

Dr. Ivor Thomas, Professor of Religious Studies

Comments on the Draft concerning the future of the College

Dear Bill,

Perhaps my detachment from much of the discussion of the past year might suggest that I am uninterested in the future of the college but let me assure you that is not the case. Some of it can be attributed to considerable dissatisfaction with the nature of the leadership of the college under Kathleen and a certain disdain for the self-congratulatory way in which she continually described her "accomplishments" during her tenure. But all of that is really irrelevant to what I want to say about the plan for the future outlined in the draft which was circulated to us.

I have doubts concerning the viability of the transformation of R-MWC from a woman's college to a co-educational college but I assure you that once that change takes place I will continue to be committed to the college and to ensuring that my department continues to be an integral and important part of the college's overall academic program. Having said that, I cannot in good conscience forego the necessity of expressing my strong dissent concerning the decision, certainly concerning what seems to me to be the accelerated rush into it. While it may well be true that in a decade or two the college that was once Randolph-Macon Woman's College might be a viable, even a strong liberal arts institution, it is important to recognize that when it is it will be a radically different institution from the Randolph-Macon that I have known in the thirty-eight years that I have taught here. For most of that time I have heard again and again the vigorous arguments defending the role of women's colleges and insisting upon their importance. I may have not always believed those arguments and I can indeed see myself arguing that a co-educational education is a more natural one and perhaps a better preparation for life in today's world, but I am struck with the nimbleness with which the Board of Trustees has abandoned that rhetoric. Did they ever believe it themselves? If so isn't the current surrender of the position rather hasty and even somewhat unseemly. Beyond that I think it must be stated (and I am sure that many others have had the same thought) that whatever college emerges from this decision it will not in the long run have any real relationship to the college that existed during the first hundred and fifteen years save perhaps in one very important respect namely the excellence of its academic program. But that is not what differentiates the college from other fine academic institutions. Again and again we have been reminded about the myriad intangible traditions of the college which its graduates call to mind when they sing the college's alma mater swaying together arm in arm. I can't really say that I personally relate to many of those traditions- they are not really my own and perhaps this is somewhat insensitive to say but to me many of them are women's traditions. Alice Ball once said that she still won't walk up the even (or is the odd) stairs. Can anyone seriously think that such a tradition as odds and evens will survive co-education, or a pumpkin parade, or a daisy chain, or General Jones, or ring nights, or the spectacle (to me silly and even disagreeable) of weird hats and button collections on academic gowns at the fall convocation? Carolyn Bell might just as well not bother writing her celebration of such aspects of the college's distinctiveness! To

be sure, I recognize that you have stressed the continuity of the Honor Code and I certainly believe that it has always been the crown jewel of the College's tradition, but it is only one ingredient in the rich tradition of Randolph-Macon Woman's College. My point is that the college that will emerge will have lost much of that which was distinctive in the old one and that with a new name that has none of the associations that the current name calls forth it will be truly new. Whenever anyone outside the community hears that name it will not resonate with the reality that is R-MWC.

I asked in the meeting the other day about the financial cost involved in the proposed transition to co-education. I really didn't get an answer but I am certain that it is much greater than half a million for men's athletics and the nominal cost of longer beds and additional toilets here and there. The draft proposal and the A and S presentation speaks of energizing student life and here too additional financial resources will be needed. That need has existed for a long time as attested to by the college's extremely inadequate student center and one wonders why the Board has not addressed it earlier in a meaningful way. I have a lot of problems with the idea of adding new athletic coaches and new athletic programs which surely will constitute a major drain on the college's financial resources. I guess a real part of my difficulty here is related to my sense that Chris Burnley is an inadequate business manager for the college-did he really think that the faculty would buy that flip comment about the cost of longer beds? In a move of this importance for the college's future one would hope for a business manager with the acumen and gravitas of a Bill Burns. On the matter of the financial cost of the transition, I along with many of my colleagues am deeply troubled with the unspoken implications of the phrase "reallocating selected existing assets." I recognize that a college art collection is different from a museum collection and that in an extreme financial emergency it might have to be sacrificed for the continued well being of the college. But we have been assured by Kathleen and others that such is not the case. R-MWC's art collection is, in my opinion, one of the most distinctive treasures of the college and those paintings, particularly the great Bellows work, should be protected at all cost. I assure you that the collection's importance to the academic life of the college is not limited to the art department, the American Culture program and the history department. In my classes, even in those dealing with European culture, I continually refer students to the Maier and encourage them to make use of it. As for the Reading Program, here too the College has a unique international academic experience. How ironic that the Board that endorses a vision of a college that will be "a powerful force for global education" just one year ago voted to scrap this program! I am not a horseback rider and really have very little interest in the Riding program but it does seem to me that it is an important recruiting tool for the college and therefore ought not to be reallocated away.

My final comments are addressed to the platform or "institutional identity" that the college is to adopt to give greater distinctiveness to our educational program, i.e. the proposed Active Global Honors platform. I noted with approval your point that it is just "one" platform and therefore not fixed in stone. I also read carefully your comments on what it means to do Global Honors. If we can leave aside for the moment the doing of Global Honors, I think that your points on what it means make a lot of sense. But, as you are surely aware and probably intend for us to note, they are not bound to such a vague

concept as global honors but rather set forth rather well what any good college expects of (or perhaps hopes for) any student stepping onto their campus. Isn't what you set forth in those points what we have always argued that a Randolph-Macon Woman's College education should be? Most of what you have set forth on what we need to do to make this happens also applies to any good liberal arts education. To return to the Active Global Honors idea-I think it is such a vague piece of jargon that I can't believe anyone would think it could provide great distinctiveness to our educational program. Global-Globalization-Internationalism-An awareness of the world beyond America's shores-Cross-cultural: Aren't these the buzz words bandied about by every college in America? Doesn't any college today argue that it prepares people to live in "the global village" and be good citizens of the world. How in the world are we going to be distinctive if we echo the common language of the current academy? Moreover, as the discussion the other day made pretty clear, most of the faculty have no concrete and common idea of what Global Honors is or should be. Consultants can throw out jargon, academics are charged with examining jargon and being willing to say when it is vacuous. The vision part of the draft begins with a statement that is not just pollyanish (my apologies to you as an English professor for that word) but almost breathtakingly embarrassing in what it claims. "In 2012 the College will be the [I take it the "the" here is meant to be emphasized as in "THE"] destination for students, both female and male, who seek intensive individual preparation to master their disciplines and to contribute and lead in a global society. The College will be recognized internationally as a powerful force for global education through graduating students who have the spirit of intellectual inquiry, independence, exploration, collaboration, and integrity, along with the joy of learning and living." A modest "a destination" might be more appropriate. In six years we will be recognized internationally as a powerful force for global education? In the face of such pretentious boasting I think of the exchange between Glendower and Hotspur in King Henry IV, Pt. 1: "I can call spirits from the vasty deep." "Why, so can I, or so can any man, but will they come when you do call them."

Ivor