

## **A last conversation with William and Mary president Taylor Reveley**

By Amelia Heymann May 30, 2018

A few weeks before he moves out of the office where he has worked for 10 years as president of the College of William and Mary, Taylor Reveley sits in one of the leather wingback chairs in his office, ready to talk about his tenure.

While the shelves and tables are crowded with books and papers, nothing is out of place. On May 31, Reveley will leave this office for the last time and the new president, Katherine Rowe, will take over June 1.

Reveley has said he looks forward to sitting in the shade and enjoying the view during his impending retirement. But just now, he is not looking toward the future so much as reflecting on the past.

### **How did your leadership goals shift from when you were in a temporary leadership role to a permanent one?**

“No change whatsoever. Because when I became the interim president the rector of the board said ‘Don’t act like you’re interim, act like you’re actually legitimate and move on,’ so I did, at light speed.

Though the first thing that had to happen was to work hard to bring the William and Mary family back together again, because there had been a lot of disruption, discord over a number of things that happened over the prior couple years ... and that happened over the course of a couple of months, probably far more quickly than I would have imagined. It turned out everyone’s basic loyalty was to William and Mary and they just wanted to see the university come together and start moving forward again, so that is what we did.”

### **Day in, day out, what is the hardest part of your job and what’s the best part, the part that makes you want to wake up in the morning?**

“Well, what makes you want to wake up in the morning is the opportunity to see what you can do for this genuinely magnificent university to help it move forward. So when you get up in the morning you look in the mirror, you don’t wonder ‘Is what I do today going to make any difference?’ All you wonder is ‘Am I going to help or am I going to hurt today?’ That’s a great feeling. If you really believe in the school, and you believe you do have a chance to make a difference for the better, that’s a powerful motivator.

In terms of what’s the hardest aspect of the job, and this is true for the president of any college or university, it’s to avoid having your agenda hijacked by other people. One of the most important things you are supposed to do is decide what you need to be focusing on for the good of the institution. So you got those things in mind, but every day people are coming to you, over the internet, in writing, over the phone, in person, saying ‘Oh, William and Mary really needs to do this or that,’ or ‘This is a huge opportunity or big difficulty you’ve got to focus on next.’ You can easily, every day, end up having spent most of your time dealing with what’s come in as opposed to the core issues that you are trying to push forward. Really hard to stay on those core issues, but if you don’t you’re not going forward.”

**How are students different today than they were when you first came to William and Mary?**

“When I first came, I was dealing with law students 20 years ago, and there has been an enormous amount of change over those 20 years.

For starters, 20 years ago students didn’t have all these machines. You know, might have had a laptop, a computer, but they didn’t have these phones that they were constantly looking at and did all sorts of things for them. So one big change has been the extent to which students are focused on all the communication equipment that they now have.

And of course, over those 20 years, the world has impinged on student’s lives in a way that was not the case when I first got here. 9/11 was, a long time ago, but it wasn’t before I got here, and I think after 9/11 and all of the wars the United States has become involved in since then, has had a real impact on students.

And there have been the evolving campus issues here and everywhere else. Interest in sustainability, the concern about mental illness and how to deal with it, through all of the sexual harassment and assault issues, to racial issues. Many, many different sorts of issues, and they have an immediacy these days for students because something can happen 3,000 miles away on another campus but be felt here through social media, almost as if it had happened here. That’s very new, that didn’t use to be the case at all. So social media I think has had a real impact on students, and everyone else, but particularly students.

But basically, William and Mary students are the same from student generation to student generation. They are always smart. I think compared to most college students at other places, they work hard, they’re continuous, they’re actually interested in their coursework and they tend to be really nice. That’s a wonderful set of characteristics. It was true 20 years ago, it’s true now, its going to be true 20 years from now. It’s just the way William and Mary students are.”

**You made a controversial choice in 2015 to remove the plaques with Confederate symbols on them. What was the backlash like?**

“Didn’t get much backlash, bottom line. I think most people understand that the time has come for the battle flag of the Confederacy and references to things like ‘The lost cause,’ that they need to go.

Now, whatever you do in American life these days, there’s someone who’s not going to like it, no matter what it is. You just roll with it. You do what you need to do and roll with the flack.

One of the characteristics you’ve got to have if you’re going to be a college or university president is resilience. If you can’t roll with the flack, get out of the job because you can’t do it. Now that doesn’t mean you like the flack, and its perfectly OK whine and complain to the dog and say whatever you want to say. You can even write emails saying what you want to say and then erase them, but you’ve got to be able to not be done in by flack.”

**One of the things you had said was you were going to put up a plaque with the names of Union and Confederate soldiers from William and Mary, but there isn’t one up yet. What is the progress with that?**

“We’re making progress. We will do something with a really magnificent plaque that will list the names of all of the people, South and North, who fought in the war. Students, faculty, staff, alumni, but we are still working on it.”

Later, Brian Whitson, a spokesman for William and Mary, said one of the things the college wants to do is ensure they present the new plaque with the historical context of William and Mary's place within the Civil War, so they are working on a historical display which will be combined with the plaque and placed in the information center of the Wren Building later this summer.

**You have taken steps to improve inclusivity on campus. What have you done to that end in the greater Williamsburg area? Also, what have you done to improve William and Mary's relationship with the greater Williamsburg area?**

"Well, I think in terms of diversity and inclusion, one of the focuses of our Lemon Project has been to reach out to the community and bring them in, and make clear that we understand that there was a great deal of alienation from William and Mary among our black citizens and we want that to end ... and that has been our major means of outreach to the community on diversity and inclusion issues. I think it's very clear to the community now where we stand and what we're trying to accomplish. But the greatest effort on diversity and inclusion obviously centers on the campus."

**How has the ongoing shift in the consistency of state funding affected your job as well as the college as a whole?**

"One of the first things I said when I became interim president was, 'We basically must fend for ourselves. Any thought that the state is going to provide for us as it once did is not realistic, and we've got to get on the stick and do it ourselves. Which means, among other things, we have to get a lot better at raising money.' And ultimately that led to our billion-dollar campaign, which no public school our size has ever attempted. So one thing you have to do is raise money and you have to get very good at raising money.

The second thing you have to do, and this concerns what happens on campus, you've got to get more productive, and that means some costs have got to be cut. On some costs, the rate of increase has to be slowed. You've got to find ways for new efficiencies, got to shift money occasionally from less compelling uses to more compelling uses, and you've got to find new ways to make a buck, principally online.

So you've got philanthropy over here, you got campus productivity over here, and then you have to be willing to raise tuition coupled with need-based financial aid for the families that need help. And if you do those three things effectively over time you'll be able to take care of yourself, and I think we've done all three and made progress with all three."

**We've heard about the conversation about dropping "college" from the name of William and Mary to appeal to a wider audience. What are your thoughts on that?**

"I have very firm thoughts. I think what I've said is we ought to call the undergraduate program 'the college' and the larger whole of William and Mary 'the university.' And I have explained why," Reveley said, laughing. Last Fall, Reveley [wrote a column](#) for William and Mary Alumni Magazine about the subject.

“But I didn’t bring it to the point of a decision because it’s clear a lot more conversation in the alumni body needs to go on before we do something like that ... this is something Harvard, Yale, Princeton dealt with. All were colleges, all now call themselves universities. In Harvard and Yale’s case, they call their undergraduate program college. So my guess is in the fullness of time something along these lines will happen ... In the meantime, we will roll right on.”

**If you had time to do one more thing or to finish up one last project, what would it be?**

“That would be extremely hard to decide ... If I had a magic wand and could extend it, to get one of the rocks I’ve been rolling up the hill and over the top, it would be to just finish the (For the Bold) campaign.

And I did, as I have done for many years, asked the Easter Rabbit for, well I was actually rather aggressive with the Easter Rabbit and asked for a billion. In cash, unrestricted, right now, even though that’s far, far more than we need. I think we’re at \$765 million. What did the rabbit do? Chocolate eggs wrapped in gold foil. I would have loved to finish the campaign. Started it, worked like a dog, would like to have finished it myself. But the rabbit didn’t come through ... that’s what I really would have loved to have nailed.

I think in all other spheres things are rolling along just fine or we’ve already accomplished what we needed to accomplish, but William and Mary must grow its endowment and must grow it as quickly as we can and I would have like to finish this campaign. But it will get finished, and Katherine Rowe will finish it.”