“Students Come to William & Mary Wanting to Change the World’—
Do They Leave with the Tools to Do That?”
March 23, 2010

Moderator:
Bailey Thomson, senior

Panel:
Caroline Cress, senior
Adam Stackhouse, class of 2004
Tom Fitzpatrick, class of 2004, 3rd year Law School student
Melody Porter, Assistant Director, Office of Community Engagement & Scholarship

Opening Remarks
Provost Michael Halleran opened the conversation by welcoming the audience. The fifth in a series of public conversations throughout the year, this session focused on the question, “Students Come to William & Mary Wanting to Change the World’—Do They Leave with the Tools to Do That?” The ongoing series of events arises 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). Bailey Thomson then took over as moderator for the event.

Remarks from the Panelists
Fitzpatrick offered five points on why W&M provides students with the tools to change the world. First, W&M has a shared value of service. At the Law School, he noted use of the term “citizen lawyers,” coined by President Reveley when dean of the law school, and the expectation of 35 hours of community service during the year. Second, W&M has an emphasis on writing. This prepares students to be strong writers as professionals, regardless of chosen field. Third, W&M provides numerous opportunities for leadership experience. The College’s size allows a high percentage of students to fill leadership positions on campus. Fourth, W&M encourages interaction between academia and the real world. He noted class assignments often include real-world projects and research. Finally, W&M has a strong sense of community. Other institutions may base feelings of community on athletics, but the W&M community revolves around engagement. He noted particularly strong political involvement, including a group of young alumni that would gather in Richmond jokingly called the “William & Mary Mafia.” He felt alumni are highly invested in encouraging opportunities and success for fellow alumni. Fitzpatrick believes a point for improvement in the future would be increasing diversity.

Cress, a graduating senior with a double major in government and environmental science and policy, reflected on her undergraduate experience in terms of preparation for life after graduation. Did she feel prepared? She offered a mixed answer: yes and no. W&M did prepare her very well academically. She came for the excellent government department, but in hindsight appreciates the environmental science and policy program even more in preparing her for the future. She will be working for an environmental policy organization after graduation. W&M also prepares students very well through research
opportunities. She participated as a research assistant for 2 years. Extracurricular options are excellent as well. She believes W&M students come as leaders and quickly fill leadership roles on campus. The highly self-motivated student body is complemented by the available opportunities. However, W&M does not do well in encouraging students to think big. She worked for sustainability initiatives as a student and feels that some of the issues addressed were small. Fighting for these small changes prevented working for the big changes she desired. Cress wishes the College forced more big thinking in students.

Stackhouse felt prepared through his undergraduate education. An American Studies and film double major, he worked for Colonial Williamsburg making children’s films out of college. He informally polled fellow alums on Facebook and found many students come in with a plan (or develop one quickly once enrolled) that leads to a career. Beyond a major leading to a career, critical thinking and writing skills were popular answers for tools gained at W&M. Alums involved in various careers noted these. W&M graduates go on to do a wide variety of things, not because of a lack of job options in the down economy, but because they choose to and are prepared to do a number of things. On the whole, the toolbox for success is here. He particularly noted three areas not always praised as contributing to student success: the Counseling Center, which helps with the college transition in general as well as specific mental health issues; Swem Library, which complements the emphasis on research with a staff willing to assist students in finding necessary resources; and the Dean of Students Office, which serves students with legitimate problems well.

Porter is not an alumna, but holds two degrees from Emory University, including a Master of Divinity. She has since worked in a few careers thinking about how to change the world. Porter concludes changing the world is impossible for most, so the breadth of the W&M statement is somewhat unrealistic. In her office, she focuses on preparing students to impact the world in the area in which they are invested. The Office of Community Engagement & Scholarship uses the active citizenship continuum as a way of helping students move from being unaware of social issues to making decisions on how to live their lives in awareness. The four stages in the continuum are “unaware,” “volunteer,” in which the person invests time without thinking about the problems, “conscientious citizen,” in which the person is both serving and inquiring about the problems, and “active citizen,” in which a person has considered the problems and is consciously making life changes—living personal commitments holistically. These choices range from pursuing a career in public service, willingness to assist in a community organization, such as a lawyer serving on the parent-teacher association, or simply making choices as to where to shop. Porter concluded by quoting James Lawson discussing how to make significant change in the world, “We start with each other, our families, the love we display and develop. It must be the kind of love that governs us everywhere we are.”

Audience Questions and Comments

- Thomson noted that changing the world at W&M gets pigeonholed into the Office of Community Engagement & Scholarship. How is service manifested in the departments and programs at W&M?
  - Porter responded that working in a food pantry is not the only way to serve. Integrating service is being active within the things a student is involved.
Stackhouse added some students may not participate in service, but still leave prepared because of the training in their programs. He asked if having the tools to change the world must include service?

- Cress responded it must. Typical service activities are fine, but service also includes a much broader range of activities. A broader definition of involvement is needed to change the world. W&M can prepare you to succeed, but not change the world without service.
  - Stackhouse felt expanding the definition of service makes accommodation in order to claim everyone can get involved. In his experience, most students were very active in service. But again, it must be a much more general definition of service.
  - Fitzpatrick felt W&M grads are prepared for engagement in the community. It is a sense of pride and characteristic of a TWAMP (typical William and Mary person).
    - Cress acknowledged that service in some way can be a copout, but not everyone is involved and it can be better developed on campus.
  - Porter believes a student’s world must open first before being able to change the world. She noted what is happening at W&M is not reality for anyone else in the world. Exposing students through face-to-face experience is needed beyond books to prepare impactful citizens.

- Thomson asked the panelists how do faculty and administrators play a role in the W&M experience. How are these groups supplementing the W&M experience?
  - Cress has worked with faculty and staff on sustainability with mixed experiences. A number of faculty have been genuinely involved. A number of administrators have been unable to think beyond the low hanging fruit. This has taught lessons of how to work with people, but also been frustrating. She wishes administrators would create a more conducive environment for student-driven change.
  - Fitzpatrick would not name anything that happened in the classroom among his 20 greatest undergraduate experiences. He acknowledged others may have been highly influenced by professors. He mentioned a pre-med friend greatly influenced by a professor encouraging her to pursue a passion for public policy. Another friend joined the Peace Corps in Africa because of the influence of a paper for a government class. As a law student, professors have been highly influential, more so through theory than practical applications.
  - Stackhouse thinks a tool includes anything affecting the experience as a whole (resident assistant, cafeteria worker, etc.). Experiences that seem random can bring people together and change their future. W&M is a giant machine of tools impacting students. The range of experiences is so broad that it is difficult to nail down specifics. He changed from a computer science major through the mentorship of faculty. He noted study abroad experiences as particularly impactful on students, much more so than short-term trips.
Porter quickly responded that short-term missions trips are also impactful. She works in her role to create space for students to think about what they are doing in relation to what they want their life to be about. She encourages questions about relating academic learning and real life. Porter identified with sadness to elements in Cress’ comment about not dreaming big enough. She often hears from students and thinks of ways to assist, but does not have enough time to help everyone. In these instances, Porter tries to connect these students to create a bigger circle rather than leaving them to go it alone.

Cress added other students have taught her the most, even more than the faculty. Her peers have shown her how to get things done and dream big. A positive at W&M is the ability to draw these students that can teach and influence each other.

Thomson added two things not mentioned that impacted her experience. First, living in an immersion dorm. She lived in both the Russian house and the mosaic house. Residence life provides a number of options for students to be immersed and grow on campus. Second, the Charles Center offers a number of opportunities for students to find places to grow.

Fitzpatrick agreed other students forced him to develop as well. Some programs do not have faculty advisors because students provide leadership. He currently advises One in Four (an all-male peer education group on sexual assault) and views his role as merely supporting the student leadership. The Law School has five publications run by its students.

Stackhouse agreed other students did greatly impact him, but interaction with faculty (beyond his major) and administrators prepared him for his professional work. These were probably more beneficial to him personally, though student interaction was also important.

Thomson asked what the College can do to better equip students. If there are underserved populations, how do we better serve them?

Cress believes the College needs to step up and increase initiatives for diversity and sustainability on campus. She added the students often have more respect for the staff than the people that hire them in some cases. Sustainability is crucial and a requirement for students to be prepared to succeed in the future.

Fitzpatrick noted the increased number of international service trips. The immediate communities in Williamsburg and Virginia can be overlooked. Students often think globally and not necessarily locally. Local involvement should increase.

Porter appreciated the question and wished for more time to develop her answer. Diversity has come a long way in her limited time at the College and awareness is increasing beyond racial and ethnic categories, which is important. Seeds in these other areas of diversity are planted and ready to burst into new growth. Economic diversity affects how W&M relates to Williamsburg. A number of students do work locally through tutoring programs. She wonders if there are ways to make a broader impact in the community, particularly in affordable housing among other issues.
Stackhouse believes that alumni are being well served well by the means that currently exist.

**Audience Comments and Questions**

- **Sarah**, a senior, has devoted her time at the College to service, which to her means giving yourself to others without the expectation of anything in return. She would like to see W&M move to engagement that can have an impact 20 years beyond her time at the College.

- **Caitlyn** has worked with Americorps in Williamsburg in Section 8 housing. She currently works for workers’ rights on campus and improving the relationship of workers to students, faculty and administrators on campus. She asked Cress if there are there things that can be done on campus to foster a better relationship among all members of the community concerning workers?
  - Cress sees a need for increased transparency as to how we are treating workers. She noted the need for workers to gather for conversation more often than coming to campus exclusively for work.

- **Stephanie**, a junior, believes the College needs to give consideration to ways it can be a better citizen in the community, locally as well as globally. She called for the College to increase transparency to students and their voice in decision-making. She noted the need for increased transparency and education on mental health issues. She asked the panel how can the College and administration be better citizens to all members of the community?
  - Cress responded students have done a lot to reach out to the community, particularly in regard to the 3-person rule. She felt more should be done in regard to sustainability. She noted the need to be a better citizen on campus. The College does not currently support the recycling program on campus. (The students maintain this program.) Cress finds this lack of support disgraceful and not being a good citizen.
    - Fitzpatrick commented students are paid to do the recycling work at the Law School.

- **Stackhouse** felt the College itself does not need to be a better citizen, rather it needs to be a community filled with great citizens. Williamsburg is a unique community and the College cannot achieve a singular voice. It is and must be a collection of diverse voices. (He emphasized he was not discrediting recycling, but talking about the bigger question of citizenship.) He again commented the Counseling Center does a wonderful job in citizenship to students and is an unsung hero on campus.
  - Fitzpatrick believes the students also need to learn how to be citizens. Students can be close-minded regarding issues beyond the 3-person rule and noise ordinances. Participation on other issues is often lacking.

- A staff member asked Cress if her experience with sustainability was actually great preparation for the real world and better than having doors simply opened.
  - Cress responded that was absolutely true. It was good experience, but also disheartening. Sustainability was pushed aside by administrators until the students provided the money. She does not feel the students should not have to
pay for everything to be responsible citizens at the College. All of the struggles focused on small things and prevented students from addressing big problems.

- Prof. Joe Galano, a psychology faculty member, believes students don’t always know the struggles present in the community. He suggested Avalon and the Community Action Agency provide the opportunity to see how others live in Williamsburg. The College needs to develop strong partnerships that are meaningful to the community. This requires working over time and in significant ways. These organizations and others like them desperately need our students help. He believes the emphasis on original research and creating new knowledge can be overrated. He urged the College to use the knowledge we have to help others in a sustainable way.

- Jane, a freshman, is a member of the sustainability committee. She finds W&M is attracting amazing student leaders. The liberal arts aspect of the College offers the opportunity to interact with differing ideas and make connections among disciplines. She sees a gap between what is being taught and opportunities to act upon this knowledge. Some energy currently spent on teaching students should be spent on activating students in the community. She would encourage more interaction between academics and issues that need to be addressed.

- A geology major commented that changing our world in large part is related to changing how we treat the land. He believes students need to ask such questions as how we get our drinking water and food. He wondered if students understand how these issues affect us all. He then questioned how we treat the land the College owns. The College needs to step and make some changes, such as allowing rain gardens. (He suggested the idea, but the College was unsupportive due to lack of funds.)

- Elizabeth, a junior, wondered why the Career Center had not been mentioned. She asked if this is a good tool on campus.
  - Stackhouse responded the Career Center was of no value to the graduates he knows in actually finding employment. The services may have improved resumes, but he did not know anyone that found a job through the Career Center.
  - Fitzpatrick is excited for the new Career Center building and the commitment displayed by the Board of Visitors. It is already much improved from his experience in 2004, which was not very helpful. However, the Law School’s Career Center was very influential in his selection of a law school.
  - Stackhouse added it was not his intent to call it a bad Career Center, but he can think of more alumni he knows that found jobs through faculty career advising and influence.
    - Fitzpatrick agreed faculty often assist graduates in finding career opportunities.
  - Cress acknowledged the Career Center could be better, but she found her job through the Career Center database. She did not have the best in-person experience, but is excited for the infusion of support to improve the Career Center.
  - Thomson added the Career Center has done a much better job at increasing opportunities through broader job fairs.

- David has been very involved on campus and feels prepared for the world beyond. He appreciates the influence of other students and faculty, but found the administration has only acted to stifle his efforts to change the campus and the world. It has been
immensely frustrating, but did force him to grow. He would encourage the administration to be more open to allowing students to change the world. He suggests the administration should allow students a larger role in helping to make decisions at the College.

- Stackhouse does not find it realistic to think the administration to encourage every student’s idea. If 1,000 students came to the administration with their idea to change the world, then there is a major problem. He believes struggle is important for student growth. The administration simply cannot support every idea. In a perfect world that would be great, but reality is being able to jump in the mud and figuring out how to get things done.

- Fitzpatrick had positive experiences with administration as an undergraduate. Administrators cannot always say yes, but generally have an open door policy and are willing to listen. This openness does not happen at every school. W&M administrators and Board of Visitor members know students and actually interact with students.

- Cress commented there is a difference between saying yes and considering something. Students should know that when they have big ideas they can be implemented and continue to exist after they are gone.

- Stackhouse is not sure the administration is the key to allowing students to pursue all their ideas. The complex nature of problems needs to be remembered.

- Cress paused to ask if there are students involved in formulating the strategic plan.

- Thomson responded that several students have been actively involved in the process.

- Sarah Rojas, student body president, announced that in April there is a large student venue for participation. She encouraged everyone in attendance to be involved.

Thomson thanked all the students involved in planning the event (Brian Cannon, Charles Crimmins, Brian Gemino, Sammy Hamididdin, Shay Jannat, Sarah Rojas, Chrissy Scott, Tildi Sharp, Bailey Thomson, Koji Ukai). She thanked the audience for attending and being willing to encounter one another before encouraging continuing conversation. She concluded by offering a quote from rapper Notorious B.I.G., “Stay far from timid and live the phrase ‘sky’s the limit.”

Discussion notes compiled and written by Jeremy P. Martin.