

Dr. Jan Hullum's letter to President Worden and Dean Coulter on the case for a women's college.

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TO: President Ginger Worden
Dean William Coulter

I am writing to request the board to preserve Randolph-Macon's status as a woman's college, for the reasons given below. I am also asking that, if the board does vote to abandon the College's historic mission, that decision should be accompanied by specific, positive resolutions aimed at minimizing the losses to women students that are typically associated with co-education.

The Case for a Woman's College

The strongest case for continuing as a woman's college is based on ideology: our commitment to values which we hold to, not because they are expedient or profitable, but because they are right. Young women today face challenges that are different from but at least as formidable as those faced by women a hundred years ago. They have greater freedom but with freedom comes the burden of choice and of responsibility. Women's colleges have demonstrated that they do a better job than co-educational institutions in preparing women to live fully and deal effectively with the pressures and opportunities of the modern world (Wolf et al. 2000).

It is not our job simply to educate women. The notion that we can fulfill our mission better by going co-ed, because more women will theoretically choose to attend RMWC, is completely wrong-headed. It's not a matter of how many women are educated, but what kind of education they receive. There are already more women than men in undergraduate programs and they tend to make better grades (Lewin 2006). But women have less confidence and a lower regard for their academic ability than men with the same or worse grades (Spade and Reese 1991). And even though they make better grades than men, women's education seems to be worth less to employers. According to the most recent Census Bureau data for full-time year-round workers, young men with some college or an associate's degree make almost as much as young women with a bachelor's degree; and with four years of college, young men earn almost \$11,000 more than recent women graduates (Census Bureau 2006). This alone (and a host of additional supporting facts could be added) makes it clear that it is premature, at best, for women's colleges to proclaim "mission accomplished." We have been justifying our existence for years by pointing out the "chilly climate" (Sandler et al. 1996) that exists for women in coeducational institutions. There has been no sudden thaw. Women's colleges continue to do a better job in preparing their students, not simply by transmitting the content of academic disciplines, but equally importantly, by increasing students' ability to think for themselves (Umbach et al. 2004), by building greater intellectual self confidence (Kim 2002) and by enhancing women's sense of their own academic ability (Kim and Alvarez 1995).

Continuing as a woman's college is the only way to keep faith with those who have poured their resources into the college because they knew, from the difference it made in their own lives, that Randolph-Macon provided a transformative educational experience. The board will be hearing from many alumnae who will testify to this fact. We should also remember what we owe to those who have gone before us and are no longer able to speak for themselves. I think of Shirley Strickland, who attended Randolph-Macon in the 40s, took a Ph.D. in sociology, and came back to her alma mater to teach for more than 25 years. She devoted her life to the College and in death, made it her major beneficiary, leaving a million dollar gift to sustain an institution that she strongly believed in. While no one can ever really know what the dead would say or feel, it is hard not to believe that Shirley, and many others like her, would consider a co-education a betrayal of the College's mission and of their trust.

Minimizing Our Losses

If the board does make the decision to move toward co-education, that decision should be accompanied by specific resolutions intended to safeguard RMWC's traditional strengths. We should make every effort to preserve an educational atmosphere which provides women with high levels of support, encourages academic involvement and risk taking, demands higher order thinking, uses integrative activities to achieve educational goals, and promotes acceptance and understanding of diversity; and we should continue to expect and promote close relationships between faculty and students (Umbach et al. 2004). These factors are necessary, but not sufficient.

Because the good outcomes of women's colleges have been shown to be correlated with the greater presence of female role models (Tidball 1980, Kim and Alvarez 1995, Nidiffer and Bashaw 2001), the board should adopt a goal of having women fill at least half of all faculty positions and top administrative posts.

Further, the board should resist the temptation to build a co-educational student body by going to extraordinary lengths to woo male students (Pennington 2006). The current shortage of college-going men and our cultural preference for males are already combining to create extraordinary pressures on co-ed institutions in recruiting young men (Britz 2006). So-called "affirmative action" for men would contradict everything that Randolph-Macon has stood for. The board should explicitly affirm that male students will not receive any preference in decisions related to admission, scholarships, or financial aid.

Thank you for sharing my concerns with the board. I also appreciate your leadership during this especially difficult period.

Sincerely,

Jan Hullum
Professor of Sociology

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