VOTING IN FAVOR OF COEDUCATION
AT WASHINGTON AND LEE UNIVERSITY

When the coeducation issue began to be considered again last year for the third time in fifteen years, I did not really know what I personally would decide on the issue. I am a traditional, conservative person who is comfortable with traditional male-female roles and who, in 1975 while on the Washington and Lee Alumni Board, said that I would be opposed to coeducation unless it was the only way to maintain the academic quality of the institution.

When the issue was raised by President Wilson, we were coming out of a period of "inactivity" that occurred at the end of a long capital fund drive and after a one and a half year transition to a new president. I believe President Wilson saw quickly the magnitude of a problem (as conveyed to him by the faculty and the admissions office) and sought to act quickly to find a solution. While there has been concern about the manner in which the issue reached this Board of Trustees, I do not doubt the need for the issue to have been raised.

President Wilson was correct in saying to us in his initial communication to us last October that "we are worried about maintaining the quality of this place...worried about trying to make a fine university better." He then said "I earnestly believe...
there lies a serious danger for the future health and usefulness of this venerable institution. And as a member of the Board of Trustees, sharing with my colleagues a deep fiduciary responsibility for one of America's precious assets, I feel duty bound to place my calculation of that danger squarely before you." It gives me no comfort to question the timing - when I consider the nature and magnitude of the problem.

During the last ten or so months, I have:

1. Read and considered every letter sent to me by alumni, faculty, students and friends of W&L.
2. Read virtually every word of the 1970 and 1975 coeducation studies as well as the multiple pounds of other material sent to us. That material included reports from the Academic Affairs, Campus Life, and Budget and Audit Committees as well as numerous other reports of many kinds.
3. Spoken on the telephone or in person with dozens of W&L alumni around the country.
4. Visited with several dozen other persons who are or have been associated with Sewanee, Davidson, Williams, Amherst, Dartmouth, Colgate, Princeton, Harvard, Notre Dame, University of Virginia, Yale, Haverford, and others - all of which are institutions that have become coeducational in the last fifteen or so years. The persons with whom I spoke were former trustees, university
presidents, alumni, admissions representatives and students.

5. Finally, I have spoken with a few individuals who are college admission counselors at public high schools and private preparatory schools.

I have agonized over many aspects of the coeducation issue and have examined and reexamined my feelings and thoughts.

I would try to write a case for remaining all male - then one for going coed - then pick them apart and start over. Like the rest of you, I have spent hundreds of hours talking, thinking and wondering what is best for this special place. Even Trustee Emeritus Jack Warner, whose generosity to this institution which he loves is among the greatest of all of W&L's sons, challenged me with his letters. While I sharply disagreed with the nature and quality of many of his comments, his letters forced me to re-think, re-examine, look deeper and think harder about all aspects of the issue. In that sense, his letters served a positive purpose.

About two months ago, I reached my conclusion, and I made no secret of my feelings at the May Trustees' meeting. It is my intention to vote in favor of coeducation - because I believe firmly that it is the correct decision for us to make for W&L in 1984.

There are what I would call "positive" and "negative" reasons supporting my decision. It is very hard to separate them from each other since all are valid but represent different viewpoints of the problem. The "negative" reasons relate to believing that we
should respond to worrisome demographic trends as well as increasing competition from other universities for students in a shrinking market, and also the recent trends relative to the quality of what is referred to as our student body's "soggy bottom". In addition, I do not believe that W&L should go coed solely to add the female point of view to the campus - although I believe it would be a plus to have it. I also do not believe that W&L breeds a chauvinistic or "warped" view of the world. Finally, it may be a negative reason to support coeducation on the basis that if we have to reduce our institutional size, we will spread our fixed costs over fewer units, thereby increasing our costs of production, so to speak, as competitive pressures rise - and we do this in a world that is likely to remain very volatile and in which risk-taking can quickly create economic disasters. Shrinking our size is not a viable option.

I do not call these reasons "negative" because they are not true. (They do remind me of Satchel Paige's addage, "Don't look back - someone may be gaining on you!'") Rather it is because they do not permit proper attention to be given to positive reasons for becoming coed. That is to say, it is a way of saying "Look what happens if we don't become coeducational" - instead of saying "Look what happens if we do."

The positive reasons for becoming coeducational are
strong indeed, in my opinion. I believe that our mission here is an educational one - splendidly expressed in our Statement of Institutional Philosophy with which we are all familiar and which it is our duty as Trustees to see is implemented in every aspect of university life.

I believe that we should aspire to be the best small university in the south - and one of the best in the nation - not elitist in a negative sense, but a fine school with strong human as well as educational values. I believe we have generally been successful in the past in doing this - and that this is a great part of the "intangibles" to which so many refer.

It is significant to me that a great majority (admittedly, not all) of the people to whom we entrust the teaching, training and care of our students are in favor of coeducation. And it is significant to me that while 60% of the alumni who responded to the survey expressed opposition to coeducation, 94% believe "quality of the faculty" is a "most important" factor in their consideration of W&L's reputation - and that 87% believe "academically selective in admissions" is also a "most important" factor - and that 86% believe "W&L's goal should be continued academic excellence, regardless of the gender of its students". On the other hand, I must confess that I am sorry to learn from the survey that 23% of the respondents are willing for W&L to remain all male even if it would "require some downward adjustment of W&L admissions standards" - a preference which is unacceptable to me as a Trustee.
Relative to student attitudes toward coeducation, it is significant to me that even though 53% of our current students are opposed to coeducation, 62% believe coeducation is in the best interests of the institution - while only 25% believe it is not.

Finally, it is significant to me that of the dozens of persons with whom I spoke who have a relationship with institutions that became coeducational, there were only two who believed we should remain all-male - and their reasons were more nostalgic than any other - and none expressed to me that they regretted their institutions had become coed; most said it was the best thing that had ever happened and that the net effect of the change had been extremely positive.

I strongly believe that the educational experience at W&L will improve if it becomes coeducational at the undergraduate level. The overall student quality will improve as a dramatic increase in applications permits a more selective admissions policy. These better students will be more motivated and will be better able to respond to the tougher curriculum that already is planned to be implemented. Most important, the absence of academically poorer students who are less motivated and less participating in the life of the university will result, I believe, in a lessening of the disillusionment that is growing among faculty members and which is reducing the effectiveness of the educational process. The better classroom experience will encourage
the faculty and bring better motivation and competition to all aspects of campus life and behavior. Not least, it will serve to strengthen the "close faculty-student relationships" about which we talk so much but which are being damaged by the poor quality of academic performance and social behavior presently on campus. We must maintain an outstanding teaching faculty, and we can do that only if we provide the proper environment in which it can exist.

In addition to an improved academic environment, I believe there would be a greatly improved social environment. In that regard, you will recall my lengthy report to you at the May Board of Trustees' meeting in which I conveyed my sub-committee's conviction that "coeducation would result in strongly positive changes occurring throughout the social and extracurricular life of the university". This conviction is shared not only by most faculty members but also by the administration and probably by most of the students.

Without questioning for a moment the sincerity and depth of feeling conveyed to all of us by the dozens of alumni who have written to express their views, I believe that our responsibility as Trustees is not to protect the alumni's perception of what W&L was like when they were here - although I think we hope we do that. Rather, it is to do whatever is necessary to foster an atmosphere and experience which best results in our institutional
purpose being achieved. After all, would not those same alumni who oppose coeducation so vocally now be even more upset if we permitted W&L to decline in quality? And are they not likely to be more proud and supportive of a high-quality coeducational university than a mediocre all-male university?

We must find a way, as Dr. Coulling suggested in his faculty letter to President Wilson, to properly combine the concepts of being "distinctive" and "distinguished". We could be "distinctive" as an all-male institution that was second- or third-rate, but we would not be "distinguished". We can be "distinctive" as a coed institution if we "distinguish" ourselves by the quality of our academic program and by the encouragement and appreciation of the values and traditions which we all believe are so much a part of the W&L experience which we desire be preserved - and which frequently are not a part of the experience found at other institutions.

Therefore, when Jack Warner says, "Dare to be different!" - I would respond "At what cost and at what loss of opportunity?" Do we invest our energy and our talent and our funds trying to be better - or use them up trying not to get worse?

Perhaps those who say "if it ain't broke, don't fix it" are really saying that nothing has changed at Washington and Lee.

1. But it is a change that the academic quality of our students is declining. Our SAT scores are down more than the national average and
more than our competition. The comments about student quality contained in faculty letters to President Wilson, and subsequently conveyed to us, are alarming.

2. And it is a change that, sociologically, the role of the female in the United States during this last third of the 20th century is dramatically different than ever before in the history of this country - indeed, in the history of the world - and there is no suggestion that this is only a fad that will go away. In that regard, a case can be made and should be made that it is poor judgment (and maybe worse) to deny W&L’s special qualities to talented, effective females who are and will be so important a part of the leadership of this nation in the future.

3. And it is a change, demographically, that the number of college-bound students will be in a dramatic decline for many years ahead - and that the competition for that smaller number of students is increasing. The financial aid packages available to students from private and state universities are impressive - and are an indication of what the marketplace will reflect even more intensely in the future.
4. Finally, but importantly, it is a change, again sociologically, that there is less and less interest among college bound students - especially males - in attending single sex institutions - especially all-male institutions. In this environment, W&L is increasingly perceived to be weird, not just different, and not just an educational alternative. Young people today are more sophisticated and aware than ever before - and they feel a need to be compatible with this changed world.

What do I believe it will mean to Washington and Lee University to remain all male?

1. Basically, that we will spend our energy and our funds simply trying to hold on - trying to prove to the world and to ourselves that we are something special - and having fewer and fewer believe us - as our own self-doubt increases.

2. We will lose market share and be forced to take more students of lesser quality - then we will begin to lose our fine faculty - and eventually we will lose our reputation. Already we have alumni telling us that they are not impressed by the fact that the company we keep in the all-male school category includes Hampden-Sydney, Wabash, a technical school, and
two military schools - while the company they want us to keep includes the University of Virginia, Williams, Dartmouth, Princeton, Amherst, Brown, Yale, Duke, Vanderbilt and a host of others.

3. Finally, the same - and even more - alumni who said "Don't go coed!" will begin to say "Why did you let this happen to my school?"

It has been said that young men choose Washington and Lee for every reason except for its gender. I believe that we should offer an institution which both young men and young women choose for non-gender reasons. I believe we should emphasize academic quality most of all - as found in close student-faculty relationships and the diversity and excellence of our academic program - and I believe we should emphasize the traditions and values which we have here and which we offer to all who are a part of the W&L community.

I believe that we should make clear - beginning today - that it is our intention that those values and traditions found here are to be pursued and supported in a spirit of renewed commitment, and I believe we accomplish this by conveying in a tone of confidence, conviction and caring a decision to become coeducational at the undergraduate level of our academic program.

I believe we should announce that decision to our alumni and our other constituencies in a positive, forceful way - with emphasis on our belief that the best way to keep intact those special qualities
that most alumni and faculty and students and administrators really think are important, is to become coeducational - and that this Board of Trustees believes this is the best way to insure our continued meaningful role as one of the better small universities in this country.

I believe we should go to work immediately - carefully planning what we want to say to our future male and female students - telling them of the traditions, academic excellence, values and codes of conduct that are found at this special place - and, finally dealing from strength and not being afraid to do so, we tell them what we expect relative to their behavior and performance.

We communicate to our president, and ask him to communicate to his staff and faculty, that we are going to have a first rate institution here - an institution that reaches out to young men and young women who have exhibited the abilities and talents which we want to nurture and encourage here - and we bring these young people into this community which we call Washington and Lee University.

We educate them splendidly - we reinforce the values and traditions that we believe are so important - strong character, a sense of honor and integrity, responsibility, leadership, and most of all academic proficiency - and we send them out into this volatile, changing world to be successful individuals in their
personal, family and business lives, leaders in their communities and professions - as W&L prides itself on doing - and we ask them to be loyal and generous to the institution which educated them - and which reinforced the ideals that caused us to bring them here in the beginning - and which are within this Board and this administration and this faculty.

Deep down inside of me, I believe that a coeducational Washington and Lee will permit this to happen. I believe that the academic, sociological, economic and political realities of the world that we are living in - and will be living in - will not permit that to occur at an all-male Washington and Lee. Will Washington and Lee change? Of course it will - as it has done so many times in the past. Do I have concerns about our future? Yes, I do.

1. I am most concerned that the disenchantment among many of our alumni might be more severe than we realize - and that the absence of support will be greater than we expect, not just support of the pocketbook but support of the spirit. I take some encouragement from knowing that similar situations were overcome so quickly at other institutions, and I know of no reason why Washington and Lee alumni are less loyal or less understanding than alumni of other institutions which we admire.
2. I am concerned that we will not make the transition as smoothly as we hope - that we won't plan for it as well as we should - or execute it as well as we could - and that this will cause anxious moments. This concern **must** cause us to make doubly certain that it is not warranted.

3. I think it is likely that we will lose a little of the intangible quality that we have trouble totally defining - but which we know is there - and which we and so many alumni fear will be lost.

But with these concerns having been expressed, it is my firm belief that the advantages and benefits and positive aspects resulting from coeducation will greatly outweigh the disadvantages and the problems - and that this will become apparent to us quickly.

We have the burden and the privilege of being in a position to act at this time on this critical issue. It will take courage to vote in favor of such a dramatic change, but in my heart of hearts, I believe we will have made the right decision for the future of this institution to which all of us are devoted.