



FROM THE BRAFFERTON

College and University

BY W. TAYLOR REVELEY, III

William & Mary President

Our Royal Charter decrees that William & Mary “shall be called and denominated, forever, the College of William & Mary in Virginia.” We cherish the Charter. Traditions matter.

“College” is very dear to many alumni, especially those who spent their undergraduate years in the shadow of the Wren, frolicking in the Sunken Garden.

But even within its first century, the College also began calling itself a university. There were consistent and deliberate references to William & Mary as a university in the 1700s, as noted in the winter edition of this magazine.

Thomas Jefferson meant to establish William & Mary as a university with his reforms of 1779. As a member of the Board of Visitors, he pressed to add medicine, modern languages and law to W&M’s curriculum. It was the addition of the law school — the first in the country — that turned William & Mary into a university. Only the University of Pennsylvania, with its medical school, contests William & Mary’s claim to being the oldest university in America.

Later, Jefferson made explicit his intentions. His autobiography states that he designed William & Mary’s reforms of 1779 “to make it in fact a University.”

We were able last Charter Day to display the honorary degree William & Mary gave Mr. Jefferson in 1783, naming him a doctor in civil law. The diploma, on loan from the Massachusetts Historical Society, showed that William & Mary referred to itself at that time as “the university or college of William & Mary.”

Classified ads in the late 1700s placed by W&M refer to both the “College of” and the “University of.” Many letters from that era refer to William & Mary as a university, including some written by the most distinguished people associated with the school. William & Mary’s President James Madison, in office from 1777 to 1812, often referred to W&M as a university.

So did George Wythe in correspondence with George Washington, who responded likewise, as they discussed whether Washington would need to take over the campus during the Revolutionary War. He ultimately did, turning it into a camp and hospital for American and French soldiers.

In short, there is ample basis in fact and history to call William & Mary either “the College” or “the University,” or, more aptly, both.

These days, outside the United States, “college” is generally understood to mean secondary school or even residence hall. In the United States, “college” is generally understood to mean a school that educates only undergraduates.

Our faculty struggle to convey the stature of William & Mary to their colleagues when they collaborate or lecture overseas. Our admission officers must be sure that international students and their families understand that William & Mary is indeed a distinguished university, not merely a high school or dormitory. Even in Virginia, we are widely recognized as a splendid undergraduate institution, but much less widely thought to be a serious research university. This is damaging, because our schools of law, business, education and marine science, plus graduate programs in arts and sciences, are thriving as part of our university.

Right now, our editorial style guide recommends using “William & Mary” and “the university” for external audiences, and “the College” within the family, especially when speaking to undergraduate alumni. With some frequency, our communications staff has to ask media to correct constructions like “William & Mary College.”

What might we do to better ensure that William & Mary is accurately understood at home and abroad? One option, of course, would be to formally become the “University of William & Mary” or “William & Mary University,” in the tradition of the other leading colonial colleges, Harvard, Yale, Princeton and Columbia. Were that to happen, it would be essential as well to keep “College” vibrantly alive as the name of our undergraduate program, because “College” has been a cherished part of William & Mary since 1693. This approach has worked well for Harvard and Yale. Interestingly, some prominent universities retain “College” as an official name. It’s still Harvard College, for example, but they do business as Harvard University. Georgetown’s charter recognizes both “College” and “University.”

I have talked to alumni groups far and wide about “what to call William & Mary” for almost as long as I’ve been the 27th president. In my judgment, the Alma Mater of the Nation would benefit quite significantly from calling itself what it actually is — a university — while calling its undergraduate program what it has been since creation, the College. This makes good sense to me. It would work. But I realize the idea needs to take deeper root in our collective thinking than it has to date before any such step might be prudently taken.

It is unlikely there is time for the necessary collective thought during what remains of my time as president. How best to communicate William & Mary’s breadth and depth was important to Jefferson and his peers in the late 1700s, however, and it is even more important in today’s world. We need to give the matter serious thought.