As a public institution of higher education, James Madison University fully embraces its responsibility to serve the public good of the Commonwealth and the Nation by preparing knowledgeable and caring citizens to serve society and promote our democratic values. Specifically, James Madison University has as its mission to “prepare educated and enlightened citizens who lead productive and meaningful lives”. We believe the most effective way to accomplish this mission is to challenge our students, faculty and staff to be engaged, “engaged with ideas and the world”, as noted in our vision statement. Thus, the importance of service is well ingrained in our educational endeavors and community, and the construct of “a service year” fits well within our mission, vision and values.

As an institution committed to service and the public good since its founding, James Madison University has developed and offers many opportunities for students, faculty and staff to engage in meaningful service. For example, our Honors Program curriculum already includes areas of emphases in service and leadership that directly address this goal. Furthermore, James Madison University is an acknowledged leader of higher education institutions in producing graduates pursuing service opportunities through entities such as the Peace Corps, AmeriCorps, Teach for America, and others. Therefore, in defining a year of service specific to our institution, it was important for us to recognize our existing opportunities and always seek ways to more effectively address the goal of “providing transformative experiences for young citizens and future leaders”. (The Virginia Compact).

It is within this context that James Madison University has designed a set of “Year of Service” opportunities that we will pilot, evaluate, continue to refine, potentially expand, and disseminate to sister institutions. Our year of service will follow the Service Year Alliance definition and consist of sustained, substantial service of 20 hours or more per week over at least a 9 consecutive month period. We will also provide a modest living allowance, including housing. We have chosen three areas of focus that represent significant needs in society and opportunities within our locale, and are consistent with and integrated within our strategic plan and initiatives of the university. During this initial pilot, these areas will include: 1) civic engagement, the need for citizen leadership and civil discourse, and our relationship with founding father James Madison and Monticello his home; 2) health and human service needs of our community as identified by our Institute for Innovation in Health and Human Services; and 3) educational opportunities for underrepresented populations through our Valley Scholars program.

To ensure a quality learning/educational experience for the year of service participant and quality service to our community partners and their constituents, we will engage faculty in developing this experience. We will construct learning outcomes expected by engagement in the service experience; orientation, supervision, seminar and reflection experiences that ensure we address the learning outcomes; service contracts with each of the community partners; formative and summative evaluation of the service participant and the program processes; and an appropriate formal recognition by the university of successful completion of the service year program. Our three Year of Service leaders will form a cohort where they will work together, participate in seminars and reflective opportunities, and interact with other students in expanding their impact on our institution and community.