

COMMENTARY

New college president's fundraising raises some eyebrows

BY KARLA K. BRUNO

After months of searching and interviewing for the 28th president of the College of William and Mary, the Board of Visitors announced its choice last week, Katharine A. Rowe, Ph.D.

This choice has some pleasant aspects: Rowe is a Shakespeare scholar, not a lawyer; she seems to appreciate the history of the college and doesn't insist on changing history to suit a narrative.

And there is a certain symmetry in hiring a woman as president in 2018, 100 years after the first women undergraduates arrived on campus. Identity politics are never a good reason to hire anyone, but the symmetry here is too delicious not to enjoy.

Lyon G. Tyler, the college president who worked to get women admitted in 1918, would likely have been delighted.

Other aspects, however, are not so comforting.

The college had averred on their website that Rowe "broke national fundraising records for women's colleges."

When pressed for details, the college then changed the wording to, "She was also part of the leadership team that broke national fundraising records for women's colleges."

Rowe, in fact, has only peripheral fundraising experience. She is a senior staffer at a college involved in a fundraising campaign, but not the one making the ask.

This is typical proto-

col in the fundraising world: bring in the program staff to explain program details to a potential donor but leave the asking to either the president of the organization or the vice president of development.

The college tried to spin it otherwise, but the truth comes out from Smith College's vice president of development, Beth Raffeld, who told me, "Katherine presented to groups ... and partnered with me ... to inform and cultivate philanthropic engagement in this early leadership phase of our fundraising."

That is a supporting role, not a fundraising one and I can't believe the Board of Visitors doesn't know the difference.

I spoke with one of the visitors after the

announcement, asking specifically about her lack of fundraising experience. The BOV member was happy to relay Rowe's vague "campaign experience" and pooh-poohed the idea that any more was necessary.

The Board of Visitors has chosen to placate the diversity crowd and sacrifice raising funds.

The BOV apparently believes Rowe can successfully ride on Taylor Reveley's fundraising coattails. If that is true, they are sadly mistaken.

The president of any organization is the one who makes the big asks; other staffers may lay the groundwork, but the big ask of the big donors is usually done one-on-one at a very personal level. Rarely do these per-

sonal relationships translate from one president to another.

The BOV has elected to push Rowe into the deep end of the pool with only the barest life support. Given that two of the five areas the board claimed to be important in the search were fundraising based, this choice seems odd and off track for the stated goals.

Yes, this is a historic choice for a historic school. Yes, Rowe has yet to prove herself. She could perhaps find her way as a fundraiser, but at what cost to the college? How many donations will be lost while she learns how to make the big ask? Does she have what it takes to navigate a multi-million-dollar contribution? What happens to the college

if she doesn't?

Paying homage to the diversity gods seems to have won the votes this time. Peter Wood's dissection of this cultural phenomenon, "Diversity: The Invention of a Concept," is an academic eye-opener, describing how diversity has overtaken core values such as integrity and freedom as the narrative of choice and has become the ultimate golden snitch, which wins the game.

Perhaps the board — and Rowe — will take time to read it before it's time to hire the next college president.

Bruno (W&M '81 and '92) works as a fundraiser in Arlington and is the author of "William and Mary and Tyler Too: The biography of Lyon G. Tyler."