

# Women raise the academic standards at W&L

By Heather Midkiff  
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**"W&L Women: The Beginning of an Error"  
"I'd Rather be Dead than Coed"  
"A Roll in the Hay, Not All Day"**

Four years ago the Board of Trustees at Washington and Lee University in Lexington announced that after 236 years as an all-male institution, it was time to go coed. What followed that announcement was a barrage of publicity, increased applications and immense changes — some of which initiated hostile reactions from the male students, like the slogans listed above.

The administration had expected such reactions; however, after intense studies on campus life and on how coeducation would affect the university, they were convinced that the decision was correct.

"The interest in male single-sexed schools was waning, as one could see by the number of male single-sexed schools left in the country (four)," said Julia M. Kozak, the associate director of admissions at Washington and Lee. "The faculty felt that we were denying education to a segment of the population by not accepting females. Furthermore, the demographics at the time were showing that the college-age population was decreasing. We were concerned about those numbers when there were fewer and fewer males interested in a single-sexed school at all."

The first class with females arrived in September 1985. Hordes of reporters from all over the country took pictures of the women unpacking suitcases and getting settled. But being in the spotlight was just the beginning.

The women had to deal with the W&L men who, according to the media, were expressing "resentment and displeasure."

"A lot of the guys came through the dorms. They were just interested. They said, 'Oh my God, there's perfume and makeup in here!'" said senior Erin Cosby, 21, who was in the first coed class.

It was the first of many adjustments the male students had to make. Today, the social and academic world of Washington and Lee has been irrevocably changed.

"Admittedly, our class and the classes before us were concerned more about the social scene of W&L. It used to be like one big fraternity — or like a Saturday night poker game without the wives," said Coalter Pollock, 22, who was a sophomore at W&L when the school went coed.

About the same time, the legal drinking age was raised to 21, and the college began enforcing stricter regulations against having alcohol in the dormitories. The Lexington police got stricter, too.

"You can't go to a fraternity party and get rip-roaring drunk and walk home without getting arrested for drunkenness in public (anymore)," said Esther Huffman, 21, a senior. The clampdown on drinking may have added to the resentment the W&L women incurred, they say.

The tradition of "road tripping," W&L men traveling to the nearby women's colleges (Sweetbriar, Hollins, Mary Baldwin, Randolph-Macon) for parties and vice versa also began to diminish with women attending W&L.

"My freshman year, there were girls from

girls' schools that would come to W&L and stay all night," Ms. Cosby said. "They would come and use our bathrooms. On our part, these girls made us uncomfortable because they acted like they knew everyone. They probably didn't like us because we phased out their social life." That first group of W&L women retaliated against the anti-coed T-shirts and bumper stickers with a few slogans of their own ("You got the best — who needs the rest?").

One male senior said that he was upset about the change in the social and academic situation. "The girls have changed the social

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—Mary Alice McMorrow

situation; everybody is worried about academics." He emphasized, however, to not "tell anyone who said this. We still want the girls to come to our parties!"

The enormous increase in the number of applications after the school went coed raised the admissions standards.

"Now, it has become more competitive, the SATs have shot up, and it just seems to be a different type of student at the school. The students are more willing to sacrifice social atmosphere for the academic atmosphere,"

Pollack said.

"We can be more selective now. We can pick and choose the class as we wish. In 1984, we accepted 60 percent of the applicant pool," Mrs. Kozak said. "This year, we accepted 29 percent of the applicants."

"There is no question that the quality of life has been enhanced at Washington and Lee. It has always been exceptional, but now men will learn how to treat women on an intellectual basis, as they will have to when they go to work on a future job."

W&L men began to see women differently.

"One day in class, we had a discussion on the pros and cons of coeducation. My professor said that having a female in the classroom would make the guys deal with the girls on a more competitive basis," Pollock said. "When the girls would just come up from the girls' schools on weekends, it just taught the guys to deal with girls as social animals."

Mary Alice McMorrow, a 21-year-old junior, said the current relationships between W&L men and women are healthier.

"It's a new surge of energy. You have males and females vying for the same positions now. People are used to being coed — every single person that has come to W&L now has come knowing that it is completely coed."

W&L women now have their own social organizations and sports. They've been elected to the Executive Committee (the Honor Council/governing body of W&L), and have positions with the school newspaper and other clubs.

"The loss of the social charm of an all-male school will be outweighed by what is gained through the academic strengthening of the

school," Pollack admitted. "Being more competitive academically is important."

For this academic year W&L has 1,108 male students, 500 female. The number of women admitted has been limited to 500 by the Board of Trustees, although that limit isn't necessarily a permanent one, said Mimi Elrod, assistant director of admissions.

"It was the board's decision to set it at 500 because they didn't know how many women would want to come," she said. "They didn't want to increase the size of the school, and they didn't want to cut the number of men because it would alter the athletic and fraternity programs."

Although some of the W&L men believe the "social charm" of an all-male school has been lost, the W&L women aren't so sure. The purpose of the school's honor code, established by former W&L president Robert E. Lee, was to make gentlemen. Although the W&L women cannot be converted into men, the idea of being a gentleman might still apply, they say.

"My interpretation of the qualities that make a gentleman can apply to women: honesty, integrity, service, being well-rounded," Ms. Cosby said.

"One has to remember that when Robert E. Lee was around, almost all of the schools were single-sexed," Mrs. Kozak said. "Anyone who knows about Lee would know that he would want the college to go coed. The tradition of the university still exists — without a doubt, Robert E. Lee would be proud of his university."

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