

## Liberal Arts

Our strategic plan calls for William & Mary to be one of the preeminent liberal arts universities in the world, providing the very best undergraduate education, complemented by a few superb graduate and professional programs. The liberal arts have long been the core of a W&M education. But they aren't always understood.

The term liberal arts (*artes liberales* for those still awash in their Latin) goes back to antiquity, referring to the education of a free person or, later, the education that makes one intellectually free. When a curriculum developed around this notion in the Middle Ages, it included the study of both the humanities (rhetoric and music, for example) and the sciences (arithmetic, geometry and astronomy).

It's often mistakenly believed that the liberal arts exclude the sciences. Not so! Indeed, the title of our Faculty of Arts and Sciences makes that quite explicit. Our undergraduates study both "arts" and "sciences" in their general education courses, and over 20 percent of them major in the sciences. In fact, among all public institutions in the nation, we rank third in the percentage of our students who earn Ph.D.s in the sciences, not to mention the great success of our graduates in medical school and other health-care programs.

In practice, the line between the arts and sciences is often blurred. For example, our Center for Geospatial Analysis, a transdisciplinary program housed in Swem Library, allows students in many fields, history for example, to apply geographic information systems in their work.

Of course, the sciences and mathematics wing of the liberal arts overlaps with the broader category of what's called STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math). I stress that overlap between the liberal arts and STEM because they are often thought to live on different planets. The excellence of a W&M education comes not only from its rigor and its

deep engagement of faculty and students but from the breadth of study — arts and sciences. This breadth is essential for success in a post-industrial global society.

The liberal arts look for connections across disciplines and stress various interrelated ways of looking at the world's challenges and possibilities. The liberal arts prepare you to thrive amid complexity and change. They help students learn to think rigorously, communicate effectively, have breadth of perspective, develop curiosity, and appreciate a diversity of views even when they challenge dearly held assumptions.

The liberal arts do not seek to prepare students for specific jobs, but to prepare them for any job. This includes finding meaningful work that nourishes the soul while putting bread on the table.

As I am wont to note, William & Mary graduates, steeped in the liberal arts, continue to move into leadership positions in a wide variety of fields, including public service. In that sphere, our graduates have recently become director of the FBI, chief scientist of NASA, the head of the Securities and Exchange Commission, and director of the U.S. Geological Survey. They join a constellation of leaders from William & Mary including the director of our national parks, majority leader of the U.S. House of Representatives, and two former members of President Obama's cabinet: the secretary of defense and the chair of the Council of Economic Advisers. Four members of the cabinet of Virginia's new Governor, Terry McAuliffe, are graduates of William & Mary — his chief of staff and the secretaries of finance, natural resources and technology. And the minority leader of Virginia's Senate is one of ours.

A broad liberal arts perspective is what employers seek. A recent survey conducted by the national Association of American Colleges and Universities confirmed what we know anecdotally from the success of our students: nearly 100



percent of employers surveyed agree that "a candidate's capacity to think critically, communicate clearly, and solve complex problems is more important than their undergraduate major." And 74 percent of those surveyed believe that a 21st-century liberal arts education is the best preparation for success.

So, when any of us hears "liberal arts" bandied about in conversation, let's remember to sound William & Mary's trumpet. The liberal arts include the full breadth of the arts, humanities, and social and natural sciences; they define the gold standard of education; they are the best preparation for success in a wildly changing world; and no one does them better than your *alma mater*.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Taylor Reveley III".

W. Taylor Reveley III  
President, College of William & Mary