Washington and Lee Struggles With New Realities

Amid Grumbling, 115 Women Join 200-Year-Old, Formerly All-Male Bastion in Virginia

By Eve Zibart
Washington and Lee

LEXINGTON, Va. — At Washington and Lee University, registration week traditionally has climaxed in Freshman Rush, a rollicking Friday night introduction to the glories of fraternity life.

But this past Friday night found John B. Lewis, student body president and maximum fratmanget, glaring merrily into his beer glass. "They're making too many changes too fast," Lewis grumbled. "I love this school, and I feel betrayed."

Washington and Lee, a small but comprehensive liberal arts college in the Shenandoah Valley, has for 200 years invested young gentlemen with rigorous academic credentials and a muscular Southern civility. Its alumni and old-boy network are legendary across the South, and its 700-course catalogue is the envy of many larger institutions.

But this year the W&L "tradition" has taken a one-two on the chin.

Faced with a declining number of male applicants, the school, one of the nation's last all-male college bastions, yielded to the economic and social realities of the 1980s. This year, despite the strident opposition of many students and alumni, Washington and Lee admitted 105 women freshmen, along with 10 upper-class transfer students, to its 1,350-member student body.

"This is going to be the saving of this university," exulted one faculty member. "You know why I was so strongly in favor of admitting women? I was worried about the Washington and Lee gene pool. Now we can recruit from the brightest women in the country."

But while faculty and administrators are convinced the good times are just beginning, there are some students and alumni who say the thrill is all gone.

"If it ain't broke, don't fix it," said senior class President Tommies Presler, summing up the disbelief of students that their school was in trouble. "This is a good school on the weekends, anyway."

"People come here to have fun, people come here to be free," said Lewis. "Why change a good thing?"

"People have been asking me would I have

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