A Liberal Arts RESEARCH University?
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Marriages fall on a continuum from incompatibility to made-in-heaven, with simple compatibility at the midpoint. On this scale I would place our commitment to an excellent liberal arts undergraduate program and to high quality graduate and professional programs in the middle range: they’re compatible. I’m talking about intellectual compatibility: for example, the undergraduate programs in philosophy and English may compete for resources, but this doesn’t undermine their intellectual compatibility.

I will first clarify why “liberal arts” and “university” are not marriage partners made-in-heaven and then suggest that an institution-wide emphasis on research is a promising way to maximize compatibility.

I use the term “liberal arts” to call attention above all to the goal of helping students prepare for flourishing lives as humans and citizens, as distinct from preparing them for careers, professions, or places in the contemporary division of labor. It is for this reason that liberal arts undergraduate programs do not, and should not, care if students go on to make a living in the specific areas of their majors – if history majors all go on to be historians. In contrast, law schools train lawyers and PhD programs in physics train physicists. The marriage partners may use similar teaching methods, may both value interdisciplinarity, etc. But it makes all the difference that these are instrumentally tied to very different underlying missions.

“Research” is equally valued by all members of our community – by undergraduate-only departments like Geology and Government as much as by graduate and professional programs. We may be accustomed to associating research with graduate programs but (for instance) research experiences are probably far more common for our undergraduates than for our professional school students. Research is at the core of graduate education but it can also accomplish very traditional liberal arts goals by providing students with opportunities for active learning and critical thinking, for working with primary sources, and for persuasively communicating conclusions to a range of audiences.

With ingenuity and investment, an emphasis in research, broadly understood, can give William and Mary a distinct personality while maximizing the compatibility of our undergraduate liberal arts program and our graduate and professional programs.