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TAMPA, FLORIDA 33602

June 25, 1984

Dear Alumni and Friends of  
Washington and Lee University:

The purpose of this letter is to respond to the many letters that I have received as a Trustee of Washington and Lee University relative to the issue of whether or not W&L should become coeducational at the undergraduate level of its academic program. I apologize for using this format to write to you since it is less personal than I prefer, but I have thought it best to spend more time reading and considering your letters within the context of a full study of coeducation rather than taking the huge amount of time necessary to respond individually and completely to the more than one hundred letters I have received. Nonetheless, I felt you deserved a response from me to your expression of care and concern about W&L and its future, and this type of communication permits a much more complete response than would be possible on an individual basis. In any event, I have read your letters carefully and thoughtfully, and now I respectfully ask you to do the same with mine since it is my personal view of what I believe has occurred during the last year.

I want to say at the outset that it has been gratifying, but not surprising, to note the high degree of loyalty, affection and support for W&L which has been expressed by so many. The only disconcerting aspect of some letters has been a level of misunderstanding and, in some instances, erroneous information that seems to exist relative to the Board of Trustees' study of coeducation. In those instances and places where incorrect perceptions, insinuations and rumors about that study have been expressed, I believe that a disservice has been done to the seriousness of the process in which the Board of Trustees and the Administration have been involved.

It is hard to know just where to begin in this desire to have you understand and believe that the coeducation issue has not been approached by the Board in a ho-hum, casual manner but has been and is being considered cautiously, carefully and thoroughly. It is appropriate that the quantity and quality of time and thought that have been given to the subject have been substantial. Speaking personally, I am not exaggerating when I assure you that I have spent at least ten per cent of my time during these last few months thinking, reading, talking and agonizing about whether or not W&L should become coeducational at the undergraduate level.

First, let me comment about the composition of the Board of Trustees. There are twenty-five active (non-Emeritus) trustees - twenty-two are alumni, one is the father of a recent graduate, one is the wife of an alumnus, and the other is W&L's President Wilson, an ex-officio member per our corporate by-laws. The average age of the Trustees is fifty-six years old. Geographically, they are from thirteen states and the District of Columbia. They are successful individuals who are respected in their individual businesses and professions. My point in mentioning all of this is not to make self-serving statements but to offer support for my contention that it is a mature, serious, hard-working Board that seeks only to act in what it perceives to be the best interests of the institution to which all of us are devoted - just as you are. It may even interest you to know that when we became Trustees, each of us took an oath to "faithfully discharge the duties of the office to which I have been appointed...to the best of my skill and judgment, without fear or favor."

So much for the Board of Trustees. Now I want to relate how I believe we got ourselves involved in the coeducation issue - again - for the third time in fifteen years.

President Wilson brought to this Board's attention one year ago, and soon after he assumed office, certain information that obviously required our most thoughtful consideration. The information related to certain facts and trends which suggested that a serious decline in the quality and reputation of W&L could occur if they were not addressed in an effective manner. Indeed, there is some evidence to suggest negative effects already are

being experienced. The information presented to us related to a decline in student body quality, a shrinking market relative to our admissions effort, increased competition from private and public educational institutions (at a time when costs continue to rise), and sociological changes that seem to affect the desire of male high school graduates to attend an all-male university. We have a substantial amount of information indicating these trends are real, not imagined, and that their nature is not solely demographic as some would believe! Among the possible solutions to these problems could be a more aggressive recruiting effort, increased financial aid, a reduction in the size of the undergraduate student body and coeducation. There may be other solutions. All of them have varying implications relative to the academic and financial health of this institution, and all of them have been and are being considered by the Board. The only circumstance that has not been considered (and will not be considered, in my judgment) is a lowering of academic standards since that would negatively affect the long term reputation of the institution.

It did not occur to me (nor do I believe it occurred to most of the other Trustees) that W&L's alumni and friends would want us to do anything other than study the information that was and could be made available to us and then make whatever decisions seem appropriate. Indeed, it is my opinion that our duties require that of us. As to President Wilson having raised the coeducation issue so early in his presidency, I believe he did so because he believed the magnitude of the potential problem made it prudent to do so.

The president's report to the Board was reprinted in the November, 1983 issue of the Alumni Magazine for the sole purpose of seeking to inform our alumni about the nature of these potential threats to which I have referred. I commend another reading of that report to you. It would be foolish for any of us to pretend these problems do not exist, and there is no question in my mind - nor should there be in yours - that what this Board is attempting to determine is how best to respond to them. Coeducation may or may not be the solution - but it is certainly one of the alternatives that should be considered.

Relative to the coeducation portion of our studies, it is certainly apparent that we are dealing with a highly emotional and personal issue about which intelligent and honorable individuals can and do disagree (evidence of this follows later in this letter). I believe it was our hope that its merits could be considered calmly, rationally and thoroughly so that a carefully reasoned decision could be made, as it should be, solely on the basis of what our collective judgment indicated would be in the best interests of this special place.

A letter was written to the alumni to advise them of the decision to consider coeducation once again. It described more fully the study process that was being pursued. In addition, information about our admissions program as well as other details relating to the study process were included in more recent issues of the Alumni Magazine. Finally, as you know, an Alumni Survey was conducted recently for the purpose of obtaining expressions of thought and feeling about the University in general and the coeducation issue in particular. All of this was done in order to keep our alumni and friends informed about the nature of what was occurring. I honestly do not know how we could have tried harder to disclose more completely what was going on.

Speaking as one Trustee, I believe that it is our intention, individually and collectively, to do what is required of us relative to the institution as a whole. While the coeducation issue was brought to us by the Administration, the members of the Board have been (and still are) deeply involved in the study of all of the alternatives available to us, and each was assigned substantial duties as part of the study process. The Executive Committee took as its assignment the consideration of the "intangibles" relating to the W&L experience since it was recognized that there are special qualities relating to this institution that do not necessarily relate to others.

Interestingly, some letters have cautioned us not to take the "easy way out" by becoming coeducational. Others have encouraged us not to take the "easy way out" by remaining all-male! The truth is that either outcome will mean a lot of hard work and will require the more


aggressive recruiting effort and the increased financial aid that were mentioned earlier in this letter. Also, it is interesting how many letters have used the expression "If it ain't broke, don't fix it!" The question before us, in my opinion, relates directly to the degree to which there currently are aspects of the Washington and Lee experience which need "fixing". Should the Trustees conclude that there are, and that coeducation may be the best way to do it, we should then heed the alumnus who wrote: "I submit that the real violation of trust would be to the future of the University, if we did not consider co-education as a way to make W&L the best institution we can. That ultimately is the question: will coeducation in the undergraduate school make Washington and Lee a better school and a better place?" Isn't that really the question?

I cannot resist relating a particular reason why the environment in which this decision is being made is so difficult - and it pertains to my desire as a Trustee to be responsive to the thoughts and feelings of W&L alumni and friends. What would you do if you received letters that included these comments: "Keep Washington & Lee all-male." "Washington and Lee needs to become a coeducational institution." "If our school decides in favor of co-education, I will no longer support our school." "I will continue to support Washington and Lee...in whatever decision is made, but I strongly support the idea of admitting women to our school." "It is literally painful for me to contemplate co-education... a development which I think would utterly destroy the unique quality of our school." "I do not think coeducation, in any way, endangers the real qualities and distinctions of Washington & Lee...the Honor System, the small enrollment, quality faculty, distinguished history and the close sense of community. Males have no monopoly on these assets." Multiply those comments several dozen times, and you will have a flavor of what my mail has revealed in recent months - and why a decision must be based on carefully developed conviction. I must confess that my favorite comment was: "Regardless of the outcome of this debate, I intend to continue to support the University to the best of my ability." It is a credit to W&L and to its alumni and friends that comments similar to this one have been made frequently in the letters I have received.

In conclusion, as I thank you for reading this probably-too-long letter, I earnestly ask you to believe, as I do, that all of the Trustees are acutely aware of their responsibilities associated with the care and protection of this wonderful and historic institution. While I honestly do not know what the Board will decide relative to coeducation at its meeting next month, I do believe that it is our duty to you as alumni and friends - indeed, to all of the University's constituencies past and future - to live up to W&L's motto of "not unmindful of the future" and to make decisions which our collective judgment indicates will foster an atmosphere and experience that best results in the University's institutional goals being realized. We are, after all, an academic institution, and we dare not become so bogged down in the form of what we are (whether all-male or coeducational) that we do not pay proper attention to the substance (the academic and human qualities that made W&L a special place).

This will have been a difficult, challenging and time-consuming process, but I take consolation in knowing that the process will have been worthwhile regardless of the outcome. Whether the decision is to become coeducational or to remain all-male, it will result from the Trustees' strong belief that we should take the chosen course for sound reasons. We will then have even more confidence in what we are and how we may become even better. In either circumstance, we must remember that we are part of the Washington and Lee University "family" - with common bonds and uncommon goals. We must go forward into the future - as Lee and as Washington would have us go - with courage and understanding and confidence - and with loyalty to and affection for this institution which should always command the respect deserved by the two men whose name it carries.

Sincerely,

  
J. Thomas Touchton

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