

[REDACTED]
Richmond, Virginia 23225
January 4, 1984

Dr. John D. Wilson
President
Washington and Lee University
Lexington, Virginia 24450

Dear Dr. Wilson:

Thank you for your letter and paper pertaining to the issue of coeducation at Washington and Lee. This question is clearly one of the most important that the University has dealt with in some time, and I am pleased by your willingness to consult alumni as you seek a resolution.

As I stated to you during the Leadership Conference, my greatest concern regarding this issue is the retention of a high quality student body and faculty. If W&L can maintain this quality and operate as an all male institution, then I hope that is the path we will follow. While there are benefits to having women in the classroom and on the campus (as many of these benefits were discussed at the Conference, I will not repeat them here), I believe there may be inauspicious changes to the character of the University that would outweigh those benefits.

However, I have examined the demographic data we were given at the Conference, and understand how compelling the argument is to seriously consider coeducation. Since you have communicated with me, I have sought to identify what I consider to be some of the key issues. This letter contains a brief discussion of each of those issues.

Demographic Trends

Clearly, no one can argue with the statistics that indicate a 25% reduction in the number of people entering college between now and 1992. The competition for the brightest students will grow increasingly intense. It is apparent that Bill Hartog and his staff have done a superb job in broadening the geographical base from which our students are drawn. I ask you to consider whether or not we can turn these new footholds (e.g. Los Angeles, San Diego, Boston, Houston, etc.) into strongholds, by attracting more applicants from these areas each year. Have we fully exploited them? Are there other avenues we can pursue in selling the attractiveness of an all male institution (e.g. a first rate film or slide presentation)?

By continuing the successful expansion into new areas begun by Bill, and by working our traditional markets, perhaps W&L can continue to enroll a very able group of students in an all male setting.

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Honor System

The Honor System at Washington and Lee is the one tradition that, in my opinion, transcends all others in importance. It is the impact that coeducation might eventually have on this system that has been the subject of most of my thought. I believe, of course, that women are every bit as honorable and as trustworthy as men. However, if W&L decides to coeducate, I anticipate some problems similar to those experienced at the University of Virginia. W&L would (as U.Va. did) enroll women, as well as a different type of male student, who would not have been drawn to the all male environment. I have talked with graduates of U.Va. (both male and female), who feel that many of their traditions, including the Honor System, are not as strong or as cherished as they were before coeducation was adopted. Even now, the Board of Visitors is reviewing the viability of the existing system.

While I cannot say that there is a cause and effect relationship, my own experience tells me that a coeducational environment attracts a less traditional student. In many ways that is quite positive: a university should foster a dynamic environment, and should not retain traditions simply to avoid change.

However, my opinion is that without a strong Honor System, W&L would lose a tradition that has served students and alumni well for many years. The word of a W&L graduate is generally accepted by those who are aware of our University. Were we to weaken that system, I do not believe that the advantages of a woman's perspective in the classroom, or a 100 point increase in SAT scores, would be adequate compensation for the loss in prestige I fear we would suffer.

The Legacy of General Lee

It is my belief that General Lee had such a positive and pervasive influence on the University during his presidency that his spirit is clearly felt on campus today. I think that Lee's devotion to the concepts of honor, discipline, perseverance and the development of gentlemanly qualities is something that has inspired and motivated W&L students for generations. This inspiration is part of the mystique that is Washington and Lee.

Many alumni relate to General Lee as a leader of men on the battlefield, as well as a leader of students in their intellectual pursuits. Would women be likely to relate to this man in a similar manner? Would the Lee legacy serve as a strong motivational force for women? If it did not, would the character of the University be altered in a fundamental way? I do not suggest that women are any less disciplined or persevering than men. I merely question whether or not women would benefit from the inspirational presence of Lee to the extent that men do, and whether or not this would have some adverse impact on the University's uniqueness, and on the camaraderie of the students and the alumni.

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Demand for the Coed Option

One reason given by admitted high school seniors who choose not to attend W&L is the fact that the institution is all male. In fact, according to the 1983-1984 Fact Book, it is the number one reason given by out-of-state respondents, and the number two reason given by in-state respondents. Despite this, are we relatively confident that students, like those who now decide not to attend W&L, will be persuaded to enroll if we go coed? I assume that typically there are a variety of reasons why students reject a college to which they are admitted.

If W&L goes coed, our tuition would still be high (by far the biggest determinant for in-state respondents), we would still be located in Rockbridge County, we would still not be Ivy League, and we would still not be members of the ACC athletic league. Do you believe that men and women in significant numbers would choose W&L over U.Va., William and Mary, Princeton, Davidson, etc.?

Sense of Tolerance

One characteristic of W&L students which has been a particular source of pride is the students' tolerance of a diversity of opinions. I earned my graduate degree at Yale, and have concluded that in a very important sense, Washington and Lee is a far more liberal institution. When I was a student at W&L, speakers representing both extremes of the political spectrum were brought to campus. Every courtesy was accorded these people.

I found in New Haven a distressful degree of intolerance of certain political and social views. In one instance, a prominent Republican was to speak on campus, until objections from students and faculty forced a cancellation. Is this the type of student (male as well as female) that we would attract to W&L if we go coed, and begin to seriously compete for students with the Ivy League schools?

Perhaps my fear of attracting less tolerant students is unfounded, as such students may find W&L unattractive for other reasons. But a high degree of tolerance of the opinions of others is necessary if W&L is to remain true to its character and to its institutional philosophy.

Preference for the All Male School

One statistic that I heard mentioned a couple of times at the Leadership Conference was that only 2% of this year's freshman class chose W&L because it is an all male institution. I see on page 154 of the 1983-84 Fact Book that respondents were asked to name the three factors that most influenced their decision to enroll at W&L. Asked for three factors, I am certain that

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I would not have mentioned the all male status of the school. I picked Washington and Lee primarily because of its academic standards, its size and its history/tradition.

However, the more time I spent at the school, the more I appreciated the camaraderie which is characteristic of the all male environment. Unlike my experience in a coeducational high school (freshman-sophomore years), I found a lack of sexual tension in the classroom at W&L, which seemed to promote a positive learning environment.

I notice from the same chart in the Fact Book that only 5% of the freshmen listed the Honor System as a factor influencing their decision to attend the University. Yet, I sense that the system is strongly supported by the students, and, as in my day, is something that is increasingly valued by each student over time.

Unnatural Environment of the All Male School

It is true that women could provide a different perspective to many classroom discussions at W&L, and that they would provide the theatre with more latitude in its productions. However, I am not persuaded that it is imperative to attend a coeducational college in order to develop a special sensitivity to women. Admittedly, those students who progress through all male elementary and secondary schools, graduate from W&L, and never attend graduate school will, I believe, suffer in both their personal and professional relationships with women.

I understand that over half of the students at W&L come from public schools. My perception is that most of those from private schools come out of a coed program. Approximately 70% of our alumni go on to do graduate work (I assume that all graduate and professional schools are coeducational). I infer from this information that the majority of W&L graduates spend most of their educational careers in a coed environment. If this is true, then it seems to dilute the assertion that it is critical for men and women to be enrolled in the same institution, in order to have a natural undergraduate experience.

Financial Costs

I understand that there would be a substantial financial cost associated with admitting women. Is it reasonable to assume that the alumni generally support coeducation to the extent that the requisite funds could be raised? This concern may be particularly pertinent, because of the fact that alumni were so recently called upon to support the University's capital fund drive.

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No matter what the final decision concerning the coeducation issue may be, please be assured of my support, and my confidence in you and the members of the Board of Trustees. Despite my wish to see Washington and Lee remain all male at the undergraduate level, I want, above all, a first rate academic institution of which alumni and students can be proud.

What has been particularly gratifying to me during this process is that while I have heard differing opinions, everyone with whom I have spoken has uppermost in his or her mind the future well being of Washington and Lee. With all of the thought and discussion that has taken place, I am confident that when the decision is made, it will be the appropriate one for the University.

I hope that at least some of my comments have been useful. If I may be of further service to you or to Washington and Lee in any way, please call on me.

Best personal regards.

Sincerely,

Bill Garrison '76

William E. Garrison, III

January 9, 1984

Mr. William E. Garrison, III
[REDACTED]
Richmond, Virginia 23225

Dear Mr. Garrison:

I believe your letter of 4 January must be placed very near the top of the file. It is well reasoned and clearly written--all that I had hoped for in eliciting responses from concerned alumni. Thank you very much indeed for taking time and thought to share your vision of Washington and Lee with me and with the Board.

I am currently going through all the correspondence we have received on this subject in the last several months and will want to help the Board sort through what next steps should be taken. I fully expect a widely drawn survey of alumni opinion. But no matter how clever a questionnaire may be, it will not be able to record the impressions you have managed to share with us.

Thank you yet again for your first-rate response. It is immensely helpful.

Sincerely,

John D. Wilson
President

JDW/bcb