



# Positioning Study

WILLIAM & MARY

Board of Visitors

September 16-17, 2023

Committee on Institutional Advancement  
Pre-Read

Page 1 of 13

# 1 Project Overview

Let's recap your project goals and summarize the evolution of our research since 2019. The world has changed; so, has William & Mary—and that's a good thing.

# 2 Executive Summary

We'll walk through everything you need to know and why it matters. These key findings are designed to be shared with larger groups and provide high-level insights.

IN ANALYSIS

# 3 Full Research Report

We'll expand upon our key takeaways and dig into specific research insights. We included data points from prior research waves for strategic consideration and additional context.

# Project Evolution and Goals

## Project Background

- Second brand research study by SimpsonScarborough—first was deployed in 2019.
- Replicates key questions from 2019 survey of prospective and current undergraduate students
- SimpsonScarborough managed all aspects of the study, including instrument design, programming and testing of the surveys, data collection, analysis, and reporting.

## Market Changes

- We've seen a decline in prospect participation in recent years. W&M's response rate matches other similar-sized schools and is still statistically significant.

- 1 Provide data to inform the development of **effective marketing and messaging** for prospective undergraduate students
- 2 Identify what prospective undergraduates want and what current students identify as **William & Mary's strengths**

# 2023 Data Collection Summary



Online survey,  
desktop or mobile



Sept 21 -Oct 17, 2023  
Post US News College Rankings



Median length of  
8 minutes



Data sources:  
William & Mary

## 773 Prospective Undergraduates

William & Mary was not identified as the survey sponsor until halfway through the instrument, after baseline brand metric questions had been posed.

Gender	2019	2023
Female	64%	50%
Male	33%	39%
Alternate gender identity	<1%	4%
Prefer not to answer	2%	6%

State Residency	2019	2023
In-state	26%	27%
Out-of-state	74%	73%

Year in High School	2019	2023
Junior	31%	45%
Senior	69%	55%

Margin of error: ± 3.51 percentage points

## 558 Current Undergraduates

William & Mary was identified as the survey sponsor at the outset.

Gender	2019	2023
Female	63%	64%
Male	35%	27%
Alternate gender identity	1%	7%
Prefer not to answer	1%	2%

State Residency	2019	2023
In-state	69%	67%
Out-of-state	31%	33%

Margin of error: ± 3.94 percentage points

# 2023 Data Collection Summary (cont.)



Online survey,  
desktop or mobile



Sept 21 -Oct 17,  
2023 Post US News College  
Rankings



Median length  
of 8 minutes



Data sources:  
William & Mary

## 773 Prospective Undergraduates

Race/Ethnicity	2019	2023
White	62%	49%
Asian	28%	27%
Hispanic. Latino/a	9%	10%
Black or African American	7%	10%
American Indian or Alaska Native	1%	1%
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	1%	1%
Middle Eastern or North African	NA	2%
Other	2%	1%
Prefer not to answer	5%	8%

Margin of error: ± 3.51 percentage points

## 558 Current Undergraduates

Race/Ethnicity	2019	2023
White	81%	78%
Asian	12%	19%
Hispanic. Latino/a	8%	7%
Black or African American	6%	5%
American Indian or Alaska Native	1%	<1%
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	<1%	<1%
Middle Eastern or North African	NA	3%
Other	1%	1%
Prefer not to answer	1%	2%

Margin of error: ± 3.94 percentage points

# Higher Ed Insights

In today's higher education landscape, prospective students are paying attention to value, ROI, and outcomes, and this shift is reflected in the 2023 research findings.

**William & Mary's researching findings confirm this shift in prioritizing outcomes and ROI over academic rigor.**

Outcomes

ROI

STEM

- College-bound students and their families are increasingly questioning the value of a college degree. They are paying attention to return on investment and therefore paying more attention to outcomes.<sup>1</sup>
- The number of college grads earning humanities degrees decreased by 25% from 2012 to 2020.<sup>2</sup>
- Interest in STEM fields has increased as interest in humanities has declined, with a 62% increase in STEM bachelor's degrees conferred between 2010 and 2018.<sup>3</sup>

1. Seltzer, Rick. "[Americans See Value in College, Question Its Price.](#)" Inside Higher Ed, 9 Aug. 2023.  
2. Marcus, Jon. "[The Number of College Graduates in the Humanities Drops for the Eighth Consecutive Year.](#)" The Hechinger Report, 15 Mar. 2021.  
3. Funk, Cary, and Kim Parker. "[STEM Jobs See Uneven Progress in Increasing Gender, Racial and Ethnic Diversity.](#)" Pew Research Center, 1 Apr. 2021,

**The percentage of respondents selecting humanities and social sciences dropped significantly in 2023.** However, the top programs prospective students associate with the best institutions are the same in both study waves, but business falls to the fifth spot.

SURVEY QUESTION: Fill in the blank: The best colleges and universities have excellent programs in \_\_\_\_\_.

Programs Associated with the Best Colleges and Universities

2019 Prospects		2023 Prospects	
1. Physical Sciences	64%	1. Engineering	54%
2. Engineering	60%	2. Physical Sciences	53%
3. Business	57%	3. Computational fields	49%
4. Medicine	55%	4. Medicine	48%
5. Computational fields	53%	5. Business	47%
6. Humanities	51%	6. Law	37%
7. Social Sciences	49%	7. Math	35%
8. Law	47%	8. Social Sciences	33%
9. Math	45%	9. Humanities	31%
10. Performing and Visual Arts	25%	10. Performing and Visual Arts	17%
11. Education/Teaching	21%	11. Education/Teaching	16%
Other	5%	Other	5%
None of the above/don't know	3%	None of the above/don't know	1%
<b>Avg # of selections</b>	<b>5.4</b>	<b>Avg # of selections</b>	<b>4.3</b>

The biggest decreases are seen in the percentage of prospects identifying humanities and social sciences with the best institutions, **down 20 and 15 percentage points**, respectively, across study waves.

Respondents selected fewer items overall in 2023, an average of 4.3 vs. 5.4 in the prior wave. As a result, we see decreases across most programs, with an average drop of 10 percentage points.

**Academic rigor, affordability, and strong STEM programs continue to be the attributes prospects value most, but prospects are less likely to identify academic rigor as important in 2023. At the same time, earning a high income after graduation has become more important.**

SURVEY QUESTION: Which FIVE of the following are the MOST IMPORTANT attributes you look for in schools? (select up to 5)

### Most Important Attributes Prospects Are Looking for in Schools

#### Top 5 Attributes Prospects Are Looking for in Schools

2019 Prospects		2023 Prospects	
1. Academic rigor	40%	1. Affordable	36%
2. Affordable	33%	2. Strong STEM programs	32%
3. Strong STEM programs	28%	3. Academic rigor	31%
4. Strong sense of community	24%	4. High job placement rates	23%
5. Prestigious reputation	23%	5. Prestigious reputation	23%
6. Personal interaction with professors	23%		

Strong sense of community and personal interaction with professors fall out of the top 5 in 2023 in favor of high job placement rates.

#### Significant Changes to Note in 2023

Increased in 2023	2019	2023	Change (percentage points, pp)
Graduates earn high incomes	16%	22%	+6 pp
Decreased in 2023	2019	2023	Change (percentage points, pp)
Academic rigor	40%	31%	-9 pp
Strong sense of community	24%	17%	-7 pp
Personal interaction with professors	23%	17%	-6 pp



# Growing Awareness

For prospects looking for W&M's brand of education—an education based in liberal arts and sciences—the reputation has improved.

**Respondents today are more likely than those in 2019 to show awareness of W&M for the liberal arts, its strong reputation, its public status, and student and faculty diversity.**

## 2023 W&M Research Insights

- Awareness of W&M's public status is a positive trend, considering the growing focus on college education costs and value.
- William & Mary continues to be known for academic rigor, its rich history, and its strength in the liberal arts.
- Recognized strengths are consistent across study years, including campus, location, and reputation in addition to academic rigor.

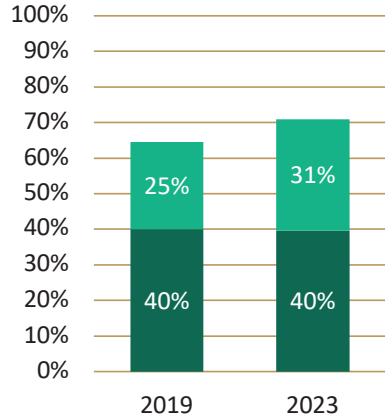
Across the four reputational attributes tested in the benchmark study, overall or strong agreement increased in 2023. These gains are driven by increased awareness among out-of-state prospects.

**SURVEY QUESTION:** Rate your level of agreement with each of the following statements about William & Mary. Scale: *Strong disagree, disagree, agree, strongly agree, don't know*; prospects only answered if somewhat/very familiar with W&M.

**Reputational Awareness of William & Mary: % Agreement, 2019 vs. 2023**

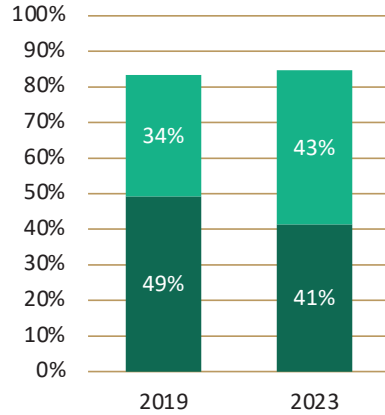
Disagreement is low overall at ≤13% for each statement in 2023. Respondents generally agree or don't know.

**Is known for liberal arts and sciences**  
Overall agreement increased, driven by an increase in strong agreement.



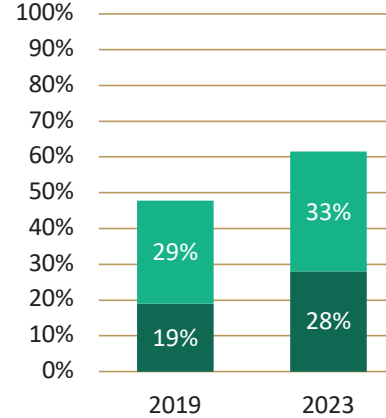
In-state – Stable; Out-of-state - Increase in net agreement from 64% to 73%

**Has a strong reputation**  
Overall agreement remains stable, but strong agreement increased in 2023.



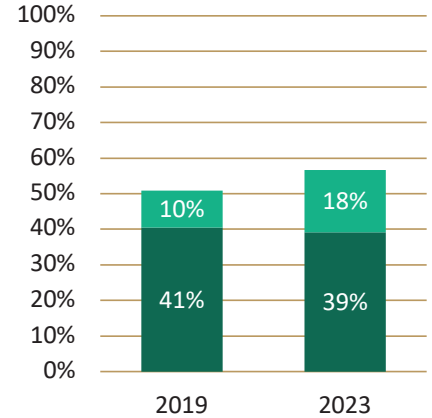
In-state - Decrease in strong agreement from 50% to 46%; Out-of-state - Increase in strong agreement from 29% to 42%

**Is a public school**  
Agreement increased by 14-percentage points in 2023.



In-state- Stable; Out-of-state – Increase in net agreement from 39% to 55%

**Has a diverse student body and faculty**  
Overall agreement is not significantly different, but strong agreement has increased.



In-state: - Stable; Out-of-state - Increase in strong agreement from 9% to 17%

# When you think of W&M, what comes to mind?

SURVEY QUESTION: When you think of William & Mary, what comes to mind? Please be as specific as possible. (open-end)

In 2023, respondents were asked one open-ended question about what comes to mind first when thinking of W&M. This replaced separate open-ended questions about positive and negative associations in the 2019 study.

## 2019 Positive Associations

- Long and rich history
- Reputation for academic excellence and rigor
- Small, close-knit community
- Campus (beautiful, traditional, Williamsburg)
- Diverse student environment
- Focus on the liberal arts and humanities

## 2019 Negative Associations

- Small, old campus. Outdated facilities
- High cost, value for the money
- Lack of mental health support
- Lack of some academic programs like engineering
- Student life, boring

## 2023 Positive Associations

- Long and rich history
- Prestige
- Campus (beautiful, traditional, Williamsburg)
- Reputation for academic excellence and rigor
- Focus on the liberal arts and humanities
- Small, close-knit community

## 2023 Negative Associations

*Most responses were positive, but of those that were negative, these themes rose to the top.*

- Quality of campus facilities (e.g., dorms and dining)
- Mediocre student life, not in an exciting location
- Cost/lack of affordability

# For Consideration

- Neither prospects nor current students recognize W&M for job market preparation, high-quality and high-paying jobs after graduation, or internship connections. Aided awareness, familiarity, and interest metrics for W&M decreased slightly in 2023, with findings showing increased competitive pressure from Virginia Tech.
- Aided mentions of W&M as one of the institutions in Virginia with the strongest academic programs decreased from 84% to 73%, and this drop is reflected in data for both high school juniors and seniors.
- Despite this decrease, W&M remains one of the top three mentions, statistically tied with UVA and Virginia Tech.
- The percentage of prospects somewhat or very familiar with W&M dropped slightly from 75% to 68%, and the percentage considering W&M dropped from 39% to 33%. These declines are driven primarily by decreased familiarity and interest among high school juniors.

## Competitive Pressure in Noisy Market



WILLIAM & MARY  
CHARTERED 1693

**2019**    **2023**

**Unaided Awareness – Virginia**  
(unaided mentions of excellent colleges and universities in VA)    **50%**    **46%**

**Aided Awareness – Virginia**  
(aided mentions of VA institutions with the strongest academic programs)    **84%**    **73% ↓**

**Familiarity**  
(% somewhat or very familiar)    **75%**    **68% ↓**

**Academic Quality Rated Excellent**  
(% excellent, rated if somewhat/very familiar with institution)    **54%**    **52%**

**Considering for Own Education**  
(% Selected)    **39%**    **33% ↓**

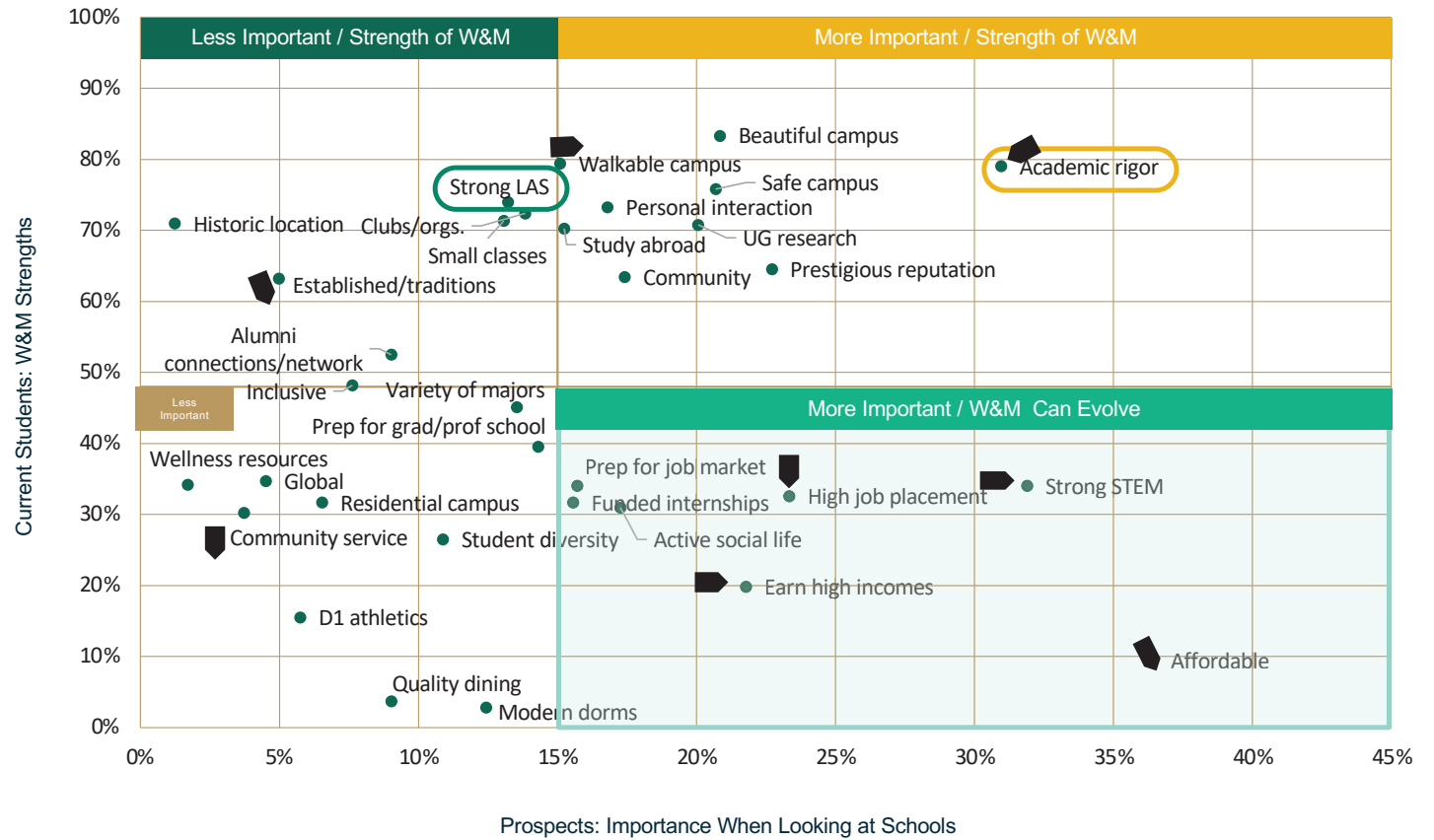
INTERNAL vs. EXTERNAL

Perceptions of W&M / Strengths vs. Importance

In 2023, academic rigor continues to be the primary area of alignment between W&M’s strengths and the attributes important to prospects. Strength in liberal arts and sciences falls out of the upper right quadrant, but otherwise, this quadrant remains largely unchanged.

2023: W&M Strengths vs. Important Attributes

SURVEY QUESTION: (Prospective Students) Which FIVE of the following are the MOST IMPORTANT attributes you look for in schools? (select up to 5) / (Current undergraduates) Which of the following are strengths of William & Mary? (select all that apply).



Axes cross at average values for each audience.