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January 30, 2007

Michael K. Powell
Rector, Board of Visitors
The College of William and Mary
P.O. Box 8795
Williamsburg, VA 23187-8795

Dear Mr. Powell and Members of the Board of Visitors:

I write on behalf of the American Council of Trustees and Alumni, a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization committed to academic freedom, excellence, and accountability on our nation's college campuses. ACTA has a network of alumni and trustees from institutions across the country, including the College of William and Mary. We have followed the controversy over William and Mary president Gene Nichol's recent decision to remove the cross from the altar of the Wren Chapel and write to express deep unease about how he has handled an issue that involves the history and traditions of the nation's second-oldest institution of higher learning—and how he has disregarded the opinions of thousands of concerned alumni.

This is our understanding of the facts—which, if it is in error, we encourage you to correct. The Wren Building is the oldest academic building in continuous use in the United States. The structure has been destroyed by fire three times and each time it has been rebuilt. The William and Mary website takes great pride in highlighting the historic campus and Wren Chapel for students, their families and the public and describes it as, “for more than three centuries... ‘the soul of the College.’” According to the website, “generations of William and Mary students have attended classes and lectures, enjoyed meals, and attended chapel services” in the Wren Chapel. In the late 1930s, Bruton Parish Episcopal Church donated a brass altar cross for use in the Chapel. For nearly 70 years, the “Wren Cross,” as it became known, has been habitually displayed on the chapel altar and it is featured in one of the pictures on the public website. During that time, the College handled objections to the cross practically and sensibly: Any group using the chapel could ask to have it removed for the duration of its stay.

However, President Nichol decided in October of last year to discard this pragmatic policy and ordered that the cross be displayed on the altar only when specifically requested—precisely reversing the previous policy. We gather that he ordered this change without first consulting with the College's faculty, students, staff, campus ministers, alumni, or Board of Visitors. A rationale was publicly available only after the fact, when the student newspaper *The Flat Hat* published an e-mail message that Melissa Engimann, assistant director for the historic campus, sent to a group of volunteer student tour guides. "In order to make the Wren Chapel less of a faith-specific space, and to make it more welcoming to students, faculty, staff, and visitors of all faiths, the cross has been removed from the altar area," she informed them.

After Engimann's message was made public, the cross's disappearance occasioned much debate on campus, in the local community, and among William and Mary's alumni. President Nichol publicly defended his order in a brief e-mail message to the campus community on October 27. "Our chapel, like our entire campus, must be welcoming to all," he wrote, adding that "a recognition of the full dignity of each member of our diverse community is vital." Although he encouraged "a broader College discussion of how the ancient chapel can reflect our best values," he did not offer to rescind his decision pending such discussion and instead has convened a committee to discuss the role of religion in public colleges and universities.

President Nichol has called the Wren Chapel "the most ennobling and inspiring place on one of the most remarkable campuses in the world." He objects, however, to the presence of "a powerful religious symbol" at the center of the chapel, arguing that it generates feelings of ostracism and exclusion among those who do not share in the Christian tradition.

President Nichol made two concessions on December 20. He offered to commission a plaque that would acknowledge the chapel's Anglican history and the College's Christian origins. He also offered to allow the Wren Cross to be placed on display all day on Sundays. However, neither of President Nichol's concessions resolves the problems he created in unilaterally overturning a policy that had successfully accommodated a diverse campus community for decades and one that acknowledged the unique historical identity of the Wren Chapel in William and Mary's history. We also note that his policy stands in opposition to that of the University of Virginia, whose chapel houses a cross that is governed by a policy similar to the one William and Mary used to have.

Further, President Nichol's decision stands in opposition to the expressed will of thousands of William and Mary alumni. We understand that over 3,200 alumni—a remarkable number—have expressed their displeasure at the website savethewrencross.org, and a significant number of William and Mary alumni in ACTA's national network have contacted us with similar concerns. We respectfully submit that this huge outpouring of discontent should be of concern.

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Our concern is not just for one college but for all of higher education. In recent years, as other institutions have abandoned beloved institutional traditions, William and Mary has stood firm, recognizing and appreciating its unique historical identity—while welcoming a diverse community and being open to all. The Board of Visitors has a responsibility—to students, faculty, staff, and alumni—to review this matter at its upcoming meeting. Due to the concerns outlined above and the significant negative media attention engendered by President Nichol’s decision, it is properly a subject of Board oversight.

William and Mary has a unique past and a history that has, for centuries, attracted students and visitors from around the world to the Wren Chapel and William and Mary’s special educational experience. As fiduciaries, the Visitors have an obligation to preserve and protect William and Mary’s identity and reputation, and ensure that its governance is open to alumni concerns.

Colleges that exclude alumni from important discussions, or simply manipulate them, not only break their covenant with alumni, but also deprive themselves of the independent judgment and broader perspectives that alumni have to offer. Shutting out informed voices of concern at the very moment when the College’s valued history and identity are threatened is perilous indeed.

We request a response from you at your earliest convenience as to how you will proceed on this matter.

Sincerely,



Anne D. Neal
President

cc: Henry Wolf, Vice Rector, Board of Visitors, College of William and Mary
Suzann W. Matthews, Secretary, Board of Visitors, College of William and Mary