



FROM THE BRAFFERTON

Leading the Way in the Liberal Arts

BY W. TAYLOR REVELEY III

William & Mary President

WHILE PRESIDENT OF PRINCETON, WOODROW WILSON NOTED that changing an undergraduate curriculum is like moving a graveyard – you never know how many friends the dead have until you try to move them. I know how he felt. Passions run high when the time comes for the obligatory parts of a college curriculum to change. But once or twice a generation, every school worth its salt must revisit its core or “general

education” requirements to keep up with advances in knowledge, meet the changing needs of students in an evolving society, and reaffirm the enduring purpose of the sort of education it seeks to provide. Members of this fall’s freshman class at William & Mary will be the first to study the new College Curriculum (COLL) as part of their general education requirements, which comprise about 25 percent of the credits needed for graduation. COLL will provide undergraduates with a sufficiently rigorous taste of various disciplines to enable them to become familiar with different modes of analysis and ways of solving problems. The way a historian seeks to understand and explain the past, for instance, differs from how a physicist plumbs the mechanics of material reality. Throughout there will be emphasis on teaching students to challenge assumptions, insist on evidence closely evaluated, and become comfortable exploring perspectives different from those with which they started.

COLL recognizes the necessity for more interdisciplinary work to understand multi-dimensional bodies of knowledge and then solve problems that can be tackled only by bringing together information and techniques from different fields of knowledge. Global and cross-cultural learning will be more prominent in COLL along with new emphasis on how to communicate effectively in writing and orally and how to conduct sophisticated research.

COLL also ensures students will share the experience of taking required courses in the liberal arts throughout their four years at William & Mary. In recent years at W&M and other universities with high undergraduate admission standards, many entering freshman have arrived with college credits from AP and IB exams equal to at least a semester of college. Students increasingly have used these credits to check off large parts of our required liberal arts curriculum. Wielding credits based on high school courses in this way also has enabled them to satisfy general education requirements during their first two years of college instead of continuing to explore the liberal arts widely for all four years.

COLL precludes this. While students will continue to receive elective credit at W&M for AP and IB exams, COLL requirements must be satisfied with courses taken on our campus from our professors during all four years of the undergraduate experience.

Several years of preparation by our faculty prepared us to launch COLL with the Class of 2019. Our strategic planning process identified the need to reconsider the general education curriculum put in place in 1993, and that reconsideration began in 2010. In December 2013 the faculty adopted COLL, which debuted this fall after two years of course development.

In their first year, new students will take COLL 100 courses focusing on “big ideas” or “great questions.” The faculty have already prepared so many marvelous COLL 100 courses that some have been transformed into COLL 150 courses (first-year seminars). One COLL 100 course that got my attention, among many others, is Professor Paul Mapp’s “The Idea of the Liberal Arts Education.” Course materials will span 2,500 years — from Socrates to Winston Churchill — and will involve students in the very kinds of conversations that preceded the launch of the new curriculum.

As part of COLL, for the first time at William & Mary, each entering student had a shared intellectual experience before arriving on campus. All new students were sent *Island of the Colorblind* by Oliver Sacks to read over the summer. Faculty will include the book in their class discussions and assignments.

We believe W&M’s new COLL curriculum will provide our undergraduates during all four years of their time on campus with a powerful learning experience spread across a wide range of disciplines, with heightened emphasis on critical thinking, research and writing skills, and problem solving in interdisciplinary and global contexts. With COLL William & Mary will continue to lead the way nationally for undergraduate education in the liberal arts.