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### Meet William & Mary's New Deans

Claire de Lisle

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# Meet William & Mary's new deans

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Meet the deans: From left to right: A. Benjamin Spencer, a nationally renowned civil procedure and federal courts expert, stepped in to lead W&M Law School; Maria Donoghue Velleca, a distinguished neuroscientist, joined William & Mary as dean of the Faculty of Arts & Sciences; Robert C. Knoeppel, a longtime educator and noted scholar on educational finance innovation, took the reins as dean of the School of Education.

by Claire De Lisle, University Advancement | October 16, 2020

This fall, as new students began classes at William & Mary for the first time and returning students adjusted to a semester unlike any other, they were joined by three new faces — William & Mary's new deans of the Arts & Sciences, Law School and School of Education.

After nationwide searches and appointments by the Board of Visitors, Maria Donoghue Velleca, a distinguished neuroscientist, joined William & Mary as dean of the Faculty of Arts & Sciences; A. Benjamin Spencer, a nationally renowned civil procedure and federal courts expert, stepped in to lead W&M Law School; and Robert C. Knoeppel, a longtime educator and noted scholar on educational finance innovation, took the reins as dean of the School of Education.

A nationwide search will commence this fall to fill the position of dean for the Virginia Institute of Marine Science after Dean John T. Wells' retirement at the end of the academic year.

All three new deans will join President Rowe for her latest Community Conversation, on Tuesday, October 20 at noon ET, to discuss their visions for their respective schools and the university as a whole. The event can be viewed at [www.wm.edu/conversation](http://www.wm.edu/conversation).

In a series of videos created earlier this fall, [Dean Donoghue Velleca](#), [Dean Spencer](#) and [Dean Knoepfel](#) shared their backgrounds, what drew them to William & Mary and their visions for the future.

### **Maria Donoghue Velleca**

Donoghue Velleca joins William & Mary from Georgetown University's College of Arts & Sciences, where she served as senior associate dean for faculty affairs and strategic planning. She is a neuroscientist specializing in brain development, and she spoke about the transformative effect of close faculty-student interactions, especially in research settings.

"Because I'm so devoted to mentorship and I know the change it can make in a student's life, I was really drawn to William & Mary's commitment to faculty getting to know their students," she said.

This academic year, as we continue to adapt to pandemic conditions, she says her main goal is ensuring students on campus and those taking classes remotely have the best learning experience possible. Moving forward, she will work with faculty and staff to define areas of responsible growth that align with William & Mary's mission, vision and values.

"I've always believed that having an academic community that reflects the world we live in is incredibly important," said she said. "I need to hear from people in this community. I need to hear from faculty. I need to hear from students, parents, alumni, donors. We need to build this institution stronger, and my responsibility in the Arts & Sciences is to strengthen this tradition of learning for the future."

### **Benjamin "Ben" Spencer**

Spencer, who grew up in Hampton, Virginia, served as the Justice Thurgood Marshall Distinguished Professor of Law at the University of Virginia School of Law before coming to William & Mary. He is also a captain in the U.S. Army Reserve Judge Advocate General's Corps. He is a nationally renown civil procedure and federal courts expert.

"Being a lawyer is not just about having a job and earning a living. It's always been about making a difference," he said. "What this law school is about is creating advocates who are going to move this country in the direction of fulfilling its promise that there is liberty and justice for all."

Spencer is the first Black dean in William & Mary's history. He comes from a family tradition of pioneers in law and academia — his father was the first Black chief judge of the U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of Virginia and his grandfather was the first Black professor at Notre Dame University.

Spencer says William & Mary's value of excellence resonates with him because he sees it in practice at William & Mary Law School every day.

“I did not come to here to make this place excellent, I came here because it is excellent,” he said. “I want our students to have heart, to have soul, to have that commitment to community and to service. That is what is going to be the differentiator for us, to have the most talented lawyers who care. I think this is the best law school in the country and the world needs to know that.”

### **Robert C. Knoeppel**

Knoeppel has worked in education for 28 years, including in three Virginia school divisions. He comes to William & Mary after serving a dean of the University of South Florida's College of Education.

“What drew me to William & Mary in particular was the mission and vision of the school of Education. I strongly believe in the transformative nature of education, that it's what creates opportunity,” he said.

He wants to further an environment of belonging and service, so that students feel accepted and welcome and work in the service of their students, communities and families.

“I was a school counselor for a long time ... some of those experiences are working with students and families that are in crisis, being in those environments built greater skills of empathy for me and the recognition that we need to build systems that help all people grow, help them achieve their goals, and it's not just about working with the child, it's about working with their entire family and the welcoming the community ... it changed who I am.”

He wants to build on the strong programs of the School of Education to make it the premiere school for educator preparation in Virginia — and ensure that all graduates, from teachers to counselors to mental health professionals to higher education administrators, have the tools they need to be culturally responsive and meet the needs of a diverse society.