

W&M's unique selling point

By Karla Kraynak Bruno

ARLINGTON

Here's a recap for those of you playing along but distracted by Christmas shopping: The College of William & Mary has been undergoing a faculty-driven curriculum redesign since 2010.

In September, Provost Michael Halleran announced publicly at the Board of Visitors meeting that it would take two more years of work before a new curriculum could be implemented. Rector Jeffrey Trammell told me personally and emphatically during the same BOV meeting that there would be "no vote this year" on the curriculum.

And yet, on Feb. 5 the Arts and Sciences faculty will vote on the proposed curriculum.

The latest version of the curriculum redesign has one umbrella for "Social and Human Understanding." With the parameters outlined in the steering committee's Nov. 30 Executive Summary, this means a student could graduate without ever having taken a history course of any kind.

This would be a travesty.

In all the conversations I've had with faculty or read about in the Gazette, not one history professor has voiced a complaint. Not one.

Which leaves one breathless, given the iconic history of William & Mary. And means that William & Mary is missing out on one colossal branding opportunity.

Instead of trying to be like Johns Hopkins (the undergraduate research king) or any other generic liberal arts university following the "We Are One World" global fad in higher education, why, oh, why are we not using our Early American History bona fides to full advantage as a branding device?

Intense, content-rich experience in Early American History is what helps make William & Mary unique among liberal arts

colleges and universities. It defines us in ways no other subject can or could. As "public ivy," we have no peer.

Why is this unique quality, our rich historic legacy, being ignored by the provost who regurgitates ad nauseum his quest to make W&M a leading research and global university? Why are the Board of Visitors and president obtuse to the loss of an unmatched branding opportunity?

Surely businessmen and women of experience understand the power of identifying a niche — what's called a "unique selling point" in the business world — and making it the cornerstone.

W&M enjoys a close relationship with Colonial Williamsburg in the National Institute of American History & Democracy (NIAHD), dedicated to the study of the American past, public history, material culture and museum studies. That's unique.

The Omohundro Institute on Early American History & Culture has been around since 1943 and offers colloquia, conferences, and fellowships as another joint venture between the college and Colonial Williamsburg. Those of you familiar with the William & Mary Quarterly will know that that august, internationally revered publication of American history comes from this Institute. That is also unique.

Bill Kelso, originator of the Historic Jamestowne archaeological digs, serves as faculty for W&M, offering unparalleled knowledge on a dig that is current and (almost) within spitting distance of Lake Matoaka — Matoaka being one of Pocahon-

tas' four names.

The argument that undergraduates come to W&M with all the American history they need goes out the proverbial window because it assumes W&M could never offer anything of value to undergrads in American history studies.

That argument not only goes out the window, but lands with a resounding *thud* when you factor in the ever-increasing number of international students being courted and taken in as undergraduates.

How much American history do international students have in their school records? Is it not worthwhile to teach them about American exceptionalism, or at least

the Constitution? Why aren't W&M history professors hammering on these points to the provost, the president, and the Board of Visitors?

Requiring that all undergrads take at least one course in American history would seal the unique selling point for W&M, giving us a brand that would never go sour. Students will surely find that their high school AP classes were only an appetizer to the full course meal offered by our W&M history department.

Final recap: The faculty has the power to offer juicy filet mignon but is instead about to vote in favor of bankrupt Twinkies. They need to rethink, reboot and recalibrate the proposed curriculum redesign into a showcase, at least in part, for William & Mary's most cherished asset and unique selling point: American history.

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