

A Constellation of Strengths

What is it like to be, one minute, a law school dean enjoying a calm morning and, the next minute, the interim president of a university in shock over the sudden end of Gene Nichol's presidency? Being shot out of a cannon or caught in the blast of a fire hose come to mind. There also comes to mind the rare and wonderful opportunity to help make a difference for the better in the life of one of America's cherished institutions.

Writing this column is a chance to say why William and Mary matters so much. Viewed over the centuries, the College's august history and physical beauty command a leading place in the pantheon of American colleges and universities. But William and Mary matters most not because of its age and elegance, but because it is a place where teaching, research and learning take place at the

the national councils of our country." While civic engagement has ever been with us, it was discouragingly late in the 20th century before William and Mary began to embrace diversity within its community, with one signal exception. The College was one of the first state-owned institutions of higher education to admit women. An embrace of diversity is now central to our identity. So also is the College's commitment to meet the financial needs of students from families otherwise unable to afford higher education. By the same token, we understand the competitive and cultural necessity to look beyond our national borders for opportunities to learn. All these areas — civic



community unusually dedicated to these values. This does set us apart from the great mass of colleges and universities. On those rare occasions when our ties of trust and affection wear thin, even tear, we are a community unusually committed to restoring them quickly.

Then there is William and Mary's capacity to emulate the phoenix. The College was laid low by the Revolutionary and Civil wars. It has been relentlessly buffeted by financial crises, some of them outright depressions. The buildings of the ancient campus used to burn with some regularity. About all we have escaped are plagues of locusts (at least so far as I know). Throughout, written across the pages of the College's past, are its poise and resilience in the face of adversity. No other college or university in the United States has faced the depth and breath of adversity that has come William and Mary's way since 1693. Like the phoenix, the College just keeps coming back, rising each time to new levels of excellence and service.

In my view, the 21st century can be William and Mary's most productive and distinguished yet. Building on the constellation of strengths just described, a glittering century is well within reach. All it will take is determination on the part of the College family — Board, faculty, students, staff, alumni and friends — to settle for nothing less.

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cutting edge of excellence. Teaching, research and learning are what we do so uncommonly well. This is how we contribute most richly to the welfare of the commonwealth and country. It is about teaching, research and learning, first and foremost, that we must keep asking ourselves, how can we do better?

There are, of course, other reasons why the College matters. From its earliest days, William and Mary's people have served their communities, states and nation. Civic engagement has characterized us from its outset. As George Wythe, the College's first law professor, said in 1780, "Here we will form such characters as may be useful in

engagement, embracing differences, the Gateway program, and our growing international reach — were matters about which President Nichol was especially passionate. They are areas to which William and Mary remains committed.

The College is also distinguished by the quality of our dealings with one another. We believe deeply in integrity and civility. It is much easier for a school to thrive if strong ties of trust and affection unite its ultimate governing body (in our case, the Board of Visitors), its faculty, students and staff, and its alumni. Perhaps because of William and Mary's human scale, immersion in the liberal arts, and powerful honor system, we are a