

Thursday, 01 October 2020

**An Open Letter to William & Mary President Katherine Rowe,
the Board of Visitors,
and the College Community**

In 2016, soon after William & Mary Athletic Director Terry Driscoll announced his retirement, the College formed a 15-person committee, led by Mason School of Business Dean Larry Pulley, tasked with vetting search firms that would identify potential candidates to succeed Mr. Driscoll.

Mr. Pulley told [the Daily Press](#), “There will be no honeymoon period or time for a steep learning curve. . . . We are not in a situation where we can train someone to be an athletic director.”

Three years after the College chose Samantha Huge to replace Mr. Driscoll, it has become clear that Ms. Huge was, and remains, ill-equipped for the position. Both the Athletic Department and the College have suffered as a result.

Immediately after beginning the job, Ms. Huge began receiving assistance from [Paradigm Four](#), a “crisis management” firm based in Atlanta. Athletics first paid the company in October 2017 for services that began on May 22, just three weeks after Ms. Huge began as athletic director. [Payments](#) have continued through to the present. To date they total more than \$140,000.

If Ms. Huge was indeed prepared to lead Athletics, why was she receiving outside assistance from the moment she arrived?

Three months later, in January 2018, Ms. Huge hired another consulting firm, [The Pictor Group](#). The purchase order, [publicly available](#) and recorded as item OC-18-33, states that, for \$45,000, Pictor will create a strategic plan over a six-month period—seemingly ignoring the 10-year plan created three years earlier. Just as with Paradigm, no request for proposal is publicly available. The payment simply appears.

As is to be expected at a public institution, William & Mary’s [procurement guidance](#) underscores that constituents of the College who request outside services must seek competitive negotiation between multiple bidders. Yet, we have no evidence that an open and fair procurement, or price, has been sought for any of these services. Engagements with Paradigm and Pictor appear furtive at best.

Against whom did they compete? Did either firm even submit a proposal? Numerous proposals exist in [the College's database](#), yet none for Pictor and none for contract OC-18-33.

Even if Ms. Huge heeded standard procurement practices, we at the College expect and deserve to know that she demanded decent competition when hiring outside advisors who will determine the future of our athletes' careers.

Further, as is the case with most consulting practices that are meant to serve the public interest, we expect the scope of services to be satisfactorily delivered prior to payment of said consultant. Athletics paid Pictor upfront, on February 5, before any work had been done, let alone delivered. The firm's consultants didn't even set foot on campus until February 21.

Pictor, based in Nevada and formed in 2014, terms itself as “intercollegiate athletics consulting.” Earliest news of the College's arrangement with Pictor, and Pictor's aim to build a [strategic plan](#) for the Tribe, did not originate from [the College](#) or from [the Athletic Department](#), but, rather, from [an independent blog](#) covering Tribe Athletics; six months after the firm had been contracted and had already completed its scope of work, the blog's July announcement showered Pictor—and Ms. Huge for selecting them—with a raft of superlatives.

I question the enthusiasm.

In a matter of minutes of browsing the firm's website and researching its individual members, five disconcerting features became evident. First, members of the staff had four or fewer years of experience in consulting when Ms. Huge hired them. Second, the senior staff is homogenous; it is made up entirely of retired athletic directors. Third, a majority of the staff was acquainted with Ms. Huge from the outset, through their affiliations with [an organization](#) at which Ms. Huge is an aspiring leader. Fourth, Pictor's clients include a suspiciously large number of institutions at which the senior staff have worked, studied, or had some other connection; per its own website and sundry news sources, prior to being hired by the College, Pictor had led a number of reviews and investigations but had created fewer than a handful of actual strategic plans.

And fifth, an astounding degree of adverse information exists—albeit of varying significance—surrounding Pictor's senior staff members. Sandy Hatfield Clubb retired from Drake University in the wake of [two big lawsuits](#) against her. M. Dianne Murphy departed Columbia University after the school newspaper's editorial board pleaded for [her dismissal](#). Pictor's co-founder, Kathy Lindahl, who has since left the firm, held the unfortunate distinction of being the associate athletic director at Michigan State while Larry Nassar was molesting the university's gymnasts. And co-founder Cary Groth called it quits at Nevada-Reno after a kaleidoscope of charges—ranging from [stalking to perjury](#)—were brought against her.

Did no one at the College research any of this, or did no one at the College care?

Unsavory affiliations aside, interactions between Pictor and the College are even more alarming. Pictor sent representatives to the College from February 21-23, 2018 to interview administrators and coaches. Four of the coaches—some still employed by the College—described the meetings as “confusing,” “a waste,” “disorganized,” and “unprofessional.” One coach thought Ms. Huge was merely conducting a standard internal review. Another coach said the interviewers told him “if you can’t make it to the meeting it’s not a big deal.” Each coach remembered an interviewer holding a pen, “barely taking any notes.” In one meeting, five coaches were interviewed jointly for less than an hour. Perhaps the most damning impression with which all the coaches were left was the sense that the Athletic Department had already decided something and had hired Pictor to produce a predetermined, corroborating conclusion.

Upon reviewing the plan Pictor produced, it is difficult to locate any insights about the College or its athletic programs that cannot be gleaned from the internet. The content is primarily filler. There are no sound proposals or examples of how to achieve them. [The “Opportunities” section](#) dedicates a distressing number of paragraphs to using spectacular basketball success to generate web traffic, social media engagement, new donations, and more applicants. Every example was drawn from schools William & Mary has never sought to emulate.

In the [stylized version](#) of the strategic plan, Appendix I indicates that following Pictor’s study, Athletics sought “further review” of the material. This partially explains the proposal request that the College issued, imprecisely titled “Athletics Consulting,” just as Pictor was concluding its six-month review. The College said the review lasted [16 months](#), not six. But it never named a firm, other than Pictor, responsible for the final ten months.

Here, dealings become even more opaque—and Ms. Huge’s request for help even more vivid—when, in June 2018, just as Pictor should have completed its six-month study, Ms. Huge released a request for proposal, [WM19-1782](#). In Section VI, “Statement of Needs,” requirements include:

- Department / Athletics Director Leadership
- Media Relations and Communications (External & Internal)
- Donor Relations and Fundraising Strategies
- Professional Development
- Strategic Plans
- Compliance Review
- Manual Development
- Facility Enhancement Studies
- Academic Review
- Student Development Review

Is this not, in large part, what we pay Ms. Huge and her staff to do? Ms. Huge has also created no fewer than seven new positions in the department—giving her yet more help.

A minimum of three vendors submitted proposals: Paradigm, [Collegiate Consulting](#), and [Zelos](#). Each proposal was as broad as Ms. Huges request. Paradigm submitted [hand-written scribble](#), plus a synopsis of the firm and its ability to assist athletic directors with—among other things—“fiscal planning and the elimination of sports.”

To confirm, we paid someone to guide our athletic director in the process of eliminating teams? Has he also assisted with quelling the ensuing firestorm? Did neither Paradigm nor Ms. Huges think it imperative to consult the stakeholders, or was cutting the teams a forgone conclusion, irrespective of school finances or team success? Did Paradigm draft the statement announcing the cuts at Stanford, too; then “advise” Ms. Huges to sign it, and, blindly, she did?

The [proposal for Zelos](#) is not listed in the portal, but rather includes the proposal from Collegiate. I ask you to kindly share it.

Collegiate, meanwhile, which presents itself as a “one-stop shop,” offered [a proposal](#) with Pictor as a subcontractor, saying, “The Pictor Group has recently worked with W&M on the completion of an intercollegiate athletic strategic plan.” If the plan was completed, why was Ms. Huges requesting the aid of more consultants? And why does Collegiate’s proposal so closely match the College’s request, that it almost looks as if Collegiate wrote the very request it would fulfill?

Remarkably—or not—all three firms were awarded contracts. In July, all three were awarded renewals. For good measure, all three can receive extensions through 2023.

Ms. Huges continued to pay Paradigm for services separate from any public contract, as well as sums of \$18,000 and \$22,000 associated with item WM19-1782. She has issued three payments to Zelos, each for \$10,800 for “executive coaching.” She then canceled the most recent one, dated August 28. The [Virginia Business Opportunities portal](#) contains no payments to Collegiate despite Ms. Huges renewing its contract in response to its proposal for \$135,000 plus add-ons.

Whether the funds to pay these firms was privately donated or siphoned from the athletic budget is yet another ambiguity, as [the College’s audits](#) make no mention of said consulting fees.

The secrecy is further upsetting given that (1) Collegiate and Pictor are inextricably aligned here and appear similarly motivated; (2) one of the coaches that Pictor interviewed said he was asked “What do you find difficult about working in the CAA?”; and (3) according to [a recent exposé](#) published by The Intercollegiate, a college sports media outlet, Collegiate’s niche is in helping “D-I programs seeking membership in a different conference. Often, the firm is hired when a new athletic director or university president comes into a job...”

Is William & Mary changing conferences? Is this the reason for securing three consulting firms, each with the potential to receive contract renewals through 2023? Is this why so much attention has been given of late to football and basketball?

Further adding insult to injury, [Collegiate's proposal](#) was unscrupulous. It named 11 individuals who would form the "project team." One was founder Russell Wright. Two worked for Pictor. Of the remaining eight people, four did not work for Collegiate. One, in fact, [Jim Livengood](#), works for Collegiate's foremost rival firm, College Sports Solutions. Another, Chris Nations, per his own LinkedIn profile, left Collegiate in 2007. Does it mean nothing that the individuals whose services we believe we are receiving are not even on staff at the company we have hired?

Rather than confronting these issues and holding Ms. Huge accountable, assistance to Ms. Huge keeps coming. On September 23, after Ms. Huge admitted to, and then excused, [her plagiarism](#), President Katherine Rowe attempted to suppress public outrage by announcing that Ms. Huge will now receive [additional guidance](#) from General Jim Golden.

Is this a college or a kindergarten? How many outsourced resources can we grant before we call into question the Director's capacity to own the job at hand? How can we trust that Ms. Huge has even engaged with the material enough to understand the unique qualities of our program? Why does the Athletic Director, whom Mr. Pulley made clear we were not in a position to train, demand so much help? How does coddling a leader foster confidence or trust in one's staff?

If the College community's widespread embarrassment and distrust are not yet abundantly clear, there is little else that can possibly elucidate the matter. The longer the College pretends not to see the emperor's new clothes and authorizes this charade to continue, the longer it will take to regain the trust of its students, alumni, faculty, and the local community, and carve an acceptable path forward.

End the circus. End the silence. End the secrecy. Stop listening to every expensive consultant and out-of-touch advisor and start listening to the chorus of people who make this fine institution what it is. Without them—without their trust, without their support—everything you endeavor will be in vain.

Reinstate the seven cut sports teams *today*. This, above all else, will affirm your commitment, improve the confidence of stakeholders, and open dialogue that will forge a new and agreeable strategy suitable for the type of institution William & Mary once was, and must once again be.

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