Does Research Bring Us Together?
The Blend of Teaching and Research in W&M in the 21st Century

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I come to this discussion from two perspectives. I direct the Public Policy program, and our Master of Public Policy (MPP) undertaking is among the largest graduate programs on campus. We interact with other graduate programs to a significant extent, and award joint degrees with Law, Business, VIMS and the Computational Operations Research group. At the same time, I have spent a career in the Economics department. While my Economics colleagues are key participants in providing the MPP curriculum, we award only the BA in Economics. I also have two children at liberal arts colleges, and so have some sense of life at such a place.

My sense of the discussion of the role of research at William and Mary is that, much like many discussions we have had on big issues, we have tended to see it as zero-sum. The genesis of the debate is clear. We are assuredly not a liberal arts college. We do not spend, on average, anything like the time with our students as our colleagues at such institutions, but this for the most part is because we are more actively involved in research. We are not a research mill, either, and choose for the most part to have more diversity in both our research portfolios and our professional lives than is the case for our colleagues at such institutions. Perhaps because we are poised at this unstable point, in danger of falling one way or the other at any moment, the current discussion on the role of research has been polarizing to a much greater extent than is warranted.

Research is necessary at William and Mary for two reasons. One, widely accepted, is that we as a faculty value original research. It is what we do. It has important implications for faculty quality and, in many disciplines, for the College’s revenue stream. The other reason, emerging but still not completely clear in all its implications, is that we need research to teach in the 21st century. Research-based teaching, a broader and perhaps more meaningful term than “undergraduate research,” is a direction in which many institutions are moving. It’s not clear to me how to differentiate a 400-seat lecture at a research mill and distance learning. It is very clear how one-on-one or small-group supervised research differs from distance learning. It also is very clear that teaching-focused colleges know the importance of research-based teaching already, and that competing for the best students increasingly will involve the ability to provide such experiences.

The best purveyors of research-based teaching have active research agendas. Teaching econometric methods, I feel much more able to speak convincingly on techniques I have used in my own work. The depth and breath of firsthand knowledge springing from our own research and interaction with our research-active colleagues is what differentiates William and Mary faculty from those at most liberal arts colleges. We are not unique in our willingness and ability to provide this very deep level of research based teaching, but we are in a very small group of schools who can do so. One key question is whether we can match the breadth of the experience provided at many liberal arts colleges. Real integration of research-based teaching is very faculty intensive, and has budgetary implications perhaps best deferred to a rosier budget cycle. The other is whether we can maintain our differentiating depth. This implies a continuing commitment to research, though perhaps employing a rationale for doing so that differs slightly from others sometimes put forth.

Graduate students are for many departments and schools a possible source of research-based teaching of undergraduates. Since the arrival of graduate students on the William and Mary campus,
there has been a bright, shining line that graduate students could not cross--they cannot teach classes here. Research-based teaching blurs the line somewhat. For example, MPP students do a large, thesis-level project in small teams. Recently, they have begun hiring undergraduate research assistants. The undergraduates typically are hired to provide specific skills, such as data analysis abilities, to the team. While we do not currently provide course credit to the undergraduates, each team has a faculty supervisor and it would be possible to assess performance toward some kind of research-based goal. In ways like this, without “teaching” in the traditional sense, graduate students may prove to be important providers of research-based teaching to undergraduates.

Jim Golden has suggested that because balance implies opposing poles we talk not about the appropriate balance of activities--graduate versus undergraduate, teaching versus research--but the appropriate blend of activities. As we move increasingly toward research based teaching, the research/teaching and undergraduate/graduate blends we choose will have important long run effects on the type of experience we are able to provide our students. It seems clear that if we can sustain a model of strong faculty research blended with intensive, research-based teaching, we will occupy a very desirable niche. One way of meeting this goal may be to think creatively about integrating the graduate and undergraduate experiences.