr. James C. Schmidt became the seventh president of James Madison University on July 1, 2025, bringing more than three decades of leadership experience in higher education. He joined JMU from the University of Wisconsin–Eau Claire, where he had served as chancellor since 2013. During his tenure, UW–Eau Claire consistently ranked among the top ten regional public universities in the Midwest by U.S. News & World Report and was recognized as the nation's top master's-level institution for undergraduate research and for student participation in study abroad.

A visionary leader and accomplished fundraiser, Schmidt guided one of the most significant philanthropic efforts in Wisconsin history, securing a \$70 million gift to construct a new indoor athletics and event facility. His tenure was marked by a commitment to academic excellence, innovation, and strong community partnerships. Before his appointment as chancellor, he served as vice president for university advancement at Winona State University and vice president for student affairs at Riverland Community College, both in Minnesota.

Schmidt holds a doctorate in educational policy and administration from the University of Minnesota, a master's degree in business administration from the University of St. Thomas in Saint Paul, and a bachelor's degree in political science from Winona State University. His leadership is defined by collaboration, integrity, and a deep belief in the transformative power of public higher education.

As president of James Madison University, Schmidt has articulated a clear and forward-looking vision centered on advancing the university's strategic priorities, strengthening academic and research excellence, and ensuring an exceptional student experience that reflects JMU's values of innovation, community, and purpose.





## Harrisonburg, Virginia

Located in the heart of Virginia's Shenandoah Valley, James Madison University is surrounded by a landscape of rolling farmland, winding rivers, and majestic mountain views. Its 675-acre campus, known for its red-brick architecture, tree-lined walkways, and natural beauty, blends seamlessly into the city of Harrisonburg. This vibrant community shares the university's spirit of innovation and hospitality.

Harrisonburg, home to more than 42,000 residents, combines small-town warmth with a growing cosmopolitan energy. Downtown offers an eclectic mix of restaurants, shops, art galleries, and music venues, all within minutes of campus. The region's four distinct seasons offer a variety of experiences throughout the year, from hiking, biking, and kayaking in the spring and summer to skiing and scenic drives in the fall and winter.

Just two hours from Washington, D.C., Harrisonburg offers both accessibility and tranquility. It is a place where students, faculty, and staff can thrive personally and professionally, surrounded by a community that values creativity, sustainability, and connection. The partnership between JMU and the city enriches both, creating a shared sense of purpose that defines life in the Shenandoah Valley.

For more information on Harrisonburg: <https://www.jmu.edu/admissions/visit/>



## Procedure for Candidacy

All applications, nominations, and inquiries are invited. Applications should include, as separate documents, a CV or resume and a letter of interest addressing the themes in this profile.

WittKieffer is assisting James Madison University in this search. For fullest consideration, candidate materials should be received by Friday, January 9<sup>th</sup>.

Application materials should be submitted using WittKieffer's [candidate portal](#).

Nominations and inquiries can be directed to:

Melissa Fincher, Jenna Brumleve, and Bree Liddell  
[JamesMadisonUniversityVPMarComm@wittkieffer.com](mailto:JamesMadisonUniversityVPMarComm@wittkieffer.com)

*James Madison University does not discriminate and prohibits discrimination in its employment, programs, activities, and admissions on the basis of age, color, disability, gender expression, gender identity, genetic information (including family medical history), marital status, military status (including veteran status), national origin (including ethnicity), parental status, political affiliation, pregnancy (including childbirth or related medical conditions), race, religion, sex, sexual orientation, or on any basis protected by law, unless otherwise permitted or required by law. JMU complies with all applicable federal and state laws regarding non-discrimination, affirmative action, and anti-harassment. The responsibility for overall coordination, monitoring, and information dissemination about JMU's program of equal opportunity, non-discrimination, and affirmative action is assigned to the Office of Equal Opportunity.*

*Inquiries or complaints may be directed to the Office of Equal Opportunity via [the OEO website](#), email at [oeo@jmu.edu](mailto:oeo@jmu.edu), or by phone at (540) 568-6991.*