As a scholar of higher education, I sought to determine what picture the data present about William & Mary and the professional schools. The Carnegie Foundation classifies us as a Research University with high research activity (we confer over 20 doctorates per year and the faculty engage in funded research). Each year, one in four graduates is from one of the three professional schools on campus. Additionally, the School of Education brought in 25% of the total outside grant monies for the main campus last year, underscoring the critical role of the professions to the college infrastructure. Like the college itself, the formation of the professional programs is long standing. The School of Education harkens its start to 1888 with the preparation of future educators. In 1919, the first department of business was established and the law school traces its roots to 1779. Historically, the college has shifted its mission and expanded its offerings as society demanded, holding central the delivery of high quality education. This data provide one view of the college.

A central pillar of the William & Mary strategic plan is now for the college to become a leader among liberal arts universities and the ongoing conversations this year are attempting to define what this means. As with all organizational change, how you define your goals and mission drive future decision-making and underscore what is valued within the campus culture. On the one hand, the aspiration to be strong in both the liberal arts and in research may appear to combine the best of both worlds. On the other hand, the terminology may in fact be too limiting and not really reflect the full scope of the William & Mary enterprise. As a faculty in one of the professional schools on campus, I do not feel that my work is reflected in the aspiration represented in the slogan of “liberal arts university.” It is one matter to market the college as “liberal arts” for undergraduates and quite another to have this represent the mission.

Language use and meaning are at the root of the issue. The terminology of “liberal arts” connotes a particular type of college, one in fact that is declining in numbers and is centered on small, undergraduate programs (Baldwin & Baker, 2009). Merely tacking on “university” to the goal does little to ameliorate the image formed. The idea of supporting a “liberal education,” on the other hand is not limited to a particular institutional type, rather a value system that supports broad based, deep, interdisciplinary synthesis and engagement with ideas. The Association of American Colleges and Universities defines liberal education as follows:

Liberal Education is an approach to learning that empowers individuals and prepares them to deal with complexity, diversity, and change. It provides students with broad knowledge of the wider world (e.g. science, culture, and society) as well as in-depth study in a specific area of interest. A liberal education helps students develop a sense of social responsibility, as well as strong and transferable intellectual and practical skills such as communication, analytical and problem-solving skills, and a demonstrated ability to apply knowledge and skills in real-world settings.
Combining application along with a liberal education resonates within the professional schools. Indeed, Boyer (1990) proposed four forms of scholarship—the scholarship of discovery (research), the scholarship of application, the scholarship of integration, and the scholarship of teaching—arguing that all four are required.

The starting point for my remarks is based on the goal of the college to provide an environment that nurtures and develops critical engagement among students in addressing the grand challenges plaguing our current society. The question then becomes, how do the professions reflect the values of a liberal education? One of the cornerstones of the School of Education is the framework in use to guide teaching and learning. “The Conceptual Framework of the School of Education at the College of William and Mary incorporates a shared view of how to best prepare our graduates to deliver services to children, schools, families, and communities in a manner that will promote educationally and psychologically healthy environments in a pluralistic society.” The four main strands of the framework include the Content Expert, the Reflective Practitioner, the Educational Leader, and the Effective Collaborator. These objectives align with those outlined for a liberal education. Graduates are expected to have grounding in their subject matter, but perhaps most importantly, they are expected to act on this knowledge. First, to achieve deeper understanding and on-going learning, graduates must be reflective of their actions and make adjustments to their practice. Graduates are expected to be leaders, regardless of named position. Finally, work within the professional community requires collaboration with other stakeholders. The interaction of educators across the educational pipeline and within the community requires development of partnerships that the college can also build upon.

Even though the William & Mary is indeed a unique institution, we are not exclusive in the problems we face or in what is known in the field about handling these vexing issues. Change abounds in higher education concerning finance, teaching and learning, faculty work, student learning assessment, governance, etc. We should be drawing from the rich and expansive research already done in the field of education to guide our planning and change efforts. A broad range of expertise may be found in the faculty ranks of the School of Education that can help inform campus issues.

A question posed to this panel was “Looking to the future, how do we take best advantage of William &Mary’s mix of liberal arts and professional programs?” The professional programs are poised to develop strategic partnerships and collaborations that link campus expertise with community stakeholders. For instance, members of the School of Education have connections within public schools and colleges across the state—indeed, many of our graduates are leaders and teachers within these institutions. Our graduates work on policy in Richmond and Washington, support community programming, and contribute to education reform on a daily basis. Moreover, Dean McLaughlin is on the State Board of Education and a member of the Governor’s P-16 Council. Tapping into these connections can advance the college mission.

It is easy to fall into the trap of “us” and “them” as resources get tight and individual fear levels rise regarding an uncertain future. Everyone on campus wants to contribute to the campus success and feel like their work is valued. Taking care with the language in our planning efforts is critical to making everyone feeling a part of the change, however, seeking to be an outstanding “liberal arts university” forefronts valuing programs focusing on the traditional liberal arts and not the professions. An alternate rallying phrase should be sought to be more inclusive.
References


