W&L coeducation talks called ‘intense’

By Bruce Potter
News Leader staff writer

LEXINGTON — Robert C. Jenevein emerged from the auditorium late yesterday afternoon.

“Wow, that was intense,” Jenevein said.

Last year’s student body president, Jenevein had just participated in more than four hours of discussion as the Washington and Lee University Board of Trustees neared a decision on whether the school should admit female undergraduates.

The board continued meeting behind closed doors today before an expected announcement of its decision this afternoon.

After yesterday afternoon’s session, the board held informal discussions last night.

Student now favors shift

Current student body President J. Coleman Dawson III of Houston planned to tell the board today that he now favors coeducation.

“I believe it would benefit the school, both academically and socially,” Dawson said in an interview.

Dawson and Jenevein, who graduated in May and lives in Dallas, were to make a statement to the board at this morning’s meeting, which convened at 8:30.

The two student representatives and a past and current president of the W&L Alumni Association, Peter A. Agelasto III of Norfolk and Charles D. Hurt Jr. of Atlanta, will sit in on all the sessions this weekend, even though they do not have a vote.

The university administrators who serve as staff members for the board did not participate in this morning’s meetings.

‘As much time as they want’

“We’ll let the trustees have as much time to themselves as they want to have,” said Frank A. Parsons, executive assistant to President John D. Wilson.

At yesterday afternoon’s session, the board watched videotaped interviews with faculty, students and alumni and received several reports.

Among those was an analysis of an alumni survey on the issue. Of the 6,700 alumni who responded to the survey, 58.5 percent said they opposed coeducation, 28.9 percent favored it and 10.6 percent had no opinion.

A poll of students and faculty in February found just more than half of the students opposed to coeducation and more than 82 percent of the faculty in favor of it.

Treasurer’s report received

The board also received a report from the university treasurer, E. Stewart Epley, that contained financial projections based on enrollments of certain numbers of students.

Several students have returned to Lexington, usually quiet during the summer, for this weekend’s decision.

Nelson Patterson, a junior from Reading, Pa., said he wanted to hear the announcement “because I’m concerned about the future of this school.”

Three of the 25 board members did not attend the meeting.

The board was expected to vote at this morning’s meeting and announce its decision at an afternoon press conference.

Several sources have indicated that the board is slightly in favor of coeducation. However, Jenevein has said the board may vote to require that more than a slim favorable majority exist for coeducation to be adopted.

Arguments pro and con

Proponents of coeducation point to a declining college-age population that may result in W&L’s being forced to reduce its enrollment or lower its admission standards. Females on campus also would improve classroom discussion and academic competition, they say.

Coeducation would end 235 years of W&L’s tradition and uniqueness as an all-male school, however, opponents say, and the school should increase recruiting efforts rather than admit females.