

# The William and Mary Scandal of 1951

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The College of William and Mary, shortly before America's involvement in World War II, attempted to become a big-time football power with an enrollment of far less than 1000 males. The push toward athletic greatness was progressing for about a dozen years while college officials were endeavoring to create one of the nation's premier liberal arts institutions. Pressure to win created recruiting and academic violations of scandalous proportions. In the process, a conflict among the governing board, the president, and the faculty broke out over academic integrity and athletic visibility. When the scandal broke in 1951, a host of individuals associated with William and Mary were left strewn as in a hurricane. The football and basketball coaches were forced to resign; the president and College dean resigned as did several professors, the head of the alumni association, and other university officials.

The William and Mary scandal supports those who believe that college presidents have little chance of success in reforming athletics when they are not in concert with the policy makers of colleges, the governing boards. And it gives credence to those who believe that faculties have even less chance to reform when boards support athletics at the expense of academics. The William and Mary scandal of 1951 suggests that if honesty and ethics in intercollegiate athletics are desired, rather than looking first to presidential or faculty panaceas, one might begin by closely scrutinizing the governing boards of colleges and universities.

In 1946, the governing Board of Visitors of William and Mary stated the policy begun several years before by officially asserting that it expected "to win more contests than we lose." Translated into administrative policy this meant that the football coach would be paid more than any professor in any effort to turn out winning teams. It also meant that a double standard would be created for athletes who would enter William and Mary with minimal academic qualifications but would receive nearly all of the College's scholastic financial aid. In order to compete in football against Michigan State and Oklahoma, academic standards were not only low, but the football coach (who was also athletic director and head of the physical education department) began altering high school transcripts, college transcripts, and granting grades for courses not taken by athletes, including those in basketball as well.

When the Dean of the College, Nelson Marshall, investigated the rumors of wrong doing and reported his findings in April of 1951 to President John Pomfret, the president dragged his feet. Pomfret felt the need to keep a promise to the football coach. He recommended promoting the coach to full professor of physical education although evidence of illegalities in his own department was on the president's desk. Pomfret accepted a delayed resignation of both football and basketball coaches at first, but further evidence caused both coaches to give their resignations immediately. Word of the athletic improprieties soon reached the public through the press.

Public exposure brought about an open split between the Board and the faculty. The athletic-loving Board of Visitors, led by officious Judge Shewmake, attempted to place all blame of the scandal on President Pomfret, who did not take decisive action, and upon the

dean who wanted desperately to deemphasize athletics and clean up the sordid actions of the athletic department. The faculty came to the aid of Dean Marshall and issued an athletic manifesto calling for ethical athletics and demanding faculty control of intercollegiate athletics. This caused a sharp rift between board and faculty, who maintained correctly that “faculty control of all phases of intercollegiate athletics” was required by membership in the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools. The board, in response, completely ignored the faculty in immediately choosing a non-academic naval officer as its new president following Pomfret’s resignation. The Dean of the College resigned in protest as did several other faculty members. Included in the casualties of the scandal was the long-time Executive Director of the alumni society, who used his position as editor of *The Alumni Gazette* to attack the athletic situation and who was censored for it.

The faculty were eventually successful in helping to deemphasize athletics. The small, liberal arts college had been unable to attain honestly both big-time athletic status and a nationally recognized liberal arts program. The Board of Visitors, which set both academic and athletic policy, had been far more interested in athletic victories than in academic success. The William and Mary scandal was symbolic of higher education in that governing boards have historically been a major source of the problems existing in intercollegiate athletics.