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3 November 1983

President John Wilson
Washington and Lee University
Office of the President
Lexington, VA 24450

Dear President Wilson:

I attended the dinner meeting of alumni at the Congressional Country Club on 2 November and heard you speak. Thank you for coming to Washington to let us know of the condition of Washington & Lee and of your concerns for its future. I wish to convey to you my shock and dismay at the rude and offensive remarks made to you by one young man seated at my table with regard to the subject of co-education. Let me assure you that such ill-mannered behavior is not typical of the students with whom I attended Washington and Lee. Were he more of the gentlemen that Washington and Lee seeks to produce, his remarks would have been polite as well as forceful.

I believe that Washington and Lee needs to expand its facilities to all who seek knowledge. I sincerely believe it will improve the educational atmosphere to admit women to the University. It will encourage male students to accept women as persons with intelligence and educational and professional goals. More important, it will be a statement that women are partners in the great enterprise of running this nation and deserve every opportunity afforded men to make contributions borne of intelligence, education and hard work.

Thirty years ago we decided in this nation that separate educational systems for blacks, no matter how "equal" are demeaning and shameful. So too is the philosophy of any institution which states that it is dedicated to the liberal arts yet excludes women. Finally, please remember that, historically, ignorance has been the tool of repression; a university which denies an education to women must be saying that they do not deserve the freedom and equality which only comes with knowledge.

Please do not let those who value tradition for its own sake divert you from a careful study of this important question. I attended Washington and Lee for seven years and found nothing particularly magical about its all male environment. I believe the honor system to be the most important aspect of life at the University. That system teaches that one's fellows are persons with rights and dignity. There is no room at Washington and Lee for those who cannot respect

President Wilson
3 November 1983
page 2

such rights and dignity. That is because adherence to the honor system is an acknowledgement of the value of oneself and one's neighbor. So too is there now no longer room for a policy that violates the roots of this honor system by debasing the value of women and saying that they do not belong.

I wish you the best of luck in your administration in the coming years. The task you face is not an easy one. However, if, after careful study you conclude that co-education is best for Washington and Lee, you will have my full support. I married a Washington and Lee law graduate and she is a testament to the contributions women can make to our society when they are given an education.

Very truly yours,



Mark E. Sharp

November 7, 1983

Mr. Mark E. Sharp
Attorney at Law
[REDACTED]
Fairfax, Virginia 22030

Dear Mr. Sharp:

Your kind note is deeply appreciated. I regret my own failure to remain patient when the alumnus at your table chose to speak at length. I guess I was, for a moment, unmindful of the need many must feel to express their emotions on this thorny subject. I hope for lucid and thoughtful assessments but must expect occasional expressions of feelings rather than thoughts.

Your own letter is most compelling and it is helpful in its explication of the honor system at its very root. I'm also impressed by your large sense of the moral envelope in which this issue, and others like it, must finally be placed. A black member of our staff stopped me yesterday to say that he was impressed by the same tone and character of the argument against women as he first heard fifteen years ago when blacks were admitted. I don't want to simplify complicated things or to imply that those who wish us to remain as we are are somehow racist or sexist. I don't believe that is true. But your sense of the larger historical and social context in which this issue resides cannot be entirely avoided.

Anyway, thanks so much for your letter. I felt truly bad about Wednesday night until Friday's mail brought your letter.

Most sincerely,

John D. Wilson
President

JDW/bcb

bcc: Mr. E. Waller Dudley w/enclosure
Mr. Farris Hotchkiss w/enclosure
Mr. Dick Sessoms w/enclosure