W&L to go coed in ’85

By MIKE ALLEN and BRICE POTTER

Chief Editors

Washington and Lee University will begin admitting women in the fall of 1985, the Board of Trustees decided July 14 after a two-day special meeting.

The decision ends 235 years of all-male tradition at Washington and Lee and leaves only a handful of all-male non-military liberal arts colleges.

The resolution, passed 17-0 by the trustees after what was described as a “vigorous” debate, reads as follows:

“Resolved that Washington and Lee University shall admit qualified students, regardless of gender, to all of its degree programs commencing in the Fall of 1985.”

The decision was announced at a 12:45 p.m. press conference in the Commerce School. Nearly 50 media representatives attended the conference. About 100 students and faculty members watched the press conference on television monitors in Reed Hall.

Reading from a statement prepared by the board, which had voted on coeducation at 11:50 a.m., Rector James M. Ballenger said, “We are convinced that a stronger Washington and Lee and a stronger society will be the happy result of the decision we have made.

As President Philip W. Agnew will be admitted in the fall of 1986, said University President John D. Wilson, adding that the board had hoped the school would have as many as 500 women students within 10 years.

Wilson spoke of the “integrity, honor and character here,” as well as “our superior teaching and learning and academic programs.”

“We believe that these values that are so important to Washington and Lee can and will be enjoyed by men and women equally, and that they will help to contribute to making these as much a part of the future as they have been of the past,” he continued.

Wilson also said at the press conference that he had voted in favor of the motion. Although he said he didn’t specifically make a recommendation to the board, he was the first member to speak on the issue Saturday morning.

“I suppose that could be construed as a recommendation,” Wilson said.

Another member of the board, whom Ballenger declined to identify, made the motion to adopt the resolution.

Executive Committee President Cole Dawson and former EC President Robert C. Jesseman represented the student body in the trustees’ closed session.

Jesseman traveled to the meeting from Dallas at his own expense.

“Looking wistful but enthusiastic, Dawson talked with reporters following the trustees’ press conference. ‘It’s going to take an effort of the whole student body to implement coeducation in a positive way,’ he said.

‘It was really quite a moment when it happened. I still cannot believe the course of history has changed right here at Washington and Lee.’

Dawson said he was in favor of coeducation. ‘I didn’t come out and directly tell them that, exactly,’ he said. ‘I told them at the end that my feelings were toward coeducation.’

‘If the committee market is there for an all-male school,’ he added. ‘This school’s not marketable as an all-male institution.’

Charles D. Hurt Jr. of Atlanta, president of the Alumni Association, and former Alumni Association President Peter A. Agnew, III, represented the alumni at the meeting.

Among reports received by the board this weekend was an analysis of an alumni survey conducted this spring by a Richmond research firm. Of the 7,000 alumni who responded to that survey, 58.5 percent said they opposed coeducation. 28.9 percent said they favored it, and 10.6 percent said they had no opinion.

Although Hurt said he did not make a specific recommendation that the board defeat coeducation, he did say the board was aware of the alumni’s feelings because “we have had a continuous communication with the board as a whole as well as individually.”

Alumni will support the decision. Hurt added “I think the decision was the right decision, and I think the alumni will accept the decision,” he said.

In its statement the board noted that “within the Board’s membership itself opinion was divided, and the vote on the resolution’s adoption, while strongly in favor, was not unanimous. However, now that the decision is made, the Trustees are united in pledging their full commitment to the successful implementation of the University’s new course.”

At the press conference, Ballenger said, “We determined in advance that a decision of this magnitude should not be made by what one would call a slim majority or a narrow majority.”

He added that the number of votes in favor of coeducation, 17, exceeded the number of voters the board had decided to require, but he declined to identify that number.

Two other trustees, A. Christian Compton of Richmond and Edgar F. Shannon Jr. of Charlotte, attended the press conference.

Shannon was president of the University of Virginia when it first began accepting female students.

Compton said he voted against coeducation “because I feel that we have put in place at this university a fine-tuned educational machine which is providing a high-quality education in a single-sex atmosphere,” and has produced “a body of outstanding alumni who have succeeded eminently in all walks of life.”

However, Compton said, “Those of us who love and support Washington and Lee will work just as hard to make coeducation another positive factor as far as W&L is concerned.”

There is no appeal,” added Compton, a justice of the Virginia Supreme Court.

Shannon noted that the board studied many financial projections before making the decision.

Ballenger described the discussion preceding the vote as “entirely civil, as Washington and Lee gentlemen should be, one to another. There were people with differing points of view.”

“All of the issues that you could possibly imagine were discussed. It was a free, full and frank discussion. I never heard anyone raise his voice. On the whole, it was polite.’’

Asking his feelings now that the debate finally had ended, Wilson said, “I feel exhausted, if you want to be absolutely candid about it. It’s been a long and arduous undertaking, but it was worth it. Frankly, a rewarding time.”

“I’m just looking forward to having it all be over,” he had said in an interview earlier this week.

“A decision of this magnitude and complexity involves us all in the re-examination of this university and its character. There is a spirit alive on the campus, a spirit of humaneness.”

“I feel very good about the decision. I think it was the right decision to be made,” added Wilson, who, along with Ballenger, wore a Washington and Lee tie to the press conference.

Relaxing at Lee House after the press conference, Wilson expressed hope that Washington and Lee now could begin to plan for the future in other areas.

Wilson said at the press conference that the trustees authorized creation of a committee on coeducation, consisting of students, faculty and administrators, “to help guide us in every step of the way.”

Female law students and women faculty members will aid the committee, Wilson added.

Among planned improvements to the university’s physical plant are a $4 million to $5 million dormitory, which has been in the works for some time, and about $100,000 worth of renovations to the gymnasium areas to provide separate locker and shower facilities for female students.

“I trust that you’re supportive of that,” Wilson added, with a laugh.

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