

FRANK PARSONS

February 29, 1996

—

Mame Warren,
interviewer

Warren: Our theme for today is academics at Washington and Lee, and my first question has to do with the Leyburn Plan proposed by just-arrived Dean Leyburn, is that right?

Parsons: That's correct.

Warren: Tell me what you know about the Leyburn Plan.

Parsons: The Leyburn Plan has been talked about for many years at Washington and Lee. It was a much more frequent topic of discussion in the first years that I worked here, because I came to Washington and Lee as a student in 1949, just almost two years after Dr. Leyburn made his memorable talk to the Faculty Discussion Club in November of 1947. The Leyburn Plan, like I say, was talked about around the campus. Some faculty members were greatly in admiration of it; others were not.

He, in effect, on that evening—I haven't committed the plan to memory, but, in effect, that evening he told Washington and Lee's faculty that the university, while a splendid institution on the basis of many levels of evaluation, it nevertheless was not nearly as good as it could be and, indeed, should be. And he went on to spell out chapter and verse as to what he thought the major shortcomings of the institution were. He didn't present these as recommendations, but he laid out these topics for debate among the faculty over the following days, weeks, and months, perhaps even years, certain specific issues that they should address to see if Washington and Lee could,

indeed, aspire to be the foremost teaching institution in the United States, certainly one of the better teaching institutions.

From that point on, then, I think Washington and Lee did have a new assessment of itself, if, indeed, there is such a thing as a depersonalized institutional assessment of itself. When I say Washington and Lee had an assessment of itself, I mean the faculty, students, and eventually alumni, I think came to appreciate the goals that he established on that evening for the institution. In embracing these goals, I do not think that those who did so were always aware that they were joining in their attitudes with Dean Leyburn.

Warren: Tell me what you mean by that.

Parsons: I mean Dean Leyburn just simply said, "We've got to be proud of more things here, for instance, than our football team, our Fancy Dress Balls, and our fraternity system." Those weren't his exact words, but that essentially was three things he cited there that we wanted to be proud of and noted for the challenging educational program that we would offer them, and he suggested that maybe while we had many good faculty members, many good professors, that there were ways in which we could improve the status of our faculty.

He suggested ways in which we could improve our curriculum. He was particularly dismayed by the absence of fine arts from our curriculum at that time, and I think one of his lasting elements of professional satisfaction was that he was responsible for bringing in the first professor of fine arts to Washington and Lee. At that time you could count the professors, some from other departments, who would offer sort of peripheral courses sort of in the arts. There was a growth that began then that results now in a very firmly established faculty in the fine arts and in the performing arts as well. So he did begin something that he would be very pleased with the way it manifests itself on the campus now.

Warren: One thing that I think is very interesting about your perspective is that Dean Leyburn laid out this challenge in 1947, you arrived on campus in 1949, and with the exception of your period of going off to Korea, you've been here as a witness through all the ensuing years. What's your sense of whether Dean Leyburn's ideas have been accomplished or not? I know you've spoken to that somewhat.

Parsons: I think in large dimension this is one of the things I'm interested in following up and seeking the opinions of others.

Warren: Through the time you've been here, has it been a steady achievement?

Parsons: Yes. Well, yes, I would say that the trend line has always been upward from that time, that I don't think there has been a period, even when we were undergoing some rather rigorous pressures in the admissions process, when our applicants slipped below 1,000, even then I think the quality of the great majority of our students prove to be as good as we had ever had. It was at that time and in some of the following years that we did have to dip deeper and deeper into our applicant pool to produce a class, and in dipping deeper, we were dredging up some students that did not challenge our professors and did not meet the educational opportunities here head on like they should be capable of doing.

So I think over the years, though, that the trend line has been a steady improvement. Let me cite something that happened not long after I came to work at Washington and Lee. There was always the assumption – let me say this, too – there was always the assumption when I was a student at Washington and Lee that we, meaning my classmates and I, were attending the premier teaching institution in the state of Virginia. Everyone seemed to be aware that with the possible exception of Mr. Jefferson's academicsl village on the other side of the mountain, and, of course, the University of Virginia was a much larger institution even then, even more so – well, I guess the size differential is greater today than it was then, but even so, it was a full-blown university, and Washington and Lee was a college with a law school.

So we felt like we were attending the best school in Virginia, perhaps the best school in the South. We thought we were one of the best schools in the country. We didn't always have the perspective for that kind of evaluation that youngsters might have, but, nevertheless, that was our feeling.

I remember shortly after I came in as a freshman, it may have been my freshman year, one of Dean Leyburn's recommendations or debate topics seemed to come to pass, and that was there was a humanities course that was introduced as sort of a senior capstone course, that all seniors would be required to take this course, in addition to some other rather rigorous requirements that were imposed on freshmen. A senior would also have to take this course, and it would be a course in the general humanities that would attempt to somehow bring together for a better understanding on the part of these soon-to-be graduates as to what education should have done for them. For many it would be underscoring what they missed. [Laughter] For others, it might be a very useful exercise.

I recall among my fellow students at that time a certain dismay over this, and I recall my own sense of relief when I heard others complain about it, and I recall my own sense of relief that I would be able to graduate under the catalog for the year in which I had entered, and that since this was a change in the catalog after I'd entered, I wouldn't have to abide by it. I could meet the requirements for the freshmen who came in in 1949, and I wouldn't have to contend with the requirements that cropped up in 1951 when I came back from Korea. As I recall, there was sufficient controversy over the success of that senior requirement that it did not last long. I can't put my finger on the date now when it passed away, but it didn't last too long.

Warren: Sounds like a great course to me. I'd love to take it.

Parsons: I think the purposes of that course are met in other ways here now. We have some interdisciplinary courses that have come about over the years that achieve some of its goals. We have a great variety of seminar courses now that sometimes address

multiple disciplinary subjects. In some of the departments, this isn't the total companion to his humanities course, there are some departments that require comprehensive examinations that try to bring together all the things that were taught within that department, at least in a coherent way, challenging the students to think coherently about what they've been exposed to.

So again, these were things that were on his mind. I'm certain all these things were on his mind. In my general conclusion here, subject to some further study and confirmation, is that if Dr. Leyburn were alive today and come back and look at Washington and Lee's curriculum, to examine the credentials of its faculty, to be aware of what they are doing in the way of scholarship and professional self-development, if he were to look upon the university and see the multiple co-curricular activities, the publications that students are engaged in, he would be very proud of what Washington and Lee has become. Knowing him, he would never take much credit for that other than the role he played when he was our – I started to say one of the best, but I'd go on and say he was our premier professor for many years. I would say that probably more students among our alumni looked to him as the quintessential Washington and Lee professor than any other single person. I can't say that I can do that, because I never took a course from him. Again, I was greatly persuaded by attitudes of others. He challenged his students, and having started late to college, I'm a little ashamed to admit this, but I wasn't looking for too many challenges. I wanted to get out of college and get on with my life.

Warren: And you're still here, Frank. [Laughter]

Parsons: Yes, I'm still here. But I could have taken a much richer course of study here than I did. I took a very nice course of study. I was preparing myself for a profession in journalism, and I had a good break in that another one of the finest teachers who we ever had here, Tom Riegel, was one of my mentors. Thanks to him, I was able to take all of the advanced courses that I chose to take in journalism without the prerequisites,

because I had come into Washington and Lee with a substantial amount of newspapering experience, and he was kind enough to not require me to take beginner's reporting and intermediate reporting and copy editing, because I had done all this.

So I actually majored in what is now called politics, what was then called political science, and I did that on the recommendation of a newspaper correspondent friend of mine when I was in Korea, who said that I should consider majoring in something other than journalism, that I would be wasting my time taking some of these basic journalism major courses, that I'd already proven my ability to work alongside professional newsmen and to do so in a creditable manner, and he suggested I major in English or history or economics or political science, whereupon he said, "Political science. Ninety percent of what you read in the newspapers is either international relations, government, or politics. The other 10 percent is sex and violence. You can study that on your own." [Laughter] Well, what I think is, if Nate Polowetsky were around today, he would agree with me that I think the balance between international relations, government, and politics has reached out and embraced violence and sex, and it's all intertwined, so political science, or politics, is as good a major for studying the human condition as anything you can find. So I did major in that.

Again, pointing up Dr. Leyburn's vantage point on this, the political science department at that time was not the strongest department in the university. I hesitate to say it was even good. One didn't discover this until you were deeply engaged in the study of political science, and some of the professors that I encountered in the political science department are among really fondly remembered individuals. In the case of one, he's a virtual Washington and Lee saint, but not because he was a good professor, because of other things he did while he was here. It was a very unchallenging major. So I'm counted both as a major in political science and/or in the journalism department as well, because I took enough courses in journalism to qualify as a major, I just took the more advanced ones.

Warren: You've used the word "challenge" several times in different ways, and I think that's an interesting word. When we were talking about the admissions, you said that there were students coming in who didn't challenge the faculty. Was there a shift—I don't want to put words in your mouth, but when Leyburn arrived, that the faculty didn't care about being challenged, but as new people came in, they were more interested in having better students?

Parsons: The best professors here liked to teach bright students. That was true then; I think it's always been true here. It certainly became true in the years, I'd say, during the seventies and eighties when we were dealing with admissions changes, and because of our all-male status and because we were trying to seek good students, we were seeing our admissions numbers go up, but we were having to admit more in order to make a class. This resulted in students coming in that were essentially dullards in class. I can say almost across the board that why our faculty in the seventies, when we pondered coeducation in several earlier studies, the great majority of them felt that they were not being challenged. They wanted to teach, across the board, a brighter student body, and they saw coeducation as one of the best ways to achieve that.

Warren: Let's make that shift, then, to talking about how coeducation came to be here.

Parsons: Well, talk about coeducation goes back into the late 1800s, 1888, 1896, 1898. There are references in publications here to coeducation and what it might do for the school and what it might do to the school.

Warren: I actually found a reference that one of the debating societies debated it in 1873. I would love to have a transcript of that debate, but, of course, that doesn't exist.

Parsons: As we went through the study that did result in the decision to become coeducational, I did a little bit of research on earlier manifestations of coeducation interest, and I came across some interesting references. One professor in particular, in the late 1800s, really was very strongly in support of coeducation, and I featured him in a little piece I did for the alumni magazine about a brief history of coeducation at

Washington and Lee. He thought it was essential that we teach young women. I ended up the article by quoting him, saying, "We are headed toward a precipice," and I said, "Was he talking about coeducation? No, he was talking about Fancy Dress. He didn't like the idea of the women out there in the frilly dresses that were in vogue at that time. He wanted women in their place; he thought it was in the classroom, not on the dance floor. [Laughter]

Warren: Who was this?

Parsons: A professor in English, Hoag [phonetic]. I'd have to look it up. I don't carry his full name in my head. But he was quite a thorn in the side, I think, of the faculty. He was always challenging them on things.

Warren: When was this?

Parsons: This was in the late 1800s, 1898, around there, 1896. He was a real advocate of coeducation, one of the first outspoken advocates for it.

It doesn't turn up too often. I can recall in my own experience when we were engaged in our first institutional self-study, by which we achieved reaccreditation through the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, the Commission on Colleges. They require every ten years for an institution to go through a very difficult self-examination as to what their purpose is, how well they fulfill the purpose, and just what it is that they offer and whether they could be doing a better job, and there are certain standards that you have to meet. So the self-study process is something that colleges must do. I don't know of any that really like to do it, although it can be a very useful exercise. It's always proven so here at Washington and Lee.

But in 1964, '65, and '66, when we were engaged in this self-study, I can remember working on a Statement of Institutional Philosophy, and I was preparing some paragraphs that would stimulate the thinking of others on the self-study steering committee, and I remember saying that trying to get them to free their minds from any shackles that limited the way in which they could perceive Washington and Lee in the

future, and I remember I conceded that with the exception of admitting women to Washington and Lee, we should not have any other impediments to change here. [Laughter] I was willing to concede that at the time, that Washington and Lee would not ever admit women. At the same I said that, this was on the edge. If you think in the mid-sixties, this was on the edge of the great transition that began shortly after that at Princeton and Dartmouth and other previously all-men's colleges, began accepting women and became coeducational. Then it spread and eventually ate up almost all of the men's colleges.

I remember in 1956, President Gaines was so proud, and I was the publicity director at that time and it was my job to take this morsel of integrity and quality and make sure it got proper play in the newspapers, Washington and Lee was chosen by the *Chicago Tribune* as one of the ten best men's colleges in the United States. I found occasion once to remark somewhat playfully – that's my inclination to make facetious remarks – I said, "If Dr. Gaines were alive today, he'd be proud that we'd improved. We're among the top five men's colleges in the United States," because we were down to about five left. [Laughter] And among that five, perhaps we could have claimed to be the best. But in any event, he was very proud of that.

I lost my train of thought there. Why did I go back to '56?

Warren: You were talking about self-studies.

Parsons: The self-study. We did not spend a lot of time thinking about coeducation in the first self-study. By the time we got around to 1978 – I think I'm correct in this, but again I would have to check the documentation on it – we made it plain to the visiting committee and to the Southern Association that we were not unaware of the possibility of improving the institution by admitting women. I think we noted for their information that we engaged in a self-study in 1970 and we had engaged in another study of coeducation, it was a self-study, I guess, in 1975-76, and our next institutional

self-study that we had a visiting committee come for would have been in 1978, as I recall.

So we were aware of it, but it was not in the purview of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools to say, "You've got to become coed." There are many fine women's colleges and several men's colleges – maybe not several, but at the time several – that are in the Southern Association that remain single-sex, so they aren't going to go out and say, "We aren't going to credit you unless you're coed." But we like to convince these visiting committees that we are intellectually alive here and aware of what's going on around us. I think it did turn up in that report.

Then the notion of coeducation was on our minds, and I can speak from personal experience here. I do know that when we began to work on some very serious capital projects, major building needs that had to be addressed in the early seventies, I know that in the work that we did at Doremus Gymnasium, the expansion into what is now known as the Warner Center, as we were doing that, we were aware that what we were doing there would be very easy to adapt for women students. When we built the law school, we built the law school knowing that we might have women in the law school. Indeed, that had come to pass even before we got into the new building, but from the beginning, coeducation in the law school was anticipated. As we added the new university undergraduate library, now the James G. Leyburn Library, coeducation was anticipated there. So almost all of our planning assumptions as we worked our way through these major needs and into some subordinate physical improvements almost always was done consciously with looking ahead to the future and thinking of how would this work if we had women students.

I recall specifically when Bob Huntley became president in 1968, in the fall of 1968, he was addressing an organization, I don't think it exists here anymore, but at that time it was called the Parents Advisory Council, and this was a group of twenty-five or thirty parents, couples mainly, who would meet with us at least once a year, sometimes

more often, to share with us their perceptions and their sense of what Washington and Lee was doing right and what it was doing wrong. I recall when Bob was talking to that first group that he met with as president, someone asked him, "When is Washington and Lee going to become coed?" and he was always very thoughtful in his responses, and he said, "Well, I can't say for certain when Washington and Lee will become coed or if Washington and Lee will become coed, but what I can say is I think it will be unlikely if Washington and Lee permits itself to go out of business offering an alternative that no one wants." So with that in mind, I know Bob Huntley's eye was always on the future here and whether or not Washington and Lee would find itself in a position where its best course of action would be to become coeducational.

Within two years of having made that statement, Washington and Lee had engaged in its first study of coeducation, and that study was not directed toward bringing forth a recommendation that we remain all male or become coeducational. The purpose of that study was to examine the consequences of a move to coeducation. What would be the consequences of a move to coeducation?

This study was accomplished by looking at several models. One model envisioned that we would remain the same size and accept women as some fraction of that total enrollment. Another model suggested that we would keep the same number of men, but we would add women in some ratio. And I think a third model was what we sometimes refer to as a sex-blind admissions policy where we let things seek its own level. We haven't quite achieved that yet, but I can only speculate as to how quickly that will come about, but I think it is going to come about. I think that we will at some point depart from our efforts to maintain what has become – I'm generalizing here – a 60:40 ratio, men to women.

Warren: We're up to about 1970 now.

Parsons: This was a study in '70. Then the charge that Bob Huntley got from the board of trustees, as I recall, this was one of the very first meetings where I sat through the

whole board meeting as his assistant, and I remember them discussing the report, and the charge instructed him to thank the committee that had worked very hard on this, very good leadership under Professor Hodges, Lewis Hodges, as the chairman of the committee, Professor Tom Amison [phonetic], who was no longer with Washington and Lee but one of our very fine chemistry professors, worked very hard on it. So the board said, "Thank the committee for the good work and tell them that we will not take any action on the report at this time other than to ask the president to keep them informed of anything they ought to know about coeducation."

So President Huntley proceeded to do that. He visited, got to know the presidents of colleges that were making the transition. He asked them why they were doing it, what compelled them to make the move. He took all this to heart and then took it back to the board of trustees.

Meanwhile, considerable pressure built within the university not only from the faculty, who saw coeducation as a means to improving the academic quality of the institution, but from the students. The student attitude would vary from one year to the next there in the seventies. They were against coeducation in 1973 in an informal poll, but were for it in 1974. They were for it in 1978, but against it in 1979. It almost depended upon who was carrying the flag and who was waving it the most vigorously.

Warren: Who would conduct a poll like that?

Parsons: The students would do it themselves. I think I'm correct in this, that these were students polls. Every now and then there would be some kind of straw vote among the faculty to establish the point of view that the institution should take another look at it.

So there was sufficient pressure around 1974, '75, I guess, that the board of trustees decided that they would conduct another study. This time the board itself would take the initiative and there would be a board study committee under the chairmanship of Frank Brooks of Baltimore. I hope I don't do Frank Brooks and the

others who served on that committee – I think Gordon Leggett, whose wife now serves on the board of trustees, I know Gordon was on the committee – I don't want to do them a disservice, but I don't think that their hearts were really in it. To them it was a tough thing to get their arms around, and I think their initiative sort of languished for a time there. I think President Huntley himself saw that the study was likely to be – well, he never said this, but this is my assessment, that the trustee study might prove to be an embarrassment to the trustees unless they went about it in a little more orderly way.

I recall one of the things that President Huntley did to stimulate their thinking was to sit down and to list the reasons why Washington and Lee should become coeducational, and then he listed the reasons why we should not, the pros and the cons. Well, I learned something from him about law at that time. I learned a lot about law from him, little bits and pieces here and there. But I discovered that sometime when you put down the pros and cons of an issue, they don't really balance each other out. Sometimes if you say something, a reason for becoming coeducational, some of the reasons for not don't exactly speak to the other issue.

So what he did was, he went back, and for all those reasons why Washington and Lee should become coeducational, he would give the rebuttal to that reason, and he did the same thing for the reasons why we should remain all male, give the rebuttals to those. It was a very interesting exercise to read over what he did there. He turned that over to the committee and, indeed, it did stimulate their thinking.

There were other activities that went on within the university, studies done. I remember Professor Bob McAran [phonetic], I believe was involved in – let me be careful here. I may be confusing one study with another. I'd have to check that. But there were supporting studies here done on behalf of the trustees, and the information turned over to them. I know a lot of financial models were run at the time.

So the upshot was at that time, in 1976 when the report was made a part of the trustees' agenda and was acted upon, the action at that time was that they saw no

compelling reason that Washington and Lee should admit undergraduate women at that time. I think the report noted that we now had women in the law school and that seemed to be going well, but they saw no compelling reason at that time why Washington and Lee should accept undergraduate women. I don't recall whether it said specifically, but it certainly was implicit in that statement that they expected to keep their eyes open and be alert to reasons that might become compelling.

Warren: At the same time they're coming to this conclusion, this is the same time when the faculty is feeling that the quality of the average student is slipping?

Parsons: Yes.

Warren: Would the board have been aware of that?

Parsons: The board probably was not as aware of it then as it would be today. The mechanism or the structure was not quite in place at that time, if my memory serves me correctly. We had established, in a reorganization of the board in the early seventies, a very effective committee structure, and I'm not certain that the Academic Affairs Committee or the Student Life Committee had come into existence at that time. I would have to check that to make certain. Certainly if the way in which those committees function today, they would discover this attitude on the part of faculty, on the part of students. The avenues of communication are wide open now, compared to what we had in the seventies, because we were just making a transition from a board whose members were chosen and served for life or until they retired, and most of them did not retire; death would take them away.

We were moving from a self-perpetuating board into a different type of board that had mandatory retirement at age seventy. Trustees were elected for specific terms of six years. You could serve two consecutive terms and then there was a requirement that even if you still had time remaining before you would reach age seventy, you would have to step down as a trustee for at least a year, at which time you could be reelected. In one case, this happened. We happened to reelect a man who was a very

severe critic of coeducation, and he served about a year or so in his third term on the board and then he resigned, and the purpose of his resignation was to lead the fight against coeducation.

So I guess to address your question, the trustees were not as aware at that moment. They were getting more and more aware. Bob Huntley was a very effective communicator with the board, and he instituted the policy of others among his senior staff of meeting with the board, so there were increased opportunities for members of the board of trustees to talk with the dean of students, to talk with the dean of the college, the dean of the commerce school, the dean of the law school, and by means both informal and formal, to have a better sense of what was going on and these additional perspectives presented to them, in addition to Bob Huntley's own superb ability to communicate with them.

Warren: What was Bob Huntley's take on coeducation?

Parsons: I think Bob's vision of the future was it was inevitable that we would become coed.

Warren: Was it something inevitable that he desired or was it something inevitable that he dreaded?

Parsons: As the father of three daughters, I think he probably would not have minded it. I never really pressed him on it. I remember we circulated among the administration and members of the faculty, we may have even mentioned it in the alumni magazine, but there was a very eloquent article that appeared in the *Princeton Alumni Weekly*, and I can remember everything about it except the person's name. I can remember why he was someone of note. He was a graduate of Princeton. He wrote the book for the musical played on Broadway and elsewhere, too, based upon the Peanuts comic strip, "You're a Good Man, Charlie Brown." He wrote under the title "We Were Never Allowed to Mourn," and it was a lament that men's colleges had passed from the scene

so quickly that there hadn't been time for those who admired them to lament their passing and to realize what it was we were losing until it essentially had all gone.

I guess his remarks would be branded sexist today, but what he said was, I think it stands up and it certainly would prove valid for women's colleges as well, he said that in the single-sex college – and here he was talking about the male college, he wasn't talking about the women, but he was addressing the men's college – he said there was a certain elegance to it, something that now we refer to as male bonding, you know, and "good old boy" networks and all the other almost pejorative terms that are associated now. But he expressed it in a very elegant way. He talked about the camaraderie and the good feelings. If I remember correctly, he may have drawn some parallels to serving together in the military, the same kind of shared experiences, causing a good feeling, and that education itself was valid to the extent that men and women would occasionally distract each other, at least it removed that distraction from those of other academic purposes.

Warren: That sounds like a nice article. I'd like to track that down.

We need to turn the tape over.

[Begin Tape 1, Side 2]

Parsons: Let me add a footnote to what we were talking about on the other side about this article in the *Princeton Alumni Weekly*. I wouldn't be surprised if Bob Huntley's view on coeducation was vastly different from mine, which simply is I wish, speaking for my own self, I think I did well at Washington and Lee partly because there was not the distraction of young women around. I find the company of young woman very pleasant, not that I studied so hard when I was here or anything like that, but I think I could have been very easily distracted as a student. So I think that there is a place for single-sex education.

I regret the fact that the imbalance that was spoken to in this Princeton article became so severe. The Princeton article mentioned the fact that you had to have a

certain number of men's colleges to make this work, that when it got down to a precious few, that they became unusual. In other words, they were out of the mainstream of education, appeared to be out of the mainstream of education. Bob Huntley said essentially the same thing long before we ever saw the Princeton article. He said that Washington and Lee should never permit itself to be perceived as quaint. So when you get down to just a few colleges doing something as narrow as to say, "We're going to only teach men," well, that can be perceived as being quaint by others, and he said we shouldn't embrace quaintness. [Laughter]

Later on, when President Wilson was under severe criticism among many alumni for having brought up the coeducation issue and appearing to advance it in a way that made everyone think that he thought it was the best idea for Washington and Lee, which I think he did, but John Wilson was under severe criticism, and I saw some of the mail that would come to him. He would share it with me. I was his assistant at the time. I remember him reading excerpts to me from letters, and he would say, "I can't survive this," and I would try to reassure him that, indeed, I thought he could survive it.

At that time, Bob Huntley was a member of the law school faculty and occupied an office over in Lewis Hall, and I dropped in to see him one day. I either volunteered the information, knowing that he was interested in it, or he may have asked me. Bob was always very circumspect about inquiring about how John Wilson was conducting his presidency. The last thing he wanted to do was be intrusive or be perceived as overly interested.

But we got to talking, and Bob gave me some advice that I should implement as the president's assistant, and one was, "Don't let the president or the trustees get concerned about the monetary costs of converting the campus in ways to accept women." I can almost remember his words. "You and I both know that these buildings will not require much modification," and also he said, "John Wilson must not lose this

fight." He said, "If he does, he's done as president." I'm not sure he used exactly those words, but that was the sentiment, that John must not be permitted to fail in this initiative, because he felt that should the trustees vote him down—I think Bob Huntley had a very high regard for John Wilson, and he did not want to see his presidency end on that note, but I think he felt that John would have had a tough time to be then a forward-moving, assertive president after that. Fortunately, none of that happened.

The trustees did support the coeducation initiative and they did so under rather rigorous rules. I've often said that if Jack Warner wanted to lead the fight against coeducation, he should not have resigned from the board, he should have stayed on, and with a little bit of persuasive power, he might have won at least one other trustee, and that's all it would have taken, his vote and somebody else's, because the trustees decided that this issue was too important to be settled by a simple majority, as most issues are before the board. So they said it had to be a two-thirds vote. Again here I'd want to check my records on this, but by their rules it was a narrow vote. It was substantially wide. I'll just say fifteen to eleven or something like that, but it would have only taken two votes to swing it around so it didn't work. Fifteen to seven, maybe. But it was by a two-thirds majority, but not much of a cushion for that majority.

So we made the transition. I was looking over the ways in which I tried, as the editor of the alumni magazine, that was my role—in addition to being assistant to the president, I also was the person in charge of our public relations office and publications office.

Warren: What time period are we talking about?

Parsons: This is in the early eighties.

Warren: You've had so many hats, Frank, you have to keep them straight.

Parsons: This was a strange situation. When I became Bob Huntley's assistant, even though it defied all the other orderly tables of organization that most colleges have, ours, for good reason, at least we thought it was good reason at the time, members of

our staff who had been hired by me and who worked for me up to the time I became Bob Huntley's assistant, they continued to report to me, and they did not want to report to somebody else. So Bob Huntley, in his wisdom, said they didn't have to; we could work this out. We didn't have to follow any rigid table of organization, and it worked quite effectively.

Bob Huntley also had the good sense to sit down with me and to make certain that I had the good sense to be aware of the fact that the new president coming in might not want me as his assistant, so that my long service to Washington and Lee could continue, that maybe we ought to figure out something else for me to do. I thought about it, and I said, "Well, what I can do, I could go back to being in charge exclusively over the PR, the publicity office and the publications office." At that time, too, I was also responsible for the print shop, which was sort of a back-shop wing of the publications operation. It no longer was part of the journalism department in ways that it used to be, ways that it came into being.

So I proposed that I have the title of university editor, and that this would give me some influence over the alumni magazine and other publications, the catalog, and would continue to enable these individuals who worked for me before to continue in a happy relationship, one that they were comfortable with. I'll speak here not for the record, but I was dealing with three very unusual, very talented persons. I was dealing with Bob Keefe [phonetic], who had his own perspective on things; I was dealing with Rom Weatherman, who also had some difficulties that he made no secret of. He suffered greatly from depression and was either riding a high or riding a very deep low. He was a roller-coaster man from day one. Then we had the irrepressible Sally Mann [phonetic] as our photographer, who brought with her certain sensitivities that had to be dealt with.

Warren: Oh, not Sally.

Parsons: [Laughter] But these were three immensely talented people, and I go back and look at the alumni magazines that we turned out with those contributions from those three persons, well, I always feel very proud that I was involved with bringing them to bear on Washington and Lee's publications.

Well, anyhow, I was university editor at that time, and one of the things that I set out to do very purposely was to let the magazine be a forum. At that time we introduced the Letters to the Editor column to be a forum in which alumni, in addition to writing specifically to the president, they could express their views where they'd be seen by other alumni. And I wanted to give Jack Warner a forum in which to express his views, and I wanted an opportunity for the president and others here, who wanted to support coeducation, or at least to identify the issues. If they didn't come out and support it, we wanted at least to be able to identify the issues as to why it was timely to think about this. I wanted to have a forum for that.

I alluded earlier to this article I did on the history of coeducation. We kept the alumni updated. At that time, the alumni magazine came out six times a year, every two months, and this was a frequency that helped us keep the issue before them. I invited Marshall Nuckols, former rector of the board, to permit me to write something for him that he'd be willing to have printed over his name, which addressed the responsibilities the trustees have. So what we did, literally we printed the names of all the trustees who were going to have to bear this burden of making this decision, and we did that so that alumni out there who wanted to get in touch with them, they could. They knew who was on the board; they wouldn't have to wonder who was on the board of trustees.

In this little statement by Marshall Nuckles, former rector, he pointed out how the trustees should perceive themselves as individuals holding in trust the future of this institution. So we did that, and we reported on the results of our survey of alumni, tried to present, although if there was a failing in these efforts, we somehow didn't

stress enough that this survey of alumni attitude wasn't a referendum. People would say, "Well, we voted it down, didn't we?" "Well, no, you didn't vote it down. It wasn't a yea/nay voted up or voted down thing. We were simply trying to find out what you thought about it, and the purpose of the survey was to establish the climate in which the trustees would make the decision."

We wanted the trustees to be aware of the climate in which they were making the decision, so that survey, I think, helped them in that regard because the survey, first of all, it went out to all alumni for whom we had good addresses, and out of some sixteen thousand—I'm speaking in round numbers here—we got back somewhere between six and seven thousand returns. The questions were very carefully worded, trying to avoid questionnaire bias. We engaged a firm experienced in this, and as I recall, in their first effort, they did not do as well as we wanted to do in that. We could read into it biased. I remember working very hard trying to rephrase some of their questions, and I think we were successful in doing that. The reason I think we were successful was that when I would try to respond sometimes or to help President Wilson respond to letters that would come in, about as many people claimed we were biased in favor of coeducation as claimed we were biased against the other side. So we offended people on both sides of the issue, so therefore one interpretation you could put on that is that it was an unbiased questionnaire.

It spoke to a lot of things. But we asked them, "If you had your druthers (and I'm paraphrasing here), should Washington and Lee remain all male or become coeducational?" And the majority, not an overwhelming majority, but a majority of those responding said they'd like for it to remain all male. Then we asked them, "Would you want this condition to prevail if it meant the university's academic quality would be lessened?" Then it flipped around. No, they would only want to remain all male if we continued to be the best institution of which we were capable of being, and that if we were going to be less than that, then their attitude toward coeducation as a

remedy was changed. And there were other questions that began to draw the fine distinctions of conditions.

We've never used, in my opinion, that study in ways that we could benefit from it. There was an awful lot of good information in there about how they perceived the institution and their general attitudes from the alumni perspective. As you know, our alumni are spread all across the United States, and we take great pride in attracting students from all over the United States, and these same students, as alumni, tend to disperse themselves all over the country. So our alumni magazine very often is the most convenient and perhaps the best medium for communication we have with the rank and file alumni.

Not all of our alumni are associated with chapters. They may live within a circumferential circle that would draw them into a chapter, but if you lived sixty miles away from a chapter – there is a chapter in Lexington, but, for instance, if there were none here and Roanoke was the closest chapter, it would take a little effort on my part to get down for events that they would plan.

Warren: Who has the study?

Parsons: It's right in this box.

Warren: John Wilson alluded to that, so that is definitely something I'm very interested in looking at.

Parsons: Want me to say anything about how the special meeting to decide the issue came about?

Warren: Sure.

Parsons: It was held in mid-July. Actually, the decision was made on Bastille Day.

[Laughter] It was a very interesting meeting.

Warren: The board normally meets in June?

Parsons: The board had met in May, late May. Normally meets three times a year, usually in October, sometimes in late January or February, sometimes as late as early

March, and then again in late May. But this was a special meeting. They did not want to have to deal with the issue of coeducation in a climate of other distractions, such as budget for next year and things of that kind, so they agreed that they would address the issue in mid-July.

They came, and it was a two-day meeting. It required some careful planning. We had at least one member of the board, maybe two, who could not be there, but, nevertheless, we arranged for their vote to come in, in one case by transatlantic telephone, so that the vote would be on the table. Lots of press attention. We set up a plan that once a decision was made, there would be a press conference. Since the result of the vote was in favor of coeducation, there was some discussion among the board about how to put our best face forward – the phrase I want to use is "to a man," but indeed I think there were at least one or two women on the board then. Again I'd have to check and make sure. But to a person, once it had been decided. It was like where you go back and make the decision unanimous retrospectively.

It was agreed that one of the trustees who had made one of the more eloquent statements in favor of remaining all male agreed to appear as part of that press conference and was represented to the press as having been an opponent and on the other side of the question, but we wanted to assure people that he spoke for those who had been on that side of the issue, that now the issue was decided, we would put it behind us, and we were all going to work to making Washington and Lee succeed in this venture, and that there were no bad feelings among those whose viewpoint had not prevailed.

So I think we did a real good job, as I look back on that, of both informing the alumni constituency of the issues that were at stake, keeping them apprised of developments, and then in the follow-up, when we welcomed our first class of young women and stayed with how they were doing. I think we did a pretty good job of saying to the alumni, "Things have not changed for the worse here, they've changed for

the better. Your fears, which probably were legitimate fears of what might happen, have not come to pass. We are dealing with a much improved educational institution. Our students are happy. Let's address other questions."

Warren: Were the students happy? How did the males react? They met in July. When did women arrive? Was there a year in between?

Parsons: Yes, there was a whole year between.

Warren: So what was the mood on campus?

Parsons: The mood on campus was disgruntlement among students, rejoicing among the faculty. [Laughter] But the students, they had done a number of things in the course of the study to make their positions well known, the most famous of which was draping Old George with a sign that said, "No Marthas." [Laughter] Disgruntlement. There were lots of low-key resentment on the parts of some students. T-shirts, "Coeducation at Washington and Lee: The Beginning of an Error," E-R-R-O-R. Various things like that.

The women themselves, when I think about those 104 young women who came in here in that first class, your admiration has to go out to them, because they were coming into unknown territory, but they were tough. One of my funnier remembrances of the first year of coeducation was the effort made by the Coeducation Steering Committee, of which I was a member. The Coeducation Steering Committee had been called into existence to plan the transition, so that committee's work actually filled up the year that intervened between July of 1984, '85. I lose track of the year. But it wasn't the following September, it was the September after that when we had the first women come. We spent the year addressing issues that we would need to study and changes we would have to make, such as the physical modifications we made in the dormitories to take what had been men's restrooms and bathrooms and modify them for the women. Again, we thought we were very clever. We didn't rip out plumbing; we just

simply boxed it in, recognizing we might have to shift around, might want to make that a men's restroom again, toilet. So we did things like that.

Over in the gym, we made some rather substantial modifications over there to provide the women with the physical education classes where they were required to take physical education, put in locker facilities and shower facilities, again trying to acquaint ourselves with the sensitivities of women.

We were blessed by the fact that on our faculty and the staff and in the law school, we had an unusual number of persons who had been present or even involved in coeducation transitions at other colleges, and they were invaluable in being able to tell Washington and Lee things we'd have to be aware of. And even so, we missed a couple, but we picked up on it.

One of the things that the Coeducation Steering Committee did in that intervening year, we sent teams to Davidson College and another team up to Franklin and Marshall College to pick their brains as to what they had done that they thought was good, and what they would like to do over again if they could, and we came away with some very good, new perspectives on things that we would have to do here.

For instance, at Davidson, we discovered when we went down there something that just hadn't occurred to us here. It might have occurred to someone here, but it hadn't reached our attention, and that was this very severe problem among young women; that is, eating disorders. We ran into, at Davidson, a very definite awareness there that you have to be very sensitive to this, that sometimes it's undetectable until it's gotten to a very serious stage in a young woman's life. They had set up certain peer support groups there that worked from within. It wasn't anything that the administration itself did to identify young women suffering from anorexia and bulimia. Usually your best source of information would be their classmates who are concerned about them and might even be aware of some of the eating habits that they were

pursuing. So I think that this has helped us here in dealing with it, through our counseling and peer support groups. So these were good visits that we had.

We discovered another thing that I felt like was very worthwhile. We quickly became aware of how dark the campus was at night. To the credit of our law students, most of whom come in with litigious chips on their shoulders, women over there have been very tolerant of the fact that the main campus over here is pretty dark. We did a little better of lighting the law school, but if they ever came over here at night, it was pretty dark. So what we did, we got our master planning representatives from a landscape architecture firm in Pittsburgh to come down, and Mr. Arthur, the superintendent of buildings and grounds, joined us.

I got three volunteers from the law school, women's classes at the law school, to meet with us one dark November evening, didn't have to be very late because it gets dark very early in November, and we had dinner together and then we went out and we walked the campus, and wherever they told us that they felt unsafe or they felt that more light would help, we took note of that and we then proceeded to light the campus in an acceptable manner. There are still some areas that I think are a little dark and we ought to do some more changes. You can't do it all overnight. It's been some years now, ten years, but in the main, I have tried to get Washington and Lee to follow the way in which a man down at Davidson, their director of planning and buildings and grounds, he says, "If one woman comes to me and says they think we ought to have a light here, I'll put a light there. I don't fool around. We found some clever ways to run conduits and things, and we try to put the light where they feel unsafe." So in the main, we've been, I think, successful in doing that.

Warren: You've alluded numerous times to these women at the law school, but you haven't told me about their arrival on campus.

Parsons: Their arrival was compelled by different forces. There, the American Bar Association and the American Association of Law Schools, AALS, they do make a part

of their accrediting process that you do not discriminate on the basis of sex, so we had to take the women there. We didn't have any choice on it.

Warren: Was there resistance?

Parsons: No, no. Well, I'm sure that there must have been, but I'm not familiar with how it manifested itself. I think it was just taken as a given. Also I believe the federal law exempts undergraduate institutions but does not treat graduate schools with the same exemption with regard to discrimination on the basis of sex or gender. So the law school really didn't have a choice. As I said, we began receiving our first women applicants and women students in the law school before we moved to the new building, and then later as we got over there, then the percentage of applicants and percentage of students enrolled sought pretty much its own level and runs about a third to 40 percent over there as well.

Warren: Another transition that happened while you've been here is the arrival of black students. Did that have an impact? I'm sure it had an impact socially, but did it have an impact academically?

Parsons: Unfortunately, the numbers involved here have never been sufficient to make an impact.

Warren: Tell me what you mean by that.

Parsons: We would welcome as many young men and women black students, Afro Americans, that could qualify to get in here, but the difficulty is that we are competing with so many other colleges who are also seeking to have more black students, and so the competition among colleges for students capable of doing our work without special tracking for disadvantaged students, we do not succeed in that competition as often as we'd like to. So we're dealing with relatively small percentages of entering classes, small percentage of the student body who are minority students. That applies not only to Afro American students, but applies to Asians, applies to Latin Americans. So the great majority of our students are white, upper middle class, and that's just a fact.

There are different views on whether this is good or bad. There are members of our board of trustees who think that we should seek vigorously greater diversity in our student body, and there are others who think that one of Washington and Lee – and indeed there are places in American higher education where you're not badly served by having a homogeneous student body. I'm not able to quantify how many trustees have these differing views, but I do know that these differing views do exist within the current makeup of the board.

Keep in mind, too, that the decision to accept black students at Washington and Lee was made before we had these enlightened changes in the structure of the board. I remember during that self-study of the mid-sixties that the self-study committee recommended that we accept black students and, beyond that, to recruit them with certain vigor. I remember that the report that we submitted to the Southern Association had to have the endorsement of the faculty and the board of trustees. We had to purge those remarks from our report that went in, because the trustees were not willing to accept black students here at that time, and they didn't want us – I don't want to use the word "fouling up" our self-study report by taking that point of view. So that was a real setback.

Warren: When did that change happen, and was it imposed by the government or was it just a change from within?

Parsons: It happened shortly after the self-study. Within a year, I think, we had our first black student here. It came from within. The government did not make us take black students. Again, I'm not enough of a lawyer to know exactly what the state of the law was at that time. There were certain conditions being attached to this, that, and the other in terms of if you wanted to qualify for this kind of federal aid, you certainly could not discriminate on the basis of race. That was behind some of the thinking, I think, among board members who, with a certain reluctance, decided, "We're going to have to do it."

There were a number of members of the board who did not abandon the traditional white southern attitude toward blacks, and Dr. Cole, when he was president of Washington and Lee, he felt that we had to get into and remain in the mainstream of American education, higher education, and that the social changes that were coming about in the late fifties and early sixties, we had to be a part of that, that we could not exist apart from that. We could not deny ourselves access to foundation support, and the foundations have become very socially conscious, and certainly the government was becoming more and more restrictive in how it was able to share its resources.

So President Cole felt it was essential that we do it. He was a southerner, but his perception of the plight of the disadvantaged minorities was such that he was inclined to work very hard to do what he could to overcome that. I don't remember as much about this as I should, but I recall he had good contacts within certain foundations and he had good contacts within the Office of Education.

When Prince Edward County, I guess it is, down near Hampden-Sydney, and Farmville and Longwood College, that county in particular balked at integration, and set up private schools for the white students in the county, leaving the public schools with only the black students and maybe white students you could count almost on one hand. I know Dr. Cole worked with these friends of his to do things that would lift the quality of the educational experience at the public black school, including Washington and Lee professors going down to Prince Edward County and helping teach special courses and doing special things to stimulate the learning environment there. He also worked with Hampton Institute to not exchange students, but programs that brought some of those students onto our campus and took our students down there.

For this he was often criticized, and he was not universally popular among certain members of our board of trustees, but what Fred Cole did was, in my opinion, a very smart thing. He recognized early the qualities that Bob Huntley had in terms of the brilliance of his mind, his reasoning powers, his powers of persuasion. He was a

good lawyer. He made Bob, first of all, the university's legal counsel, and he also then, in order to bring Bob in contact in the best possible ways with members of the board of trustees, he made him the secretary of the board of trustees so he'd be at all the meetings and would have these reasons for talking to the trustees. Bob proved to be very persuasive in working with certain members of the board to lessen their stiffness on this matter of racial integration, so he played a very key role in that transition.

Warren: Did the first black student come during Cole's time or during Huntley's time?

Parsons: I think he came during Dr. Cole's time. I'd have to check that.

Warren: It would be right on the edge there.

Parsons: Two local boys. You'd think I could remember their names. I know one of them was the son of Mrs. Smothers, who still works in the co-op. She's been working in the co-op as long as I can remember Washington and Lee. She and I joke about how long we've been here. She is retired, but she also has come back to work in her retirement from time to time. A lovely person. Her son was one of the first black students to come here, and the other was another local young man.

Then we began to recruit, and again heroic young men, in my opinion. When we were trying to decide how to communicate this change in admissions posture for Washington and Lee, I was a lot more courageous in those days, and I proposed to Dr. Cole, and with Dean Gilliam's support, that we lay our cards on the table. "Let's say what we've decided, let's tell the alumni what we think the consequences of this decision—" We had this fear among some of our alumni that if we lowered the racial barrier, we would be flooded with black students, just like everyone thought we'd be flooded with women. We knew that was not going to be the case.

Warren: They flatter themselves.

Parsons: Yeah, they do. And we knew that wasn't going to be the case, so I did a piece for the alumni magazine in which I laid out, in the most objective manner I could, what had been done. I quoted Dean Gilliam at length in terms of his perception of what we

would do to recruit, how difficult it was going to be to recruit black students to come here, words to the effect that when we did get applicants here that we could accept, likely they would be unusual persons, because coming to General Lee's college would require a certain amount of steadfastness of purpose that would result in getting nothing but real good people.

So I wrote the story. Dean Gilliam thought it was fine. Dr. Cole thought it was fine. But he said, "Well (this may explain a little bit what we've talked about over recent weeks), I think we ought to let the board know what's going to be in the magazine, so I'm going to circulate the story to members of the board. This is not for them to say yes or no to; this is just for their information."

Well, unfortunately, three or four didn't want to be that candid, and even though the majority thought the story was fine, Dr. Cole decided, well, he couldn't run the risk of offending the rector of the board and two or three other members. So he asked me to change the story.

Warren: I need to change tapes.

[Begin Tape 2, Side 1]

Warren: Mame Warren. Today is the twenty-ninth of February 1996. This is tape two with Frank Parsons.

Parsons: We were talking about the story that I had written for the alumni magazine that was sent to the trustees, and despite the fact that the majority of the trustees who read it and responded thought it was a good article and fairly stated our position on the racial integration of Washington and Lee, there was a small number of trustees whose role and service to Washington and Lee, in fairness to them, was significant, and President Cole asked me if I wouldn't—I don't think I had much choice, but asked if I wouldn't change the story and do a less interpretive story and to deal with it on this other basis, which I did. What that resulted in was a statement that quoted the board's position on this.

I would want to go back and read that article again before I would attempt to quote it, but in the main, they took the position, that, "Hey, we've never interfered with the admissions process in the past. We haven't had any black applicants, and we have full faith and confidence and know that the admissions people will deal fairly with the applications they get." What they did was simply, without saying that they were doing this, agreed not to interpose themselves in the admissions process. I am certain that up until that point, had we had applicants from black students in those days, we required a picture.

Warren: Are you serious?

Parsons: I'm serious, yes. The word would have gotten to the trustees. There wasn't a chance in the world we would let a black student in here inadvertently or without their knowledge. But in fairness to the board, there had never been a completed application by a black student. That's not to say that we could have gone on forever in that. The board was completely unpersuaded by the fact that early in Washington and Lee's history there was a black student who attended Liberty Hall Academy, Mr. Chavis, for whom Chavis House on Lee Avenue is named. That didn't carry any weight with them whatsoever.

Warren: Do you know much about that Chavis story?

Parsons: Yes. I don't carry it in my head. Again, I'd have to look it up. I'd be reluctant to comment on it without refreshing my memory.

Warren: Where would I find that story?

Parsons: It's around. It's been written up in the magazine and in historical papers, and I know that Taylor Sanders has papers on it.

Warren: How did young Mr. Smothers know that it was okay to apply?

Parsons: We didn't fool the newspapers with that statement from the trustees. The headlines in the newspapers said, "Washington and Lee To Admit Blacks," or admit whatever the "in" term for black people at that time was.

Warren: So when would that have been?

Parsons: 1967, around that time, '67, '68.

Warren: So it was a headline?

Parsons: Oh, yeah, it made the news. Yes, indeed.

Warren: Locally? Or how widespread was this considered news?

Parsons: I wouldn't be surprised if it didn't get in the papers across the country, because there had been coverage from time to time. We had class valedictorian, or at least one I know of, get up and in his valedictory address urge the university to accept black students. So it was something that kept coming up in ways that – we had the big flap over whether or not we were going to invite Martin Luther King [Jr.] to speak here.

Warren: When was that?

Parsons: That was in the mid-sixties, too. Again, an issue surrounded by a great misunderstanding and controversy as to what actually happened. There was a group here on the campus – I'm trying to think what its name was. It was sort of a religiously oriented group that wanted to invite Martin Luther King to come to Washington and Lee and speak at a time when Martin Luther King was engaged in his leading the civil rights movement through civil disobedience. Before they ever invited Mr. King, this group was sensitive enough to the attitudes of some of our trustees and felt that they ought to ask the board for its permission to invite him. The board wasn't about to grant its permission. They said, "No, you don't have our permission to invite him."

Well, that got twisted around, so it appeared that Martin Luther King had been invited to speak here and then denied the opportunity or the invitation was withdrawn. Point of fact, it never was issued. But that in itself created a high visibility profile for Washington and Lee's position on racial integration, and so like I say, we were pretty much in the spotlight there from time to time, and sometimes in ways that cast Dr. Cole and the institution in a favorable way, but angered the trustees and sometimes in ways

that appeared that the trustee viewpoint was indeed Washington and Lee, and that we were still trying to oppose racial integration.

So when the decision was made, it was clearly understood certainly in ways that would reach out to qualified young black men in the community, that here was an opportunity for them to come to Washington and Lee.

Warren: Would they have been offered the traditional free education?

Parsons: Yes, they would have gotten the Rockbridge County discount.

Warren: Tell me about the Rockbridge County discount.

Parsons: My memories of what it entailed are not as clear as they once were. At one time, my first year here as director of publicity, Dean Gilliam wanted me to get out a news story about the number of Rockbridge students, county students, that were coming here. We were very proud of the fact that we offered an opportunity for residents of Rockbridge County to come to Washington and Lee at a great discount in the tuition and fees. I'd have to check to find out what that is. At a time when our tuition was, say, \$600 or something, the county student would pay \$100 and \$500 would be forgiven.

Dean Gilliam was very proud and Dr. Gaines was very proud of the fact that we offered this opportunity to our local constituency, if you will, and I won't say rationalize, it wasn't quite a rationalization, it was simply a good reason for doing it, that by offering this opportunity, we were giving an opportunity to some local students to go to college that they might not have exercised if we hadn't offered it, that their means didn't even permit them to go to a state institution perhaps, but they could live at home, and because of their tuition discounted here, they would have an opportunity to come here. Sometimes we would take them—I think I'm correct in this—and Dean Gilliam would let them in even though they were not among the best applicants we had. He wanted to give them a chance. I would say that in such instances, his

experience and reason for doing so probably was justified. They were good and they turned out to be good students.

So that's been something that's been part of our heritage here for a long time. I don't know the terms of it today. I think they still do it, but I don't know that the differential or the ratio of support compared to what they would pay themselves is the same. But that's something that I've always felt very good about at Washington and Lee.

Warren: When I first heard of that, I was so impressed by it. I thought it was such a wonderful offer. Maybe it's something all schools do, but I haven't heard of it before.

Parsons: No, I'd be so bold as to say it's something that all schools ought to do, but I don't know, and I don't mean to suggest that we're unique in this. I'm sure there are other places where this does happen. But again, I don't think it happens universally.

Warren: Frank, we're past five o'clock, but today I don't have to be frantic because the dog's right here. But I think we probably ought to start winding this up. What would you like to say that I haven't asked?

Parsons: I'd like to say that my memories of these things are fairly accurate. Almost everything I've said I would recommend that the facts be checked if they can be checked. Some of the things I've offered have been opinions, and some of these opinions, I think, have been stated in ways that appear that I can certify their validity. I don't think I misrepresented anybody in what I've said today in ways that would embarrass them or anything like that.

Warren: We'll have to try harder next time.

Parsons: My concern is not being unduly critical. I've mentioned Jack Warner, for instance, and his opposition. I have great respect for Jack Warner. He's a very fine person, a good alumnus, very generous benefactor of Washington and Lee, and just a genuinely entertaining person to be around.

Warren: We know he'll have a chance to speak for himself, too.

Parsons: I don't think I do him a disservice. He's a good old boy, and I've always liked him and regretted very much that he was, for a time there, at odds with the institution. And maybe others I may have mentioned today, but all of these persons, even when they've been individuals in support of ideas that I couldn't agree with myself, I always tried to remember that they had the best interest of Washington and Lee at heart. Sometimes we have differing perspectives on the best interest from different vantage points, but they've been men and women of integrity, and gentlemen and ladies, just nice people, and even some of those that I've had the toughest time with, I could cite chapter and verse here, one person in particular, even so, I'm inclined to think of them in warmer terms, and maybe they weren't. [Laughter]

Warren: I do have one last question to wind this up. We started out talking about academics in general. Let's bring it up to the present day. What do you think the status of things is academically at Washington and Lee today?

Parsons: I think we're very much better in almost every way than the institution has ever been in the past. Keep in mind we've always had really good students here, and we've got really good students now. To say that we have better students now than we had then is not quite fair. But I think that from top to bottom of a given class or a given student body, we have better students here today. We offer a much better curriculum, much more demanding requirements of them within their disciplines and within the courses.

I think it's tougher to get good grades at Washington and Lee now than it was when I was a student here, and I'll represent myself as exhibit number one. I did very well at Washington and Lee. I do not recall studying very hard. I was able to succeed at a level satisfying to me and satisfying by almost any measure you would measure. I graduated magna cum laude, Phi Beta Kappa, and I did not have to work very hard to do that. To my own discredit, at the time I was not embarrassed that I wasn't working hard. I worked hard on some things, let's be honest. There were certain courses where

I did have to work hard, and I tried very hard to get an A from Claybrook Griffith and I never succeeded. But in the main, college was not difficult for me.

So are we as good as we can be? Of course not. I think that right now one of the issues I understand that is before the long-range steering committee has to do with whether or not we should increase our enrollment here up to 1,700, let 1,700 be sort of the floor or the ceiling or the point that we would try to gear our admissions policy to support. I have very strong reservations about whether or not we should go any larger than we are. I just look up and down the Colonnade and the back mall there at class change time, and I see swarms of people there, and if we get any more up there, I've read where you put too many rats in a cage, they begin to fight, and I think sometimes we put too many students up here on this ridge line and things begin to go sour.

Now, we will have tremendous new capacity here when the Science Center is completed and our renovations in Howe and Parmly are completed. We will have some elbow room. If anything that sometimes educators, administrators, and faculty seem to be unable to tolerate is elbow room. They've got to be able to touch things with their elbows. They've got to have that sort of semi-cramped feeling. If you've got too much elbow room, they want to think of ways to fill it up, and one of the easiest things to do is, "Gee whiz, if we added X number of students, think of the tuition that would bring in, and we could handle it here. We might have to add a professor in this department and one over here, something like that." It's very easy to rationalize growth. If you do it in 100-student increments, then that doesn't seem to be too much of a change.

When I came here, Mr. [Earl Stansbury] Mattingly was university treasurer. He used to literally dance a little jig when we knew we were going to have 1,000 students. That, to him, was the ideal enrollment. It certainly was his own breakpoint for financial fiscal stability. We were over 1,200 students in the years immediately after World War II when we had the influx of veterans, and then it leveled off at around 1,000. It seemed

to stay there for five or six, maybe ten, years. Again, I'd want to check that. But then gradually it began to creep up and we began to seek slightly larger freshmen classes. We added some additional capacity across the street in Gilliam Dorm for additional freshmen, so we went up. Pretty soon we got up to around 1,300, 1,350, and even a couple of years we got up above 1,400, then slipped back.

When coeducation came to the forefront and we began thinking about what size student body should we have, the notion was that we would try to achieve a student body of 1,500, and that gradually over a period of, we thought then, I think, five or six years, we would get up to that by gradually increasing the size of the freshman class, and that we would seek a balance of two men for every woman. Again, that was an extrapolation of the view commonly held by some members of the administrative staff, some members of the faculty, certainly held by the athletic department, that we needed 1,000 men to survive athletically. We could not be expected to compete successfully in football and lacrosse and some of the —

Warren: Of course, the women couldn't compete. [Laughter]

Parsons: Without 1,000 men. We were of the mistaken notion — I think mistaken notion — that we had to have at least 1,000 men to sustain all the fraternity houses. So that's how 1,500. We had to have at least 1,000 men and 500 women.

I meant to say something about this when we were talking about coeducation. I think this metaphor is original with me. I said even when you're the caboose on the coeducation train, you don't want to jump the track. And we didn't have any confidence that we could stay on the track, even though we were the caboose to the coeducation train, that just because all the other colleges had done it and were succeeding, we didn't know whether we could succeed or not. We had, I think, a massive sense of lack of confidence that we could succeed. What surprised us is we succeeded beyond our wildest dreams, that of the 104 young women who came in that first class, I think 101 of them came back as sophomores, and the attrition level,

particularly among the women over the first four or five years, was minimal. So very quickly we went up to 1,500, up to 1,600, and have been over that several times in recent years. We've been very happy.

One of the things I used to always ask every young woman among our students I'd get to know, "Are you glad you came?" And I've never gotten a negative answer. "Oh, yes." Usually it's very enthusiastic. "Yes, I'm glad."

Warren: Frank, the idea of two men for every woman is very attractive. [Laughter]

Parsons: Well, I used to facetiously say two. When we did accept our coeducational status and began to recruit women, one of the things that we ought to put into our catalog was a picture of a VMI dress parade. [Laughter] I don't think we've ever done that, but there is—I don't know how much—cross current between that.

When I used to be the parking czar, one of my memorable moments was when a young woman, a freshman, came in to complain about the tickets that her VMI boyfriend was getting when he would bring his car over on Wednesday afternoon and visit her in the dorm. She said, "Quite frankly, I can't afford to pay his tickets anymore." Apparently she was paying his parking fines, and she wanted some kind of relief.

Warren: Poor boy didn't have two legs? Not very far to VMI.

Parsons: I asked her, "Why does he bring the car over?" "Well, we never can decide what it is we want to do until he gets here, and he likes to have a car in case we need it." I said, "Well, tell him to park on the street then for an hour or so until you make up your mind." [Laughter]

Warren: Frank, this has been a really good interview. I'm very happy.

Parsons: I'll be glad to talk on other subjects if you want to talk some more.

Warren: We will. I think you'll be very happy when you see this in print.

[End of interview]