

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, LOS ANGELES

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SANTA BARBARA · SANTA CRUZ

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA 90024

October 20, 1983

President John Wilson
Washington & Lee University
Lexington, Virginia 24450

Dear President Wilson:

This is the first chance I have had to write and welcome you to the W & L community. Although I would like to have heard that you are now comfortable in your new position and attending to everyday concerns, I understand that recently some of my fellow alumni have reminded you that merely addressing the issue of coeducation in the town of Lexington is akin to defiling the crypt of your most famous predecessor. I, however, applaud the manner in which you are handling the issue, encourage you to continue considering it, and assure you that there are those of us who find W & L's only fault to be its refusal to recognize the benefits of coeducation, a fault that is all the more striking given the university's extraordinary ability to teach its students to think rationally, clearly, and analytically on almost every other issue.

I am writing primarily as an alumnus who feels a strong allegiance to the institution, its values, traditions, and missions. I have been fortunate to have also spent two years as Assistant Director of Admissions, a position that reinforced my commitment to the university and provided an opportunity to meet with alumni, work with students and faculty, and articulate to prospective students those characteristics which make W & L distinctive. Based in good part on my experience at W & L, I decided to make a career of studying higher education, and after receiving my Ph.D. in public policy and teaching at the University of Kansas, I came to UCLA where I am working on a study, supported by the Carnegie Foundation, of the academic profession. In short, my interest in higher education generally and my acquaintance with W & L in particular have caused me to have concerns about the university's future, concerns that center around its continued resistance to coeducation.

I, like you, have gone over the arguments many times and by now you are certainly far more aware of the demographics and other facts than I will

President John Wilson
October 20, 1983
Page Two

ever be. My reiterating them would serve no useful purpose for you. Those facts by themselves are persuasive and ironically validate the options suggested in a bumper sticker that I understand is now circulating on campus: dead or coed. But the issue need not hinge only on those grounds; surely, W & L could survive as a single-sex institution, although in light of the demographics it would not be able to attract quality students and faculty--thus changing the character of the college far more than the admission of women.

There is, however, another consideration. In our society, an all-male institution is increasingly viewed, to put it mildly, as unusual. When my colleagues at other universities ask why we're all male, I am at a loss to cite any educational or social benefits our students receive; when representing W & L at a high school college night, I feel awkward ignoring over half of the seniors; when my research team at UCLA is choosing institutions to visit for our Carnegie study, I am embarrassed that my alma mater is not a candidate because it has been put in the category of "quirks". W & L does not have to apologize for choosing the form of education it considers best; there is a virtue and strategic advantage in distinctiveness. There is also, however, a fine line between distinctive and weird, a line that is not in this case determined by the university but by broader changes in society. If these societal changes were mere fads, I along with most other alumni would implore you to resist them, but the influence of women in our work force, political system, and culture is irreversible. Denying these trends threatens our ability to preserve what really sets us apart: the virtue of W & L has always been the uncommon character of its people, not their common sex, and drifting from distinctive to weird prevents us from attracting bright, open-minded faculty and students.

When an institution departs from the norm, it is necessary to justify that deviation as conferring certain benefits. Our size, focus on liberal arts, emphasis on teaching, and honor system are distinctive and beneficial. Coeducation threatens none of these and to adhere to a tradition that is unconnected to any value merely for the sake of preserving a tradition is the height of illiberal thinking and the antithesis of what a W & L education seeks to develop.

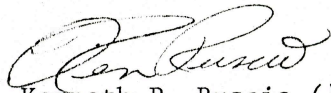
If you and the Board decide on coeducation, I am confident (and hopeful) that you will present the case better than I have. The emotion and sentiment run deep and arguing the case by refuting the other side's claims -- that is, arguing the case negatively instead of positively -- would be divisive. Besides, those who have made up their minds, and that includes most of us, will not be persuaded otherwise. On the other hand,

President John Wilson
October 20, 1983
Page Three

the depth of the alumni's feeling about coeducation is exceeded only by their commitment to W & L, and while the issue divides us on one level, a decision to admit women would certainly not in the long run set us against each other. The bond that unites us is too strong. I have a feeling you already realize that, and whatever the Board's decision, that bond will, as it has throughout our past, override any differences and direct all of us to the continued excellence of W & L.

Best of luck, and if I can be of any assistance, please let me know.

Best wishes,



Kenneth P. Ruscio ('76 A)
Postdoctoral Research Scholar

KPR/ms

October 31, 1983

Dr. Kenneth P. Ruscio
Department of Education
University of California, Los Angeles
Los Angeles, California 90024

Dear Dr. Ruscio:

What a wonderfully refreshing letter you caused to come to my desk-- and at just the right moment in just the right week. I am most grateful to have your thoughtful views. I had almost despaired of the possibility that one could talk about the issue in a rational way.

Your perception of the University's distinctiveness is identical to my own. When I receive letters from alumni telling me that I am bent upon destroying the University they love, I write always to ask if they can help me understand what parts of what is most valuable to us will be damaged and in what way, were women to be here in the daytime as well as after dark. I await the first reply. I hope I have not inadvertently offended them by asking for their help in this way.

Anyway, we will move forward as carefully and sensibly as we can. If I may I will want to share your letter rather widely at the right time. I'm sure, for example, that it should be shared with the Board at the correct time.

Thanks so much for writing and writing so thoughtfully.

Most sincerely

John D. Wilson
President

JDW/bcb

bcc: Mr. James Ballengee w/enclosure