

COLLEGE'S 26TH PRESIDENT RESIGNS

Community Responds to the Departure of Gene R. Nichol

BY BEN KENNEDY '05

On Tuesday, Feb. 12, College President Gene R. Nichol announced his resignation after being informed that his contract would not be renewed over the summer. In an e-mail to the community and alumni, Nichol said “the too-quick ending of our work together is among the most profound and wrenching disappointments in my life.”

Nichol said his “was not a perfect presidency,” citing specifically having “sometimes moved too swiftly” and “perhaps paid insufficient attention to the processes and practices of a strong and complex university.”

Less than an hour later, Board of Visitors Rector Michael K. Powell '85, D.P.S. '02 responded in another e-mail that the Board had hoped Nichol would serve until the end of his contract on June 30 before announcing his plans to step down.

“After an exhaustive review ... the Board believed there were a number of problems that were keeping the College from reaching its full potential and concluded that those issues could not be effectively remedied without a change of leadership,” Powell said.

The Board named current William and Mary Law School dean W. Taylor Reveley III interim president during the upcoming search for Nichol's long-term replacement. Nichol has accepted a professor's position at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill's law school.

In his e-mail, Nichol called William and Mary students “the largest surprise of my professional life, those who have created in me a surpassing faith not only in an institution, but in a generation.” Those students showed up in large numbers later on the same day in the Sunken Garden and in the evening in front of the President's House. That night, more than 1,500 students, faculty and staff expressed dis-

appointment and anger toward the Board's decision. Events continued throughout the week in protest of Nichol's nonrenewal.

On Friday, Feb. 15, Rector Powell announced that he would be coming to Williamsburg with other Board members to answer questions from the campus community.

“We plan to spend the entire day listening, learning and offering answers to a number of questions we've heard over the past week,” said Powell to the *W&M News*. “We want to do this in person and we want to do this for as long as it takes. It's important that every member of this community has a chance to be heard.”

The Board was itself in the news after member Robert Blair '68 resigned on Feb. 20. Blair, who was in favor of Nichol's renewal, explained his resignation was a response to perceived attempts by



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Opposite page: An estimated 1,500 students and faculty supported Nichol by singing the “Alma Mater” outside the President’s House in February. Top: Members of the College Board of Visitors met for five straight hours in the University Center’s Commonwealth Auditorium. Pictured from right to left: Philip Herget, Kathy Hornsby ’79, Anita Poston J.D. ’74, Michael K. Powell ’85, D.P.S. ’02, Suzann Wilson Matthews ’71, Judge John Charles Thomas, Barbara Ukrop ’61 and Jeffrey McWaters. Below: Staff member Lydia Whitaker asks a question at the BOV forum on Feb. 22.



into nonrenewal by partisan attacks from Nichol’s opponents and the state legislature. Judge Thomas was clear in stating, “We will not be pushed around.”

“This was not a Board that was trying to do in President Nichol because of his ideologies or his plans for making this College great,” said Hornsby. The Board repeatedly emphasized that their decision was made due to Nichol’s weaknesses as a fundraiser and manager, and not for other reasons.

Other concerns about stating too much regarding the sensitive nature of personnel decisions prevented the Board from going into detail on Nichol’s evaluation, but each member

made sure to point out that the Board wanted to see Nichol succeed. A constant theme was the difficulty of the decision and the regret the Board felt, knowing the turmoil it would cause on campus.

“The whole world is watching to see how the College community comes together after this decision,” Powell said. “They want to see if we just say that we are a Tribe or whether we mean that we are a community.”

The Board of Visitors expressed regret that Nichol’s strengths — including student relations and diversity advocacy — were not the only criteria for success, and that Nichol declined the BOV’s offers to address his deficiencies with an executive coach. The Board expressed strongly their desire to move the College forward under President Reveley’s tenure and beyond.

“We have no intention to rush into anything” said Matthews. “We understand the great process we have to go through here.” ■

the Board to “pick apart President Nichol’s accomplishments.” Blair’s e-mail raised questions about Powell’s statement that the Board’s decision was unanimous.

The Rector explained to the *Flat Hat* that the Board had elected to speak “with one voice” rather than delineate individual votes.

“I did not hear any objection and believe other Board members understood this. I deeply regret if I misunderstood Mr. Blair’s intent,” Powell said.

Later that week, eight members of the Board arrived on campus Feb. 22 and held three forums to answer questions from staff, faculty and students. Representing the Board were Rector Powell, Barbara Ukrop ’61, Kathy Hornsby ’79, Anita Poston J.D. ’74, Philip Herget, Judge John Charles Thomas, Suzann Wilson Matthews ’71 and Jeffrey McWaters (pictured above).

The Board members refuted allegations that they were pressured

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