



# WILLIAM & MARY

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## REPORT OF THE W&M FACULTY REPRESENTATIVE APRIL 2023

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W&M BOARD OF VISITORS, FACULTY REPRESENTATIVE

Several crucial searches for key administrative positions are underway, including those for the Chief Operating Officer and for the Dean of our largest unit, Arts & Sciences. There are faculty representatives on both search committees. Many faculty have been engaged in meeting in open fora with the candidates for both positions. It has been heartening to hear the candidates coming from other institutions of higher education speak of their admiration for William & Mary, and of the excellent reputation our university has around the country. It seems that our external brand continues to be strong.

The leadership of Faculty Assembly has been working closely with the Provost and members of her team to respond to the Board's request for a report on faculty productivity. This will be presented at the Academic Affairs committee at this meeting. To my mind, this is a "snapshot" of work that is always being done at the university, and which continues. The work of our faculty is regularly assessed: internally, in student evaluations for every course, in annual merit evaluations of teaching, research, and service, in rigorous and detailed reviews for candidates for tenure and promotion, in selection of faculty for prizes and awards, and externally, when grant proposals are scrutinized, when scholarly articles and books are peer-reviewed, when speakers are selected for prominent national and international conferences, for national prizes, or when elected to fellowship in their professional societies. The work of gathering information for this report has made it clear that, while we "track" data on most of these measures of productivity, some data are not routinely captured, so the picture may be incomplete. Tools and procedures are being developed to improve this situation.

The word "Productivity" raises the question: what is our Product? Higher education, of course, is not retail – we don't produce easily countable widgets, nor can we measure quality by our price to earnings ratio or position in the stock market. On the Research/Scholarship side of a faculty member's responsibilities, there are certainly identifiable products – these include scholarly or scientific papers, books, patents, works of literature or in the creative or performing arts, *etc.* While many of these can certainly be counted, it is hard to imagine an ideal way to compare their relative importance: all may have impact on our health, develop our economy, improve our understandings of ourselves, of human societies, of our history, of the natural universe around us, or they may bring joy and entertainment. The sheer diversity of scholarly and research activity at a university such as William & Mary requires us to accept that the metrics of excellence will vary considerably from discipline to discipline. How can one compare the importance of a paper in a top chemistry journal announcing a new synthesis path for an organic molecule to an article in a law journal assessing evolution of the principle of *stare decisis* in state courts, or to a new and visionary electronic music composition, or to an analysis of the relative efficacy of different bond investment tactics? How many peer-reviewed scientific articles are equivalent to a book on

the history of the Caribbean? These are not easy questions. One must often rely on the evaluation of expert peers within a discipline to assess the quality and impact of academic work; often those experts are external to the university – this is the “industry standard” in higher education. Of course, relying too heavily on external review would place undue burden on those external peers, as this represents unpaid service work for them.

On the Teaching side of our responsibilities, measuring the “product” is also fraught with challenges. The easier things to quantify – how many students take a course, how many credit hours – provide only a part of the complete picture. One can also look to the success of students in being accepted to law or medical school, to top graduate schools, or of landing their first job, but those miss the longer-term effects – do they become leaders/innovators in their chosen fields? Do they have the intellectual skills to master the positions they will rise to a decade or three after they graduate? Are they involved, informed, and ethical citizens? These are not easy things to measure, but I submit that they are important gauges of success.... and, of course, they reflect the contributions of not one faculty member, but of the many who taught or mentored a given student.

A few colleagues have expressed concern that some of our students are convinced that if they dutifully show up in the classroom, do the reading, and hand in their assignments, then they are entitled to the “product”, i.e., a high grade and the credential of a degree. They view the education as simply a product that they (or their parents) have purchased, and that the goal is a simple transaction rather than a transfer of learning.

I like to think of the Teaching aspect of our jobs not as a product, but as a service industry. The university provides a service, that is, access to the tools with which to become educated: expert and caring faculty, libraries, laboratories, information technology, etc. The actual learning is done in a partnership of the student and the faculty (and with other students, with researchers, coaches, support staff...). In an imperfect analogy, one can pay for membership in a gym, and hire a personal trainer, but one can't lose those extra 15 lbs without investing the sweat equity – no matter how skilled the trainer. Similarly, the student will not earn the true benefits of the education without investing the intellectual sweat equity required. Most William & Mary students understand this, I believe, but increasingly it seems in our culture that some people believe higher education is simply a “widget” to be bought.

None of this is to deny the importance of efforts assessing productivity, as a means to ensure that resources are allocated effectively, to celebrate and reward top performers, and to identify areas for improvement and growth. Rather, it is to point out some of the challenges in such an effort – it is far from being a trivial problem.