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Educational Tragedy

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Educational Tragedy

All Virginians should be immensely pleased by the high rating that the University of Virginia law school received in a study reported in a recent issue of *Change* magazine, a publication that specializes in matters pertaining to higher education. Among publicly supported law schools, the university's ranked number three, behind only the University of Michigan and the University of California, Berkeley.

But elating though it is, the high standing of the University of Virginia law school dramatizes the deplorable plight of the state's other publicly-supported law school at the College of William and Mary. While the Charlottesville institution basks in scholarly praise, the Williamsburg law school is in danger of losing its accreditation.

This should not be. On the contrary, the William and Mary law school should be one of the most eminent in the nation, for it is the oldest in the nation. It was founded in 1779 at the suggestion of Thomas Jefferson, then governor of Virginia, and the distinguished George Wythe was its first professor. Chief Justice John Marshall was one of Wythe's earliest students.

Through the years, the William and Mary law school often has had to struggle to stay afloat, and it is in trouble now because of grossly inadequate physical facilities. Unless William and Mary soon

receives money to construct a new law school building, funds that the state has promised but never provided, the American Bar Association may withdraw the school's accreditation.

The need for a new building has been clearly demonstrated. During the last three years, approximately 2,100 persons have applied for admission to the William and Mary law school, but it has been able to accommodate only 450, at least 70 per cent of them Virginians. Even for this number, present facilities are inadequate and fail to meet ABA standards. And this is the important point. After all, it would be unrealistic and even undesirable for any law school to attempt to provide space for every single applicant.

Gov. Mills E. Godwin Jr., the State Council of Higher Education and the General Assembly all have recognized William and Mary's need. The legislature has appropriated \$50,000 to finance utility and site work for a new building, and it has conditionally appropriated \$5 million for the building itself. But because of the state's revenue problems, this money is not now available and the project is in peril.

The General Assembly should do its utmost in the current session to provide these funds. Of course the state has other pressing capital needs, and the legislature cannot finance all of them at this time. But the William and Mary law school should stand at the very top of the priority list.

This institution, whose able new dean is former Sen. William B. Spong Jr., has the history and the leadership to become one of the nation's great law schools. But unless the General Assembly enables it to retain its accreditation, it may soon cease to be rated even an acceptable law school. And that, in our opinion, would be an educational tragedy.