"Is a Liberal Arts University Possible?: William & Mary in the 21st Century"
October 29, 2009

**Moderator:**
Michael Halleran, Provost

**Panel:**
Herrington Bryce, Life of Virginia Professor of Business
Keith Griffioen, Chair, Professor of Physics
Leisa Meyer, Associate Professor of History and American Studies
Joel Schwarz, Director of the Charles Center, Dean of Honors and Interdisciplinary Studies

**Opening Remarks**

Dr. Halleran opened the discussion by welcoming the audience, which included more than 120 people. The first in a series of public discussions throughout the year, these events arise directly from the strategic plan, which states, “Promote a campus-wide conversation about the future of liberal arts education and the role of graduate and professional programs in a liberal arts university” (Challenge 1, Goal 1, Objective 1). Tonight’s discussion focused on the question, “Is a liberal arts university possible?”

In his opening remarks, Halleran described William & Mary as a “a medium-sized public institution with an intense core of undergraduate liberal arts education offered within the context of select graduate and professional programs.” A limited group of institutions self-define as a liberal arts university, including Furman University and Colgate University, though most look quite different from the William & Mary model. Halleran stated the future success of William & Mary will depend on achieving an appropriate institutional balance between the various interests of undergraduate and graduate education, including teaching and research. He posed the question: how do we have the best of not just both worlds, but many worlds?

**Remarks from the Panelists**

Prof. Schwarz, the first panelist to present, took a pragmatic approach to the question, centering his response on the compatibility of excellent undergraduate and graduate programs. Acknowledging that undergraduate and graduate programs may compete for resources, Schwartz believes they are intellectually compatible. He noted the difficulty, even among wealthy schools, to do both well. Schwartz defined liberal arts as helping to prepare students to live flourishing lives as human beings and citizens rather than preparing for a specific career, concluding, “We [as a liberal arts institution] don’t care if a history major goes on to be a historian.” Schwarz concluded his thoughts by discussing the role of research. He believes a research focus can give William & Mary a distinct personality while maximizing the breadth of areas studied. While research is generally viewed as central to graduate education, research participation at the undergraduate level is also a means to producing a liberally educated citizen. Schwarz feels research can be strengthened at William & Mary while emphasizing that research is undertaken seriously by faculty in both graduate and undergraduate programs.
Prof. Griffioen began his remarks by admitting that his bachelor’s degree came from a liberal arts institution. However, he then emphasized William & Mary is not a “liberal arts university” and should abandon the term. In a Google search of the term “liberal arts university,” the resulting institutions are generally 2,000 or fewer students and not the peer group in which William & Mary belongs. Griffioen feels Stanford and Princeton offer more appropriate institutional models for the College than Amherst or Swarthmore. Stanford and Princeton have similar undergraduate populations, emphasize the liberal arts in undergraduate education, and have comparable graduate program offerings. Griffioen believes the term “liberal arts” de-emphasizes the contribution of a well-rounded education, noting the use of the title “Arts & Sciences” regarding the central core of the College. He emphasized the whole is simply not the sum of one part, such as describing William & Mary as a “physics university” due to the presence of educational programming in physics. Griffioen believes the College is distinctive as “truly a place where faculty can combine stellar teaching and world-class research.” The sciences tend not to thrive at liberal arts colleges as the research aspect often suffers. Teaching tends not to thrive at universities due to the heavy emphasis on research. Griffioen stated, “If we are unique, then we do not need to have someone else’s title.” As the College works to develop a new financial model, he noted the need for funding from research grants from the federal government, foundations, and corporations to support programming. In concluding, Griffioen suggested a better question for William & Mary: how can each department or school reach its own potential as a home for the world’s best liberal arts scholars?

Prof. Meyer opened her remarks by stating that she believes a liberal arts university is indeed possible and already is part of the William & Mary identity: excellence in teaching and research. As noted in her essay prior to the event, she emphasized several ways in which graduate programs provide critical support for undergraduate education, such as serving as teaching assistants and sometimes adjunct professors, as well as support staff in various offices around campus. Meyer feels language is extremely important in how William & Mary describes itself. She emphasized the College’s Carnegie classification as a research university and noted a third of degrees awarded are to graduate and professional students. Meyer then stated that both graduate and professional programs enhance the College’s reputation, but suffer from stagnant support. In an effort to support these programs, she posed the question: how can we do better by these programs and more fully link graduate and undergraduate education within the institutional mission? Meyer described graduate students as essential partners with faculty in creating new knowledge and engaging undergraduates in that same endeavor. While noting that graduate students do not replace faculty, she emphasized they do serve to enhance the undergraduate experience and the relationship between undergraduate students and faculty. Meyer concluded by suggesting a synthesis of the Latin terms for the liberal arts and the university. Combining *artes liberalis* (roughly translated “the education of a free person”) with *universitas magistrorum et scholarium* (roughly translated “a community of teachers and scholars”), Meyer suggested the College pursue this synthesized vision of “the education of a free person in a community of teachers and scholars.”

Prof. Bryce was the final panelist to offer remarks to the audience. He suggested that a liberal arts education is determined by three factors: community, method, and curriculum in that order. Bryce noted that curriculum does not vary widely across institutions because of a general
conviction about what students should learn. Bryce then noted that the perceived curricular differences at the College might not be as pronounced as appearance suggests. He offered the example that business professors have a wider background than might be expected from a professional school, including liberal arts degrees, and pursue research in a variety of areas not necessarily obvious for business faculty. Bryce emphasized the written curriculum is not the issue as it will be relatively constant, noting the modern curriculum has not fundamentally changed over time. He suggested markets would impact the curriculum by placing demands on institutions for competencies in its graduates. Bryce explained method (how the curriculum is taught) and community (the environment in which the curriculum is taught) are the areas where the greatest change can be implemented. He then focused on his most important stated factor, community. The community defines the area in which learning and growth take place. Our community values define us as liberal, but also as tolerant of other people and ideas. He concluded, “What else is the purpose of a liberal education if it does not enable you to see beyond the limits of an individual academic discipline?”

**Audience Questions and Comments**

- A graduate business student inquired as to the reasoning for choosing the 12 benchmark schools in the strategic plan with a second question to the panel as to what should be the reasoning.
  - Sam Jones, Vice President for Finance, was asked to respond. Jones explained the list came from the office of Geoff Feiss, the recently retired provost. The list was to identify a set of schools with overlap in attracting faculty and students. A mix of private and public institutions emerged.
  - Dr. Halleran then emphasized none of the 12 looks exactly like William & Mary. Most are private and some extraordinarily wealthy, but overlap does exist.
  - Prof. Griffioen suggested the appropriate criteria for establishing peer institutions is the combination of legitimate teaching and research.
  - Prof. Schwarz emphasized the fulcrum point between teaching and research needs to be reduced so they go more hand in hand.

- Barbette Spaeth, Associate Professor of Classical Studies, emphasized that teaching and research are separate functions of the College. The purpose of a university is two-fold; first, educate students (involves both teaching from the faculty and learning by students), second, create new knowledge through research. Both of these purposes involve the entire community and can involve all members of the university community. Both purposes are conducted in the community. The term “liberal arts university” is problematic in that “liberal arts” does not equal “teaching in a liberal arts university.”

- Bill Cooke, Professor of Physics, stated a liberal arts university should focus on educating students well. Faculty research implies a narrowing of the focus, which is in stark contrast to the general focus required of students. He emphasized faculty focus needs to be broadened as well as the students. Prof. Cooke proposed that introductory courses should be team taught
Suzanne Hagedorn, Associate Professor of English, felt more comfortable with the term “liberal arts research university.” She stated the presence of a graduate program seems to create stratifications in support, noting the emphasis on building for the graduate schools while the infrastructure of some undergraduate liberal arts department buildings are falling apart. She emphasized this divide cannot continue as the university moves forward. Undergraduate programs cannot be deemphasized, or relegated to a second-class status, and must also be well funded. As part of a department that previously eliminated a master’s program, she suggested the College’s emphasis should not be on adding graduate programs, but focusing on educating honors students that will be able to enter top graduate programs.

- Prof. Meyer responded that not all graduate programs are well funded, noting some graduate programs in the Arts & Sciences. She stated that she did not find her position to be in conflict with Prof. Hagedorn.

Jim Livingston, a retired professor, noted that as institutions and societies develop they must face a paradox of positive historical developments that may also be detrimental. He listed growth, diversity, specialization, and commercialization as four paradoxical elements.

Dot Finnegan, Associate Professor of Education, applauded the opportunity for all of the College to converse together. She stated that too often programs are separated into respective schools or areas and do not communicate. She then emphasized the funding difference between graduate students in Arts & Sciences and Education makes the Education graduate students into second-class citizens. She concluded by emphasizing more interdisciplinary work and communication needs to occur.

- Dr. Halleran noted the manner in which graduate education is funded is currently under discussion.

Robert Archibald, Professor of Economics, stated the term “liberal arts university” should be dropped. He stated the College should instead focus on how can we be excellent at what we do. He concluded the College should pursue programs that it can fund at a high level.

Michael Tierney, Associate Professor of Government, encouraged the focus to be on determining areas in which William & Mary can be excellent and devote resources to those areas. He also suggested the College needs to investigate possible areas where excellence is not realistically possible to be eliminated in order to refocus resources in areas where a competitive advantage exists. He agreed with Prof. Cooke that faculty should diversify course offerings and interdisciplinary offerings.

Sophia Serghi, Associate Professor of Music, asked if adding other programs creates a culture change, noting her interest in a School of Fine Arts/Music. She inquired if William & Mary should be thinking about adding other programs. Prof. Serghi was also in support of Prof.
Cooke’s thoughts on interdisciplinary programs and offered the example of first-year experience courses at Randolph-Macon College.

- Dr. Halleran responded that form must follow function when considering adding new programs or reorganizing departments and schools. He stated the College must ask what is the purpose of forming a new school.

- A sophomore student commented that the class experience is highly dependent on the professor. He offered the example of seminar courses that can feel distant compared to a large class that can feel intimate depending upon the professor. He stated the research opportunities for undergraduate students are excellent and an important factor at William & Mary. He also stated graduate programs offer advantages to undergraduates and opportunities for additional intellectual development. He concluded the community environment at the College defines William & Mary as an institution better than a term such as “liberal arts university.”

- A faculty member stated the term “liberal arts university” describes what we do and not how we do it. William & Mary is different in the quality of teaching. He also felt the descriptive terms used by the College over the years have descended (from “public Ivy” to “public and great” to “liberal arts university”).

- A student in the audience commented the discussion should not be a battle between schools or programs. She stated William & Mary’s advantage is graduating leaders and teaching life skills. She posed the question: how are we moving into a new generation, the 21st Century? She concluded William & Mary graduates make a difference in the world and the College needs to emphasize that aspect in the discussion.

- A faculty member in the audience commented on the elimination of a psychology Ph.D. program despite strong partnerships with different institutions around the region and state. He felt the programs that are to be eliminated need to have a voice in the process and concluded a few dollars saved sometimes sacrifices important parts of the College’s mission.

- An alumnus in the audience noted it seems William & Mary could define itself a lot better with more money. He emphasized development needs to be partnering with academics and not looked at as second-class citizens.
  - Dr. Halleran noted the College needs a new financial model, the development of which is on going, but needs to determine what areas should be funded independently of that process. He emphasized distinctive areas and academic programs will make it easier to find funding and attract donors.

- An alumnus from the early 1950s in the audience noted there has been some tension historically between the undergraduate liberal arts and graduate or professional schools, which needs to be avoided in the future. He was very impressed with the current students, noting students pursuing double or triple majors and the amount of service undertaken by
students was unheard of during his time at the College. He encouraged the audience that what happens here is fabulous and the College should be unified moving forward. He concluded by advising the faculty remember your history and build on it moving forward into the 21st Century.

After a round of applause following that alumnus’ comment, Dr. Halleran closed by thanking the panel and the audience before noting ways to continue the conversation.

*Discussion notes compiled and written by Jeremy P. Martin.*