

Mr. Richard Sessoms
Alumni Secretary
Washington & Lee University
Lexington, Virginia 24450

June 27, 1982

Dear Richard:

The enclosed donation is larger than the one I gave last year, but it is given with much less enthusiasm on my part. Though you are not responsible for it, the way in which the recent discussion of coeducation has been handled disturbs me every time I think of it. The following are some of my observations on the discussion.

- ¶ The opinions of the vast majority of alumni (with the exception, I assume, of those considered "influential") were virtually ignored for almost a year after President Wilson raised the subject in earnest at the May 1983 Alumni Weekend. Two things to note here: a) when I saw him in Atlanta in April '83, President Wilson made no mention of what he, a month later, felt was a problem to be confronted, b) President Wilson raised the subject after a brief period of exposure to his new job and the school.
- ¶ The Alumni Survey, which was the Board's effort to involve more alumni in the discussion, had an insulting amount of bias in it. Answers given for most of the questions could (and I'm sure may very well) be used to support any position (particularly one in favor of coeducation) which the Board chooses to take.
- ¶ It appears that the January issue of the Alumni Magazine was meant to bring to light some distressing admissions information to add fuel to the fire. The issue of declining college enrollments was, and is compelling. However, the decline has been taking place since 1978. When elected in September of 1982, President Wilson made no mention of this as a potential problem for the school. It is interesting to note that there has been an overall improvement in many admissions figures since 1978. The "Admissions" article did point out that some admission statistics have declined (though not precipitously) since the heyday of small liberal arts schools in the 1960's. This seems to be a fairly common occurrence among many smaller liberal arts schools (even those which have adopted coeducation).
- ¶ In truth, I think the January Magazine showed that the school still is what it has been for some time, one of the best small liberal arts schools in the 1050 to 1200 SAT category (for lack of better classification). The efforts of the admissions staff are commendable, particularly in light of past practices, but I still believe that more can be done. Currently, I believe that the college applicant pool is approximately 1.5

million (approx. 50% male/female). Given this, W & L now demands 1500+ applications from the 750,000 males available, or .20% of the pool. When the decline of college age students has run its course in the 1990's, a 25%+ drop, an all male W & L would demand only .26% of the male applicant pool to maintain a base of around 1500. I have to believe that with the help of some of the school's 16,000 alumni and the work of the admissions office, a 6/100ths percent increase might be possible. Would quality suffer an unbearable decline, probably not. The problem does not appear to be insurmountable. With work, the school should be able to attract quality students.

- ¶ The March Alumni Magazine read like a P.R. brochure for coeducation. I guess that Jack Warner's January letter, and the few others against, have been assigned the duty of speaking out against the change. I also noted that the heated discussion at, and the agitated departure of alumni from the alumni dinner in San Francisco this past February, were not mentioned. I'll certainly never forget that evening, nor I'm sure, will you or President Wilson. In any case, there has been a lot of publicity for the case in favor of coeducation, both in the Alumni Magazine (November's "Background Paper" is another eloquent example) and from President Wilson in his speeches at alumni functions.
- ¶ Though alumni involvement and open lines of communication have been publicized, I wonder if they have had any effect on the decision which, from all indications (and despite protestations to the contrary) seems to have been made for quite some time, at least by some Board members. I don't see overwhelming evidence of a true open discussion of coeducation. No other ideas, such as reducing the size of the school somewhat, while reducing staff size through attrition and retirement, seem to have been publicly or actively considered. Would the school be irreparably damaged if some marginal programs were eliminated? Would the students get appreciably less attention if the faculty/student ratio were increased from 10:1 to 12:1? Probably not. Could some programs be expanded to increase the school's appeal? Would a larger endowment and the resulting lower costs increase appeal? Possibly. I remember the last time coeducation was brought up. I also remember it as an idea which was analyzed and discussed (along with alternatives) rather than an issue being forced, as in the recent discussion.
- ¶ Beneath the rhetoric about the declining student population I have sensed something which may, in fact, be the true nub of the issue; a desire to change the school for the "better". I cannot judge this point completely (though I believe that a school like W & L still has a place in our educational system), but I can make a couple of statements about this as an idea.

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If the school had been coeducational during my time at it, I doubt that the friendships I made would have been as strong or would have lasted as long. I wonder if the informal relationships I had with faculty members would have developed. I also doubt that I would have met my wife, nor would we have been able to share in the long term friendships we developed at both schools. A "better" school with coeducation, possibly; more subdued, probably; more like other small liberal arts schools, definitely. I tend to feel that when coeducation is brought to the school, it will lose much of the character which it has developed and has helped it survive and prosper for many of its 235 years. I am not against the question of coeducation being raised (I do not like the status quo for its own sake), but the way in which it has been handled has not helped me become a great supporter of the idea. I am not against coeducation per se (all of my other education, including graduate, was at coed schools), but I have yet to be convinced that it is right, or necessary for W & L at this point. Most of my alumni friends share the same opinion. In any event, I doubt that the manner in which the subject has been handled would win a public relations award.

I have been a consistent alumni donor and participant in alumni affairs since my graduation. In the past, I often gave more than my income said I should, but I gave because I wanted to and felt it was necessary for the continued success of the school. I gave because I so thoroughly enjoyed my time in Lexington and wanted to help others enjoy the unique experience it provided. With the experience changed so fundamentally, I am not sure I will feel this way in the future.

The way in which coeducation has been rammed through (once again despite protests to the contrary), makes me wonder how much the school really values its alumni. It will certainly be no surprise if the Board votes in favor of coeducation in July. I will be surprised if anything else is announced. I think the timing of the announcement is a good reflection of the manner in which much of the recent discussion has been handled. The announcement will occur when the students who give the school life are not on campus (and not around to express opinions, as they did in May). Thank you for your attention to this rather long letter.

Sincerely,

[REDACTED]

cc: President John Wilson
Rector James Ballengee
Mr. Peter A. Agelasto, III

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