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William & Mary Athletics: Returning to the College's Core Values

A Proposal

For an institution as old as ours, turbulence is not new. We have witnessed war, financial crises, purchase by the state, and a myriad of adversities and adjustments across our 327-year history. These include controversies surrounding sports.

On August 10, 1951 William & Mary Athletic Director and head football coach Rube McCray, along with men's basketball coach Barney Wilson, resigned following [a sports scandal](#) in which the New York Times reported "athletes received credit for work that they did not perform and grades were altered on incoming high school transcripts to make athletes eligible for admission." One month later, President John E. Pomfret, too, submitted his resignation. He failed to address the matter "with dispatch" and lost the confidence of the Board of Visitors.

By the late-1970s, succumbing to the pressure of football enthusiasts, the Board of Visitors attempted to impose plans that would [expand Cary Field](#)—now Zable Stadium—to 30,000 seats. Nine out of ten students and faculty opposed it. After three years of boycotts, rallies, a lawsuit, and other forms of protest, the NCAA downgraded the football team from Division I-A to I-AA, and any expansion of the stadium turned moot. A modest renovation took place instead.

These blips teach us two crucial lessons: (1) sports at William & Mary have long been integral, but never central, to our identity; and (2) the College community will not accept the compromise, or any perception of compromise, to our academic integrity.

We have demonstrated, in response to our current debacle, that our values remain unwavering. Equally, we have demonstrated that any process that excludes honesty and transparency will fail. The sudden deletion of seven sports teams never concerned COVID-19; it never concerned plans for cultivating department-wide competitive excellence; it never concerned Title IX compliance; and it never concerned our least expensive sports being too costly.

The cuts resulted from three things: structural issues, oversized egos, and misplaced priorities. Together they fashioned a delusion of commercial grandeur that stakeholders have made clear they oppose. Priorities, gradually, are being reexamined and the most self-serving individuals have either resigned or are beginning to learn the extent to which they will be scrutinized.

Structural issues remain. So, too, do misunderstandings of Title IX and unanswered questions concerning the exact metrics the College used to conclude which teams to keep and which teams to cut; and, by extension, why we continue to sanction a nebulous, potentially flawed rationale.

As a result, William & Mary has been thrust into a national conversation about collegiate sports, and it has left us with two disparate options: we can lead or we can follow. If we elect to follow we need only cite the choices of other institutions, copy their excuses, and join the status quo—all of which, to our collective humiliation, we have done. Followers need not continue reading. This proposal is for leaders.

Before proceeding, there are a number of broad but fundamental understandings we must share.

1. The notion that by providing less funding per athlete than our peer institutions provide, we are demonstrably failing them, must end. We could just as surely make the argument that the average spending per athlete at other schools is excessively high. Not all athletes at all schools need or want the same access to support staff or gratuitous services.
2. Sports is not our lifeblood. Athletes and coaches come to William & Mary to persevere, not to be pampered. Amenities are nice, but adversity builds leaders. William & Mary builds leaders.
3. Rather than be distracted by ostentation we must focus on essentials. Outside funding, recruiting, and competitive excellence will all decline for sports that were once integrated by gender—gymnastics, swimming, and track—but proceed without men. The College will be required to spend more of its own money to obtain weaker results. Travel costs, facility upkeep, and coaching salaries will not change without male athletes competing. In all respects, the presence of male athletes in integrated sports benefits everyone.
4. No legitimate financial argument exists for cutting men's gymnastics, men's swimming, or men's indoor or outdoor track and field that does not exist for any other men's team. According to the College's own accounting, in 2019 men's gymnastics supplied 99.88% of its expenses, men's swimming 64.42%, and men's indoor and outdoor track 53.29%. [The figures for track](#) were vastly misconstrued. In reality, cutting these four men's teams *combined* would have saved the College \$96,281 last year.
5. We cannot maintain excessively large rosters that support athletes who are unlikely to see a meaningful gameday experience at the expense of entire championship-level programs. Teams take precedence over players.
6. Until a detailed explanation is given for why gymnastics, swimming, and track and field were targeted, we must stop perpetuating discussions of "the affected men's teams" and adopt the mindset that every men's team is affected. All are cut until all are restored.

In addition to these points, it is imperative that we also share an understanding of Title IX.

1. [50 years ago](#), prior to Title IX, men comprised 58% of all college students in America. Today they comprise 44%. [Across campuses](#), 54% of all NCAA teams exist for women, while 56% of all NCAA athletes are men.
2. Title IX consists of [three tests](#). Compliance with any test authorizes compliance overall. These tests include:
 - a. Substantial Proportionality: Are participation rates of men and women at a school proportional to enrollment at the school?
 - b. History and Continuing Practice: Has the school made a good faith expansion of athletic opportunities through its response to developing interests at the school?
 - c. Fully and Effectively Accommodating Interests and Abilities: Are there concrete and viable interests among the underrepresented sex that should be accommodated by the school?
3. [Most universities](#) that comply with Title IX do so by using the third test. Under this test, three factors assess the feasibility of adding teams for the underrepresented sex.
 - a. Is there sufficient unmet interest to support an intercollegiate team?
 - b. Is there sufficient ability to sustain an intercollegiate team?
 - c. Is there a reasonable expectation of competition for the team?
4. The answer to all three questions must be yes. Thus, if a member of a current club team wants to elevate her sport to varsity status, similar interest and ability must exist among enough other individuals; and enough other teams must exist within the school's normal competitive region. There is no single survey or set of interviews that a school must use to exclude this possibility, but rather a collection of legitimate assessments.
5. When William & Mary slashed three women's teams, it immediately violated test three and further violated test one. Sports offerings had grown less proportional to enrollment over time, but no club athletes had demonstrated the three criteria in point three above. Sports funding for women had also grown less proportional to sports funding for men, but the disparity had gone unchallenged. When entire teams of the underrepresented sex were cut, numerous elite female athletes were in a position to immediately answer "yes" to all three questions above, making test three unviable as well.
6. If Title IX were as rigid as we often interpret it to be, it would not include three options for achieving compliance.

Title IX accepts the possibility that interest between sexes, across regions, and within sports, might not be proportional, and schools are not to be held responsible for such discrepancies. Quoting the [U.S. Department of Education](#), "the elimination of teams is a disfavored practice because it is contrary to the spirit of Title IX. When the results of an investigation show noncompliance, OCR's policy in negotiating compliance agreements is to seek remedies that do not involve the elimination of teams." The intention of Title IX has never been to achieve equity through the reduction of opportunities for men, but to increase them for women.

William & Mary may choose to ignore test three, but in bringing the lawsuit against the College the attorney for the plaintiffs identified no other members of the underrepresented sex, from club or intramural teams, with grievances against the College other than the numerous varsity athletes from the eliminated teams, and thus is [not prohibited](#) from reinstating all remaining cut teams.

Today, the College can demonstrate its compliance with test three *and* reinstate its men's teams. [Any attempt](#) by the College to dismiss or discredit the third test within Title IX is not the failing of the lawsuit or of Title IX, but of the College itself.

Resolution of the Title IX lawsuit stipulates the following four terms.

1. "The university will publicly announce that it is rescinding its decision to eliminate women's gymnastics, women's swimming, and women's volleyball."
2. "The three women's teams will be treated equitably with the other varsity teams."
3. William & Mary "will complete a gender equity review and develop a gender equity plan envisioned by the Tribe 2025 strategic plan no later than August 30, 2021."
4. "The completed gender equity plan will ensure that the university is Title IX compliant during the 2022-23 academic year and future years."

The plaintiffs expressed their collective desire for the men's teams to be reinstated. The College, however, faces a funding hurdle. It must add roughly 18 to 37 new scholarships for women. Or, it can subtract that number from men. Presently, William & Mary falls half a million dollars shy on the funding it provides to female athletes—when compared *only* with football and basketball. Our issue centers on proportional funding even more than it does on proportional participation.

Until we reach an understanding of the points above, which include reinstatement of all teams and equitable funding for both sexes, the rest of this proposal remains meaningless. We cannot reimagine our Athletic Department or athletics in general until the College commits itself to all its varsity athletes, fully and equitably.

If we were to build a new department, of our own making, what would it look like? How would it be structured? Who would answer to whom? In what ways would it differ from departments at most institutions? The following proposals are skeletal. They are fashioned as a springboard to dialogue, a catalyst for brainstorming. They should be scrutinized. And rather than prioritize our outlook through the lens of "peer" institutions, they should be reviewed from the perspective of what is best for us, William & Mary—now and in the future.

It is helpful to divide these considerations into two parts—first, Key Players and Constituents; second, Structure and Management.

KEY PLAYERS AND CONSTITUENTS

Athletic Director

At this juncture, William & Mary requires an Athletic Director who understands the community. We need someone from the current faculty who, for years, has demonstrated integrity, growth, passion, leadership, vulnerability, creativity, transparency, decency, a sharpened comprehension of the College's values, and earned the trust of generations of athletes, coaches, administrators, and alumni across sports and departments. [Peel Hawthorne](#) should be the next Athletic Director.

Ms. Hawthorne, who served for a quarter century as the head coach of the field hockey team before becoming an administrator in the department, should lead more as a dean than a director. Rather than maintain the current model of Athletic Director reporting directly to the President—the prevailing NCAA practice that in part contributed to rising salaries and outsized influence—the College should consider revamping this insular reporting structure. Director of Giving and Alumni Liaison should report to Matthew Lambert, Vice President for University Advancement; Director of Finance should report to Amy Sebring, Chief Operating Officer; Ms. Hawthorne, Dean of Athletics, should report to Ginger Ambler, Vice President of Student Affairs; and so on.

By restructuring the reporting framework, Athletics will be better integrated into the operations of the College, less trapped within its own groupthink, more accountable, and more trusted.

Athletic Administrators

The Athletic Department has grown dramatically in the last three years, despite no new sports being added or departmental capacities being expanded. Some individuals have been promoted in a short period, further adding to the Department's operations. This structure needs evaluation to ensure accountability to its effectiveness, to guarantee efficiencies, and to reduce costs.

Further, we need to assure our administration is comprised of individuals who fully understand the needs of the College and the expectations of their profession. As drafted above, employees of the administration must report not only to the Dean of Athletics but also to an administrator, relevant to their domain, beyond the Department.

Coaches

As with administrators, we must examine whether we need the number of coaches we employ. Reducing the staff for football (12) and men's basketball (5) is not ideal but should be reviewed. Coaches must also take part in advancing, or preserving, financial sustainability for their sport. This can include operating in conjunction with a fundraising coordinator, a marketing strategist, an alumni liaison, or other professionals who set short- and long-range targets and outline steps to achieving them. Finally, all coaches should receive contracts, always.

Athletes

Our baseline belief at William & Mary is that the classroom is primary; all students are scholars first and foremost. Many students seek additional achievement beyond their academic pursuits. Some serve in student government, some write for the Flat Hat, some participate in Greek life, some give campus tours, some represent the Honor Council, and some compete in a sport. Together, all are One Tribe.

Yet, what separates varsity athletes from most extracurricular pursuits is the time commitment each athlete makes to their chosen sport, and the importance of coordinated group training. Though the NCAA currently sets strict limits on the time athletes may spend honing their skills, the College should consider opportunities to maximize team practice efficacy and participation.

Granting early class registration to varsity athletes would minimize chances of missed practices resulting from conflicts with training schedules. Another option includes designating a window each afternoon (for example, 3:30-6:30) during which time no classes convene. This is already in practice at other schools, including at some Ivy League institutions. Any programing changes should serve to enhance team performance and reduce additional burdens on coaches.

Tribe Club and Alumni Engagement

The Tribe Club has long been the College's chief donation magnet for the Athletic Department. It is a loosely structured entity of no more than 40 individuals, primarily alumni of the College, mostly former athletes, all supportive of Athletics, who attend meetings and organize events aimed at expanding outreach, cultivating relationships, and increasing engagement. All members contribute a minimum of \$5,000 a year. Until recently, few, if any, understood or even realized the depth of mistrust that had built under the former Athletic Director, Samantha Huge.

There was no transparency. The Tribe Club received minimal communication from Athletics. Ms. Huge discontinued the Club's outreach events, not only in Washington and New York City, but in Williamsburg and Richmond. And among alumni from 19 of 23 teams, giving declined—in some cases by margins of six digits for a single team.

As we address the mistrust to which the Tribe Club fell victim, we have two clear opportunities.

1. We can create 501(c)(3) non-profit entities for each team. Some have already done this. Non-profits are not intrinsically necessary, but they would help restore trust in the donors whose funds the Tribe Club solicits. It would greatly diminish funding to the Tribe Club, as gifts would flow to specific sports teams, but it would by no means diminish the value of the Tribe Club's work. The Tribe Club could then focus on expansion, engagement, events—"friend-raising"—and promoting the spirit and authenticity of our teams.

2. As we revive and reinvigorate our community, we need our senior members to identify, recruit, and groom younger generations to carry on their work, to foster new connections. The Tribe Club should include at least one alumnus/a from each team who builds a web within their respective sport that consists of at least two alumni/ae from every decade. With greater representation and broader networks in place, teams will be better equipped to transcend coaching changes and other disruptions by maintaining healthy engagement.

STRUCTURE AND MANAGEMENT

Division and Conference

William & Mary is a small but highly competitive Division-I school. This is part of our history and identity. Division-I includes the brand under which we have recruited athletes for decades and the athletic experience we profess to deliver. We have no reason to consider alternatives.

There are, however, benefits to leaving the CAA. These benefits, along with the drawbacks and the requirements, should be reviewed and measured in detail. We can agree here that the CAA lacks comparable academic institutions to William & Mary; and William & Mary's chief priority is academics. Associating ourselves with analogous institutions offers us the exposure we seek. Athletically, given our overall enrollment, current funding constraints, and scholastic disposition, we should start by asking ourselves, realistically, what are our primary goals and in what milieu might we best achieve them?

If we do consider leaving the CAA, the Patriot League is the only conference worth joining.

Strategic Planning

The College must seek broader input on impending and long-range strategic planning processes. The administration must ensure fair and balanced participation along each sport's respective base of current student-athletes, staff, and alumni. Any single group not participating or being heard should not be judged as a lack of interest or investment, but as a lack of offering adequate notice, timeframe, reminders, and emphasis on the importance of participating. Communication efforts should not conclude until a defined and equitable quantity of voice has been heard across parties over an appropriate and respectful period for feedback.

During department evaluations, we must review sports not as individual entities but in harmony, as they exist alongside each other as One Family. Similarly, fundraising and tracking metrics should be monitored viewing the teams as One Tribe. Additionally, fundraising for Athletics should not be framed or monitored as independent from broader College fundraising efforts. Financial presentations should be clear, frequent, self-evident, and consistent, with all rationales based in factual, documented, easily accessible data.

Operations

For three years, Ms. Huge permitted no dialogue and no dissent. She offered no explanations and sought no suggestions. Athletics lost sight of its identity; sports teams resented each other more than they supported each other; failure and anything that might resemble it became feared; responsibilities were duplicated and unchallenged; financial schemes became commonplace; violations accumulated; operations were hidden.

We cannot rebuild without checks and balances, integrity, and a mutual vision of who we are. We are not so myopic and so zealous that we are content sacrificing some sports to bolster others or to permit the mismanagement of legally endowed funds to accomplish clandestine motives. Far more than fundraising and trust will suffer if we continue down such a path. We must expect and demand an honorable, open system.

Title IX Compliance

Despite the College currently being able to reinstate its men's teams, it must, within two years, demonstrate substantial proportionality in opportunities and in funding. In order to achieve this, the College must engage some combination of the following options.

1. Enroll more men. The percentage of women enrolled at the College grows every year. Women now comprise 58% of the student body; the freshmen class has 61% women.
2. Gradually increase roster spots by 10% for women and decrease them by 20% for men.
3. Begin raising funds for another women's team, such as softball, rowing, or triathlon, and do so with the support of football and baseball—expensive teams with no female analog.
4. Add 18 to 37 women's scholarships; subtract 18 to 37 men's scholarships; or reallocate between nine and 19 scholarships from men to women to strike necessary proportionality.

Marketing and Branding

Using virtually any college search website that allows users to enter a wide range of parameters, our niche reveals itself. We are the only small to medium liberal arts college that is both public and boasts exceptional academics, and competes in Division-I. The College must own this, advertise this, and capitalize off of this—proudly. Countless students seek such a combination. No other institution can provide it.

As we market ourselves, academics must remain the foundation of our brand just as amateurism must remain the hallmark of our athletic ideology. It is the College, not Athletics, that must lead our marketing strategy, both internally—showing pride in our abundant and sundry triumphs—and externally—increasing our visibility in such states as Connecticut, New York, Pennsylvania, North Carolina, Florida, Illinois, Texas, the west coast, and abroad.

The College has arrived at a crossroads. Had cuts never been made, we would have continued down an appalling path of inequity, violations, mismanagement, waste, departmental turnover, secrecy, lies, internal competition, resentment, division, and distrust. We have witnessed the law of unintended consequences, and we will surely witness it again. Yet, in the midst of this storm, if we commit to honesty, unity, equity, responsibility, knowledge, selflessness, respect—a return to the College’s core values—we will be greeted by a brighter tomorrow.

There will need to be sacrifices. There will need to be tolerance. There will need to be dialogue and reflection and a clear understanding of both the law and of our shared goals for the College and its student-athletes. There will need to be real leaders. There will need to be wise leaders. There will need to be leaders who are just as prepared to nurture and instruct as they are willing to admit mistakes, take responsibility, and improve. There will need to be leaders who listen—not with the intent to pacify, but with the intent to progress.

The men’s teams can, and must, be reinstated. The women’s teams can, and must, obtain equity. We can achieve the former today, and we can achieve the latter in due time. It will not be easy. There will be growing pains. There will be disputes. But we will be stronger for the experience, we will be fairer for the result, and we will be wiser for the future. We will set a new precedent for collegiate sports. Rather than succumb to hopelessness and defeat, universities nationwide will know a beacon of possibility within a tempest of doubt. They will look to us, point to us, remember us. “William & Mary,” they will say. “William & Mary turned the tide.”

We must simply show them—and ourselves—that it is possible.

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