



FROM THE BRAFFERTON

Toward Even Greater Graduation Rates

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A student has to focus and work to graduate. The tooth fairy isn't going to deliver the degree. But a student's failure to graduate can also reveal the school's shortcomings as well as his or her own. As G.K. Chesterton noted, "a good novel tells us the truth about its hero, but a bad novel tells us the truth about its author."

On the whole, the news is good for our undergraduates and the College. We consistently rank among the nation's best universities when it comes to graduation and retention rates for undergraduates. Our graduation rate (measured by the federal government as a six-year statistic, though the vast majority of our students graduate in four years) is 90 percent for the class that arrived in 2008. This is more than 30 points higher than the national average.

Our retention rate, measured as the proportion of freshmen who are still at W&M in their sophomore year, is 95 percent, compared to the national average of 79 percent.

Due to ties and bunching at the top, W&M has the third-highest rates among public universities nationally for both six-year graduation and retention. In my view, we should have the highest rates among the publics, and we've begun seriously moving to get there.

Our scholarship athletes have an 85 percent federal graduation rate, already the highest at any public university in the country. The next closest is the University of Michigan at 80 percent.

William & Mary also has the highest African-American graduation rate (86 percent) and highest graduation rate among African-American men (also 86 percent) of any public university.

Our four-year graduation rate for all undergraduates (83 percent) is second among public universities. The national average for all universities (public and private) is 39 percent.

Earlier this year, we formed William & Mary's first Working Group on Retention and Graduation. It is charged with figuring out how to take W&M's retention rate to 97 percent and our six-year graduation rate to 95 percent. Once we reach these celestial levels, W&M will lead the publics and begin closing in on the most distinguished private institutions.

The working group has already identified and implemented a number of improvements in outreach to students having trouble during their first year. First-year academic performance signals a student's likelihood of graduating. We will do more to spot even marginal academic problems and intervene sooner with struggling students. We are also working with the faculty to increase the use of formal midterm warnings, which allow the university to ensure struggling students are aware of the academic resources available to help them. Far more often than not, students who get such warnings improve their performance before final grades are issued. Rigor remains a hallmark of a W&M education, but a better early grading system can help more students adapt to that rigor and grow intellectually.

This is an ambitious effort. It will take hard work and patience to move the needle. Some factors are more in our control than others. For example, when a student transfers to another school and graduates, as is the case with nearly all our transfers, he or she is counted as a graduation failure for W&M the same way a student who simply drops out would be counted. Since federal graduation rates are measured in six-year cycles, we won't see the numbers change overnight. While our target for both goals is 2025, this is not something that will take a decade to bear fruit. The working group will share results annually.

Really, though, what difference do high retention and graduation rates make? They make a lot of difference. First, they capture the caliber of the people a school has, the excellence of its teaching and learning, and the care it takes to keep students from slipping through the cracks. Second, these rates can affect the cost of the education. A student who graduates in four years (that's 83 percent of our students but 39 percent nationally) pays the sticker price (minus any financial aid) for only four years. A student who takes five or six years to graduate may end up paying materially more.

It is not easy these days to be admitted to William & Mary. Every student who makes this demanding cut is capable of earning a degree. For the good of each student who joins us, as well as the health of W&M and the contributions our graduates make to the economy and civic life, it is important that no Tribe member fall by the wayside while on campus.

William & Mary should be first among public colleges and universities in our retention and graduation rates. We're moving toward that worthy goal.