For Longwood president, higher ed runs in family

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Richmond Times-Dispatch

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W. Taylor Reveley IV

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Longwood University President W. Taylor Reveley IV examines the portrait of his great-grandfather, Thomas Eason, who taught biology at Longwood.

About W. Taylor Reveley IV

President, Longwood University

Five-year contract: Base salary, $325,000; deferred compensation, $10,000 annually; retention bonus, $25,000 per year as deferred compensation; eligible for annual performance bonus up to $20,000.

Education: Princeton University, Bachelor of Arts, 1996; Union Theological Seminary (now Union Presbyterian Seminary), Master of Divinity, 1999; University of Virginia School of Law, Juris Doctor, 2002.

Experience: Managing director, U.Va. Miller Center; coordinating attorney for the center's National War

“He used to ride his horse over to see her,” W. Taylor Reveley IV said, recounting the story he heard from his grandmother, who like his great-grandmother was a Longwood
That family link is just one reason that Reveley’s connections to the university he now leads seemed “just palpable” to the board that hired him, says Longwood’s rector.

Reveley IV, who turned 39 in August, is a lawyer who also holds a Master of Divinity degree from what is now Union Presbyterian Seminary in Richmond.

But Reveley always knew he had a “different vocational calling,” he said. “Higher education is what I always wanted to do. It runs in the family a little bit.”

So far, Reveley has had no new-president surprises since he took office June 1. He said he has found Longwood to be in strong shape with “no crisis on any front.”

“Internally strong, but there are all sorts of macro forces that are afoot in the world of higher ed that Longwood is just as much in the mix with as any other place is,” he said.

Reveley previously was managing director of the University of Virginia’s Miller Center — a good vantage point for observing the leadership crisis that shook the Grounds last summer.

“It was the first time national attention began to squarely focus on some of the tectonic pressures beginning to build in the higher education systems across the country,” Reveley said. The crisis was “the first flash of that broader change” confronting higher education.

Through the past 400 years of American history, there have been only a handful of “junctures of cyclical change in higher education,” he said. “And we’re in one right now, probably for the first time since the close of World War II.”

Just 10 years ago, higher education looked much as it did in 1950, he said. But he doubts that 15 years from now, academia will look like it did in 2000.

“It’s almost like the seasons,” he said. “We’re passing through a big change right now.”

The changing landscape for higher ed means a top priority for Reveley will be to build philanthropy to replace declining state revenue, he said.

But for a self-described “liberal arts devotee at the core,” so too will be protecting the university’s stated mission of creating citizen leaders as the bedrock of democracy.

“There’s something about self-government, democracy, that requires the breadth of perspective that the liberal arts gives,” he said.
Reveley, who played football and studied the classics at Princeton University, is a staunch defender of the liberal arts at a time when pressures are building for universities to produce graduates with career-tailored degrees.

“I think if we as a country were to begin to lose sight of our ideals by losing sight of the liberal arts as the core of our education, we’d be losing part of what makes us free,” he said.

He notes that other countries that have had a much more technical system of higher education are “racing to figure out how they can create something like the liberal arts model.”

That’s because the study of the liberal arts fosters creativity and the potential for reinvention as technology evolves, he said. “Somebody who was technically educated to the gills” a few decades ago would be at a loss today without that ability.

The best kind of education, he said, is to couple the liberal arts “with strong professional preparation so that people do have skills that are immediately useful in the marketplace.”

Reveley is on common ground with the board of visitors on that point.

“We talked a lot about it,” said Marianne Radcliff, Longwood’s rector. “The good news is that the president and the board really speak with one voice that the liberal arts base is really valuable.”

Radcliff said the board was sold on the breadth of Reveley’s experience.

Reveley, who earned his law degree from U.Va., was an attorney for Hunton & Williams, where his father also worked. U.Va.’s Miller Center, which focuses on the U.S. presidency, policy and political history, was his entree to academia.

“He just seemed to be very well-rounded,” Radcliff said. She has found him to be “humble, competent, calm, quiet — a really, really trustworthy guy.”

Plus, she said, he has “an emotional attachment to this place that was pretty evident.”

That his father is president of another public college in Virginia “came up almost never” during the interview process, Radcliff said.

She said she has told him, “No slight to your father, but you know, to the people at Longwood it just doesn’t matter who the president of William and Mary is.”

Reveley and his wife, Marlo, have year-old twins — a boy and girl. Though his son is named for him, he isn’t a “fifth.”

“We thought it was time to move on from the Roman numerals,” Reveley said.

He and his father have agreed they will need to use their numerals more, but “haven’t figured out the nomenclature just yet,” he said. “No matter how you slice the puzzle, the name is the same.”

Reveley III says his son is “a lot bigger, younger and better looking than I am,” which will help.
“There was some confusion when Longwood first announced that IV was coming, especially among W&M alumni, but tranquility was quickly restored,” his father said by email.

Reveley IV said he grew up talking about education with his dad — “it’s been dinner table conversation throughout my life” — but now they talk about it on a less abstract level.

“It’s been fun to talk through brass tacks and mechanics of how the machine really operates,” he said.

His family has had a role in operating the machine for decades: Thomas Eason, the great-grandfather who was chairman of the biology department at Longwood, went on to be head of higher education policy for the state Department of Education in the days before the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia.

Eason was the father-in-law of Reveley II, president from 1963 to 1977 of Hampden-Sydney, a private men’s college.

Reveley III, who became W&M president in 2008, said he initially spoke with his son about whether he felt ready for the challenge of leading a school “in a very difficult time for public institutions of higher education.”

When it became clear he was, “I said, ‘Go for it — do your level best to catch the bus.’ ”

Since then, “I’ve left him alone except when he’s wanted my views on one thing or another,” he said. “He does every now and then, but there is no steady diet of parental advice by any stretch of the imagination.”

He doesn’t expect to be pitted against his son lobbying for state funds at the General Assembly because “the special needs that schools sometimes have are very unlikely to put William and Mary and Longwood at cross purposes.”

**Reveley IV succeeds** Patrick Finnegan, who resigned in May 2012 because of health problems after nearly two years as Longwood’s president.

The new president can’t predict how long he will stay at Longwood, but says “Reveleys tend to be pretty monogamous about their leadership of colleges and universities.”

“Longwood is all I see on the horizon,” he said.

His father has told him that, done right, “this is a pretty ceaseless job. I can’t plead ignorance about that coming in,” he said.

But he’s looking forward to the range of people he’ll meet and the many roles he’ll play, from fundraising to lobbying, he said. “There’s a real richness to the different issues you get to pay attention to.”

The job is also good for travel lovers like Reveley and his wife — they’ve visited all the continents except Antarctica, he said.

He expects he’ll be traveling often to raise money and spread the story of Longwood, which he said “ought to be much better known” given its history as the third-oldest public institution of higher education in the state (edging out Virginia Military Institute by months).
Longwood, founded in 1839 as the private Farmville Female Seminary, became the first public institution of higher education for women in the state in 1884. It became coeducational in 1976.

The university, with about 4,830 students, is in Farmville, deep in rural Southside, without interstate access.

Although he’d like to enroll students from a broader geographic area, Reveley said he doesn’t see Longwood expanding in size except through “organic growth” — that is, improved retention of first-year students.

Longwood has a reputation of being a second-choice school for many students.

Haley Vest, president of the student government association, said she herself had intended to transfer, “but something about it made me stay, and I absolutely love it.”

Vest, a senior biology major and a Godwin High School graduate, said that’s true for many other students at Longwood.

“I guess it’s the second-choice school that changes your mind,” she said. “It’s a great place to be, for sure.”

She said Reveley seems to understand the Longwood culture.

“Longwood has a very close-knit community, and that smallness is super important,” she said.

Vest has had a chance to meet with Reveley and said she and other students were excited by his selection.

“He seems to really get students,” she said. “When you speak to him, you can tell he’s really listening and processing what you’re saying.”

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