



## REPORT OF THE W&M STUDENT REPRESENTATIVE April 2024

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BOARD OF VISITORS, STUDENT REPRESENTATIVE

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BOARD OF VISITORS, COMMITTEE STUDENT REPRESENTATIVES

The spring semester has been busy for both students and Student Assembly. As we look back on the semester and year, we have a number of different reflections and updates to share with you all.

### Transparency Report

As we near the conclusion of the 331st Session of the Student Assembly, it's a moment for reflection on the multitude of projects and initiatives that have occupied our time and efforts throughout the past year. From advocating for student welfare to spearheading campus-wide initiatives, we've been deeply engaged in endeavors aimed at enhancing the student experience.

In the spirit of transparency and accountability, we are in the final stages of preparing our year-end transparency report. This comprehensive document will provide an overview of our activities, achievements, and challenges encountered during the session. We are excited to share this report with you all at the Board meeting and welcome any in-person discussion and feedback. Our report will also be shared with the student body as we work to encourage active participation in our governance process. Through open communication and collaboration, we can continue to work towards creating a vibrant and inclusive campus community.

### End of Year Events

April is a busy time of year for Student Assembly. As always, Student Assembly has organized events that bring the student body closer, initiatives that sparked meaningful dialogue, and championed inclusivity, and diversity. As a continuation of the Asian Cinnetenital Ball, Student Assembly planned the Art and Hatsuye Ball which showcased the beautiful culture and history of Asian Pacific Islander students here at the university. This event was attended by over 400 students, community members, and alumni. Student Assembly also planned the Royal Ball which is an annual end-of-the-year event to reminisce on the year, celebrating the diverse contributions of our students and their profound impact on shaping the vibrant community of William and Mary. This event typically hosts over 800 students.

We're gearing up to bid a fond farewell to our graduating seniors by throwing them a spectacular Senior Class Dance! This highly cherished tradition is a great event celebrating the Class of 2024 and typically draws a crowd of 900+.

Other events that we are continuing to support for the rest of the semester included a QTPOC Prom, our annual Earth Day Bash on April 20th and the Spring Concert on April 29th, in addition to a number of other smaller scale events.

### **Campus Safety**

As always, the safety of students is one of our top priorities. In collaboration with the President's Office, Student Leadership Development, and student leaders, we have created a working group that is continuing to address ongoing pedestrian safety concerns. They have recently joined with the city to repaint 27 crosswalks on campus, and are looking to begin the process of painting crosswalks adjacent to campus sometime soon.

In addition to pedestrian safety, we have also spent time trying to respond to student concerns regarding a perceived increased police presence in Williamsburg. We have been in communication with the city and understand that many of their concerns are focused around the high risk behaviors that students often participate in on the last day of classes. We are continuing to work with the city to provide strategies to mitigate these concerns, while also strengthening our communication channels with the student body in an attempt to encourage safer behavior.

### **Student Assembly Elections**

After returning from spring break, Student Assembly entered into our election cycle. Candidates running to represent their class and the student body as student body president and vice president had the opportunity to campaign and share their vision with their peers. The initial election took place on March 28th, but our process allows for an appeal of the election. On March 30th, there was an appeal filed with the Student Assembly Review Board followed by a hearing on April 1st. The opinion from the Review Board, delivered on April 3rd, concluded that the result of the Student Body Presidential Election was invalid, calling for a special election. The special election was held on April 8th and the results of the student body president and vice president election were verified. This process was a contentious one for many in our campus community and was amplified by student's engagement on Yik Yak (an anonymous social media platform). Use of Yik Yak as a primary way to influence individuals and groups demonstrates that we have a long way to go in terms of helping our students use productive discourse to resolve differences.

### **Student Activism**

Our student body is passionate about advocating for the change they wish to see on our campus and in the world. As their representatives, Student Assembly's role is to elevate student voices and help

them navigate the advocacy channels that exist here at W&M. Since we last met, students have continued their activism around a number of different areas of concern. As their representative, I want to use this report to highlight a few of the areas where students have been dedicating their time.

Following the announcement of Gates Hall, the Committee for Contextualization of Landmarks and Iconography released a petition that has received 626 signatures as of April 12th. The petition outlined the frustration that many students felt regarding the naming of the building, particularly given the historic significance of the Bray School. I share this concern not to call into question the qualifications of Chancellor Gates, but rather to highlight what many students felt was a missed opportunity to honor the hallowed grounds of the Bray School. The frustration that many students feel regarding this naming decision comes from a broader reflection of our institution's troubled history. In recent years, W&M has taken significant strides towards acknowledging the more challenging aspects of our history and giving recognition to individuals who were previously overlooked, especially from underrepresented groups. Recognizing and addressing the darker chapters of our history must be an ongoing commitment that is woven into every decision we make as a university community. It is imperative that we continue to engage in meaningful dialogue, reflection, and action to ensure that our institution evolves in a manner that respects the dignity and diversity of all its members, past and present.

In November, I brought to your attention a request from students calling for new buildings to be named in honor of an Asian American figure at W&M. As you all move forward with naming decisions, I hope that you will consider the opinions of students and other community members. The petition created by the Asian American Student Initiative is just one example of the calls made by students asking that the university name our buildings, spaces and structures after individuals who honor our values and uplift communities that we have previously overlooked.

In addition to this petition, I also wanted to highlight the work of other student organizers on our campus. Throughout the course of the semester a number of different student organizations have come together to host protests, forums and other events to show their support for Palestinian liberation. These groups have made a number of calls to the board and the university administration, many of which pertain to the university's investments which I will discuss more below.

### **Transparency of the University's Investment**

In the past semester a number of student groups and a student referendum that I will discuss below have called for more transparency surrounding the university's investments. While the most recent requests have centered around the university's investment in corporations that have ties to the State of Israel, the calls for transparency are not a new conversation here at W&M. I recognize that President Rowe has already released a statement outlining that the university does not intend to change that way that we invest, but I hope that moving forward you all will continue to give weight to student concerns regarding this issue.

Without complete information students have less ability to participate in constructive conversations around the discussion of our investments, so I hope that moving forward you all will seriously consider making that information more publicly available to our student body, recognizing the power that students hold within our community.

### **Educating and Empowering Democratic Leaders**

In my tenure as student body president I have been given ample opportunity to reflect on the importance of representation and Student Assembly's role as a democratic body. Throughout this past year students have remained steadfast in their commitment to advocating for the issues that they care about and pushing our institution to grow and evolve. As Student Assembly, our commitment will always be to promote student voices and encourage them to engage in our processes. We understand that the way that students engage with our body can shape the way that they engage in all democratic processes here at W&M, and beyond. Because of this, we believe that it is essential to do everything we can to be transparent and help students take advantage of the structures that are available to them. By doing this we hope that we are helping to instill confidence in our democratic systems and encouraging students to participate in democracy in all parts of their life.

Every academic spring term during the Student Assembly's elections, questions may be placed on the ballot for the student body to vote upon. There are three ways for a question to be posted on the ballot, but this year 301 students signed a petition and submitted their petition to our independent Elections Commission to have the following question be placed on the ballot:

*This referendum calls for The College of William & Mary to submit an audit of their endowment to determine the extent to which it is implicated in companies that uphold The State of Israel's system of apartheid and continued infliction of violence against Palestinians, and to immediately divest from such funds, as well as end institutional ties to such corporations.*

The full text of their referendum can be found at [this link](#). This election cycle received some of the highest participation from the student body that we have seen in recent years, which we can guess was at least in part due to the inclusion of this referendum and a contested student body president election. The referendum that I outlined above won a majority of student support with the following voting breakdown: Yes 56.44% (2036 votes), No 27.19% (981 votes), and Abstain 15.52% (560 votes).

President Rowe released a response to both this referendum and the [Ceasefire in Palestine Resolution](#) that our Student Assembly Senate passed on March 19th. Even with this response, I expect that student advocacy around these issues will continue to play a prominent role in campus advocacy. I share this to update you all, but also to provide a reflection on how I think we could all work to support and uplift the democratic processes where students are engaged.

Our student body is passionate and steadfast in their beliefs. A common theme that I often hear from the student body amidst these conversations is that they don't feel as though administrators are listening to their concerns or taking any meaningful action. While I recognize that student advocacy does not always persist through structures and channels that facilitate your engagement with it, I do believe that students have been making a more direct attempt to engage with administrators and the Board. That being said, many students still feel as though there has been a lack of adequate response to their concerns and as though their concerns are being brushed under the rug.

If our goal, as an institution, is to educate the next generation of leaders and democratic thinkers we need to hold ourselves to the highest standards of democratic engagement and collaboration here at W&M. If we do not empower student activists now when they advocate in our own community, we are losing the opportunity to encourage our student body to continue the type of civic participation that creates a more just and equitable world.

We have found ourselves in the midst of a time when disagreement is becoming more and more difficult for students, and our country more broadly. I hope that as students continue in their advocacy efforts, we can work together to ensure that we support space for conversation and show the student body that their voices are a valued part of university conversations.

The university has already shown a commitment to encouraging conversations across differences, but there is always room to grow. This semester has highlighted a number of scenarios in which it has been difficult for students to participate in productive and meaningful civic discourse. Activism and discourse should not take place on only virtual platforms, and we hope that moving forward the university can help us find more ways to engage students in constructive civic dialogue.