Students, alumni 2-1 against; faculty 4-1 for coeducation

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LEXINGTON (AP) — Washington and Lee University is a school steeped in 235 years of all-male tradition, and the notion of admitting women has spurred spirited debates among students, faculty and alumni.

But not at all-male Wabash College and Hampden-Sydney.

There has been no recent organized push for coeducation at the private Virginia college, and "we've had a conclusion that remaining all-male makes sense," said a college spokesman.
The issue is even less consuming on the Crawfordsville, Ind., campus of Wabash.

"It is not an annual issue," said Wabash spokesman Tom Keen. "We have a strong tradition and we are very tradition-minded. Consequently, there is little pressure on us to make a change.""

The W&L Board of Trustees is scheduled to make a decision later this week after having wrestled with the coeducation issue for months. But the idea of admitting women has not been new.

It was first suggested in 1808 by the student magazine, the Southern Collegian, which advanced the then-revolutionary notion that Southern women would lose "delicacy and refinement" by attending classes with men.

In the World War II years of 1942-1944 the school faced with a depleted pool of college-age men — admitted women to summer school. "A lovely, lovely summer," was how Wanda Wade Keller, one of the women, remembered it.

In 1972, under pressure from the federal government, W&L opened its law school to women, who now comprise about one-third of the program's 350 students.

But when Dr. John Wilson, the school's president since January 1983, suggested opening W&L's undergraduate ranks to females, the outcry was the biggest since the school abandoned big-time football in the mid-1980s.

Polls show students and alumni oppose such a change by more than 3-1, while W&L's faculty supports it about 4-1.

Opponents most often cite the school's lengthy all-male tradition. They say the university would lose some of its distinctiveness with the change. And they frequently attack Wilson — a Northerner and a W&L newcomer — with wanting to destroy traditions he neither understands nor appreciates.

"I would say his popularity is very low," student body president Bob Jenevin said in February. "He's perceived as someone who's coming in and changing everything."

Wilson, who has remained neutral on the question, has defended the decision to study the issue on pragmatic grounds. He noted that America's college-age population is dropping, and he has suggested that the school might face a shortage of qualified students in the near future.

The controversy has prompted bumper stickers proclaiming "Better Dead than Coed," and "Girls in the Hay, Not All Day." A banner was draped around a statue of George Washington vowing "No Martha."

Jenevin is one of those against coeducation. He has softened his stance somewhat since the issue was raised, but he said he still worries that admitting women will change the university's distinctiveness.

"When you're talking about the spirit of any institution, it's the result of the chemistry of all the different facets of the school," he said. "And when you change something as integral as the single-sex status, it seems to me naïve to assume that you won't change that spirit."

Nonsense, replies Frank Parsons, an executive assistant to the school's past three presidents and Wilson's right-hand man.

"I don't think it (coeducation) will change the character as much as some persons imagine," he said. "Washington and Lee is a distinctive school that ought to be able to sustain itself no matter what the gender of its students may be."

Parsons said the real question is how best to maintain the quality of students that has earned the school high marks for its academic programs.

"It's one thing to get 300 students every year," university spokesman Jeff Hanna said. "It's another thing to get 350 good students. The whole thrust is to retain quality."

Can a single-sex school attract those qualified students? Parsons is not so sure.

"Our product is still good, but perhaps our package has gone out of style," he said.

Wabash's Keen disagrees.

"It's difficult in this day and age to sell a single-sex institution," Keen admitted. "However, it is not a monastic. We exist as a single-sex institution. We pride ourselves on the fact we're able to exist as a single-sex institution," he said.

According to Keen, Wabash projects an increase in enrollment in the 1884 freshman class. And the Hampden-Sydney spokesman says the college is growing steadily. What we're doing at the moment seems to work.

Parsons said all-male seems to be working at the moment for W&L, too — but he is afraid of the future. He likens the problem of recruiting a shrinking pool to swimming in turbulent water.

"Virtually all schools are swimming with both arms," Parsons said. "We're swimming with one arm tied behind our back. We've got to be able to make that appear not to be stupid. We've got to be able to swim as well with one arm as they can with two.""