W&M is a unique institution that already combines excellence in teaching with excellence in scholarship and research. In today’s world of rapid changes and advances in information and technology, we face a challenge and an opportunity: we can become leaders in defining the meaning of liberal arts education for the 21st century. To my mind, this means that we should not only watch closely the newest developments in scholarship and research and tell our students about them but be an active part of those developments ourselves.

The liberal arts have a long tradition of promoting analytical reasoning, fostering critical thinking, encouraging dialogue, and subjecting the past and the present to scrutiny, eventually helping individuals arrive to the pleasures of creative synthesis and discovery. Throughout, the enduring value of a liberal arts education is its inherent flexibility: each discipline contributes new understandings and new information to a given field but is also shaped by contemporary concerns. At the same time, the investigation of knowledge for knowledge’s sake, the hallmark of the liberal arts’ endeavor, is not a self-referential or narcissistic intellectual activity; on the contrary, time and again it has led to groundbreaking achievements, be those scientific and technological or social, political, and ideological. The Liberal Arts is a dynamic space where true progress becomes possible.

As educators our mission is to equip our students with the necessary skills to embark on critical thinking and analytical reasoning but also to instill in them the love for knowledge and inquiry as a lifelong attitude. I believe that our ability to be effective in this depends upon the relationship each of us has with our respective disciplines. To this end, our task is not simply to tell our students about other people’s research (although we should do it and do it well). This would suffice if all we wanted to do is make our students learn. But we want our students to be inspired; and the only way to do that is to share with them our own discoveries, our own excitement about the attainment of new knowledge. This is where the necessity of blending teaching with active research comes in.

Research means different things to different disciplines. I think that we need to educate each other, as well as our community of students and alumni, as to what research means for each constituency of Arts and Sciences. I suggest we have an open mind about the nature of research, resist narrow definitions, and most importantly, listen to each other.