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Christopher Caracci, executive director of The Williamsburg Institute, aims to give today's leaders a glimpse into leadership via 18th-century Virginia. Photo by Mark Rhodes

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The Williamsburg Institute

Institute looks to 1700s for lessons for today's leaders

Imagine the opportunity to hear Thomas Jefferson speak on today's most important societal issues. That's exactly the aim of The Williamsburg Institute, a new collaborative effort between the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation and William & Mary.

The nonprofit institute is aimed at providing immersive opportunities for leadership development, specifically among three demographics: business

professionals and community leaders; lifelong learners; and students seeking leadership skills education. But it does so through an innovative framework — 1700s Virginia.

“It’s a one-of-a-kind venture that seeks to look at leadership today through the lens of the 18th-century leadership experience,” says The Williamsburg Institute’s founding executive director, Christopher Caracci.

The Institute held two one-night events in its first year. Its first, staged in October 2023 in front of Colonial Williamsburg’s Raleigh Tavern, featured interpreters portraying U.S. Presidents James Madison and Thomas Jefferson, and Williamsburg enslaved tavern worker Gowan Pamphlet, who would become the first Black ordained minister in the American colonies. The trio discussed political shifts and ideologies of the late 18th-century.

The second event, held April 12, saw historic interpreters portraying Jefferson and Founding Father George Wythe engaged in a conversation entitled, “Cultivating a Legacy: Embracing Education Through the Lens of History,” in which the nation’s third president and his legal mentor answered questions about education and the importance of critical thinking to the American society they aimed to build.

“All of them speak about some facet of leadership and then we contrast that with how the 18th-century might have reflected on that,” Caracci says. “We can utilize that history as told through primarily the interpretive historian staff at Colonial Williamsburg.”

The Institute’s sole employee so far, Caracci worked for Walt Disney for more than 30 years, many of which were spent providing leadership training for executives as part of Disney Institute, the entertainment company’s external professional development and training arm.

Caracci reports to a board of trustees chaired by former Hewlett-Packard CEO Carly Fiorina. Other trustees include William & Mary Provost Peggy Agouris

and Colonial Williamsburg Foundation President and CEO Cliff Fleet. The Williamsburg Institute also has an advisory board of area business leaders and educators.

The Institute's funding comes from both Colonial Williamsburg Foundation and William & Mary, but Caracci says the nonprofit's goal is to become financially independent in the future through partnerships, fundraising and event proceeds.

The inaugural two events were free for attendees. Williamsburg resident Rick Morrison and his wife, Julie, were among those who attended the April event, and were struck by the attention to detail, from the live period strings music to the depth of the conversation between the historic interpreters playing Jefferson and Wythe.

"The thing that impressed me most about the experience ... was how deeply immersed in the thoughts of those gentlemen and in their works those two reenactors were," Rick Morrison says, "to be able to portray those characters in a realistic fashion that basically had the audience believing that they were listening to Jefferson and Wythe. ... And even though it was couched in the context primarily of the 18th century, it had a lot of lessons that would benefit people today."

Those reflections are exactly what Caracci hopes attracts people to the Institute's future events. While its first two events have been marketed toward lifelong learners, the Institute's next planned event, set for Oct. 13-16, will target business and community leaders. It will feature William & Mary faculty teaching on contemporary leadership, assisted by Colonial Williamsburg's interpretive staff to add 18th-century context.

The Williamsburg Institute's other target demographic — high school seniors and college students — can look forward to events in the future, he says.