

Response to the Art and Science Institutional Positioning Study of November 2, 2005.

By the undersigned alumnae of Randolph-Macon Woman's College, January 2006

Since the Board of Trustees announced the demise of the Reading Program, with no forewarning, alumnae have gathered together to address how to save this program as well as the future of the college. In reviewing the A&S report, alumnae collaborated extensively on this formal response to the A&S study. This response is intended to go hand-in-hand with the proposed plan alumnae wrote in hopes of helping the Board of Trustees find ways to maintain R-MWC as a woman's college and build on the framework of superior education that the College has traditionally offered.

Introduction

Women's colleges and historically black colleges and universities are an endangered species in higher education in this new millennium (Roebuck & Murty, 1993; Solomon, 1985). There is a wide perception that the hard-earned advances of the women's movement and the Civil Rights era are over and the "victory for equity is won" (Sandler, Silverberg, & Hall, 1996). We know better. Statistics still show women and African Americans earning less money and possessing less power in professional, educational, and governmental agencies and legislative bodies. Often, women must still do the job of two people in their homes or, in the case of minorities, face the double bind of racial prejudice and perceived inferiority in educational institutions and the workplace. Clearly, equity has not been achieved for these two groups and we still have much to do to achieve such, especially in institutions of higher education. That is why these institutions are *critical* to the future success on all levels for both of these historically under-represented groups (Tidball, 1998).

Instead of literally recounting the research that shows the efficacy of women's colleges (Graham, 1978; Horowitz, 1984; Palmieri, 1981; Solomon, 1985; Tidball, 1998) and the inordinate successes of women who graduate from these institutions, it is incumbent for

us to make a case for the survival of a particularly important woman's college in the South and across the country.

Randolph-Macon Woman's College holds a special place in the history of education for women, particularly in the South. Founded during the Progressive Era in the United States in 1893, the College quickly organized as an academically rigorous college for women, earning a Phi Beta Kappa chapter far in advance of many liberal arts colleges in the South in 1916, and graduating such important women in the arts and letters as Pearl Buck. The College's reputation went far beyond the finishing school image of many southern women's institutions. Indeed, an R-MWC alumna's famous quote (when hearing of the "finishing school" image) was particularly apropos to thousands of alumnae when she replied: "Yes, indeed, it [i.e., R-MWC] just about finished me off." Also, the alumnae participation and support for the institution is legendary and has even been acknowledged in the ensuing A&S report ("we have never seen higher ratings") and among prestigious college guides for the last few decades. As Burton Clark wrote in *The Distinctive College* in 1970, R-MWC possesses a well-known saga among women's colleges and is a leader in liberal arts education in both the South and the United States. Such a distinctive mission, saga and history deserve to be preserved for ensuing generations of women (Clark, 1970).

Research Methodology

Since A&S did not provide the research methodology utilized for their study (e.g., sampling strategies and numbers, survey instruments, interview techniques, data analysis procedures, etc.), the credibility and validity of their suggestions and/or conclusions is highly problematic. More specifically, there are no financial scales demonstrated for the report, so readers have no avenue for understanding how A&S arrived at the "statistics" upon which recommendations are made. This proves to be a fatal flaw in the report, and we are at a loss as to understand the reason behind the absence of such vital appendixes. While we have no reason to believe that A&S either falsified or manufactured information for this report, we are at a decided disadvantage in fully weighing and

responding to this report without statistical data or methods utilized to arrive at their findings. As a result, we have no alternative but to respond tentatively to their suggestions. However, we will forward our counter-suggestions based on our research and combined experiences in higher education with further refinement from various alumnae groups in our separate document “R-MWC Blueprint for the Future.”

R-MWC Appeals

We agree with A&S on the following points of strengths of R-MWC that should be expanded and marketed precisely and aggressively: 1) **Global.** We believe that R-MWC has earned a solid reputation as an emerging global institution; 2) **Honors.** We believe that the academic backgrounds of women who desire a highly academic environment with an institution that has both a Phi Beta Kappa chapter and rankings on a national level can and should continue to increase in rigor with visionary leadership and strategic positioning; 3) **Leadership.** The *raison d'être* behind women's colleges in the United States is that they inordinately produce strong female leaders in every aspect of American society since their rise during the Progressive Era of United States history (1890-1920) (Graham, 1979).

Alumnae—Key Implications

We strongly agree with A&S conclusions regarding alumnae: “*alumnae view R-MWC both now and then extremely positively*” and that they are particularly on-target when they deduce: “*they [i.e., alumnae] would be less likely to support R-MWC if it were to become co-ed...*”

Taking this critique a step further, we believe that the alumnae have not been sufficiently challenged nor welcomed to become intimately involved in the future of the institution. This was made clear by the Board of Trustees' Reading closure decision of September 2005. Since then, small groups of alumnae have banded together to formally respond to both this report and the challenge that R-MWC is facing at critical levels of institutional leadership. (Our formal responses and ideas regarding the future direction of the College are made in the aforementioned separate document “R-MWC Blueprint for the Future.”)

We would add that any alumna of a woman's college with the reputation of R-MWC would be alarmed at the number of women's colleges that have become co-educational in the last decade. Indeed, we believe the issue of co-education should have been raised and put to rest at the latest three years ago, as it was at Sweet Briar College under the leadership of Elizabeth Muhlenfeld (See: www.sbc.edu).

The alumnae's view of "an inflated sense of R-MWC's financial health" is a direct result of what they read in their alumnae publications, what they have heard from the President's Office over the course of the last few years, and the public relations "press" expended during reunions and Alumnae Council. We ask: In what ways in the last three years has the College's leadership *directly addressed the alumnae* with the facts and figures of declining enrollments, endowment expenditures, or concerns for the future viability of the College as a woman's institution, as outlined in print from the President's Office in late 2005?

Retention Concerns

Most women's colleges in the United States have been faced with retention "issues," and single-gendered institutions have ubiquitously faced this issue since their inception (Horowitz, 1984). The more successful women's colleges in the United States possess aggressive marketing, recruitment and retention plans appropriate to their market niche, and, therefore, have addressed these issues in a pro-active manner. (Contemporary examples of such foresight as highlighted in the A&S report are Agnes Scott (GA) and Mills College (CA), while historically the former "Seven Sisters" in the Northeast have led the way in remaining women's institutions, the lone exception being Vassar College (NY)). While recognizing the impact of budget constraints that have been imposed at the College, we maintain that R-MWC lacks aggressive and visionary marketing, promotion, recruitment and retention plans that capitalize on both the historic strengths of the college and its future positioning among other women's and liberal arts institutions in the South and Eastern Seaboard of the United States.

Again, citing social life as a major concern is nothing new to a single-sex college. We maintain that there are many creative social endeavors and a commitment to physical plant plans that can address some of these concerns. R-MWC's lack of social spaces (such as a Campus Center) and activities that engage the current student generation must be addressed by responding fairly and reasonably to their requests. Indeed, PER plans have been on the "boards" since the nineties.

The city of Lynchburg, VA is a major city in the state of Virginia with a metropolitan population of just over 200,000. Indeed, according to the 2005 annual issue of *Sperling Magazine's* "The Most Livable Cities in America," it is ranked seventeenth in the United States in this coveted category. While we understand that this statistic has to do with families, we also believe that parents desire to send their children to a safer metropolitan area such as Lynchburg, rather than a questionable urban locale for their college education. Also, it is our understanding that the city is committing large amounts of money for its revitalization ("City of Lynchburg," 2002). The safety and centrality of our location in the state of Virginia and proximity to both Charlottesville, VA and Washington, D.C., should be appealing to students and their parents, if marketed as such. Also, if the population of international students and residential minorities continues to rise, the College's diverse demographic will also have a positive and distinct impact on the city.

There is a problematic inference when A&S highlights the following as a retention issue: "*the intense, **dramatic** [bold added] campus culture was repeatedly cited as a reason for leaving.*" Most graduates who attended small liberal arts colleges with excellent reputations would remark that their academically rigorous environments were, indeed, intense. This quotation, which seems to be posed as emblematic of A&S research findings, suggests a compromise of academic rigor at R-MWC. Additionally, the term "dramatic" is pejorative at best, and sexist at worst, and necessitates sufficient interrogation if presented as narrative data upon which to make large-scale institutional changes.

We believe academic rigor should be a major concern. That is, academic rigor should be one of the *main* reasons a woman chooses R-MWC. Most serious academic students do not choose a college based on its social life. In fact, many students attend single-sex institutions such as R-MWC *in spite of* the fewer opportunities for social interaction. They choose it because they “fit” the environment, because the institution is serious about educating them for their future and because, as a result, they can be proud of their collegiate name and reputation upon graduation and beyond. While this factor was stated in a manner that concluded it was not a factor in transferring, we believe that this category would be one of the reasons weaker students would transfer to a state institution.

We strongly endorse the idea that an honors college with a global emphasis is highly appealing and should be the lynch-pin in the future direction of the college. The fact that co-education was viewed as having a negative effect also coincides with most alumnae attitudes as well. Again, A&S findings in these areas are encouraging to the institution’s future.

We agree that more housing options, given sufficient funding, are both warranted and appealing in the competitive market that R-MWC finds itself. Yet, we would encourage any such plans to reinforce the strong sense of community with apartment style additional housing on or near campus (as A&S acknowledged students’ preference for on pg 11) rather than detract from this community with pockets of housing spread away from campus.

Again, since we do not have the specific questions, methodologies and numbers of respondents, we find it difficult to respond to the A&S findings from pages 12-15 regarding why some students, apparently, do not choose to attend R-MWC (e.g., lack of social opportunities). There are too many methodological questions that must be addressed by A&S before we can respond with any amount of professional integrity.

One of the most discouraging revelations that originated from President Bowman’s speech to alumnae attending Winter Wonderland Weekend in Williamsburg on December

2, 2005, was the fact that R-MWC's admissions overlapping institutions (that is, who R-MWC defines to be its primary competitors) are overwhelmingly public institutions in Virginia and not women's colleges in the South or the Northeast. This demographic fact was *not* publically communicated to alumnae in the normal chain of communications from the President's Office or by any other college constituency. This is both disturbing and telling. We contend that had this specific demographic been exposed earlier, alumnae groups would have responded more aggressively in the form of active participation in recruitment. Indeed, we have numerous examples of alumnae offering help in context with admissions college fairs and recruitment efforts who have not been utilized or followed up on by the College.

Additionally, this pattern of non-communication is further compounded in the A&S report through suggestions about how to communicate with alumnae groups during this present time. These suggestions, including verbatim sample quotations, would appear to obfuscate more than clarify what seems to be the predicament of the college as indicated by the entire A&S report. An example of such is demonstrated by their section on how alumnae communications should be "handled" (A&S Report, p. 41).

We strongly concur with A&S's observation that current students and alumnae have deep emotional ties to the College and its mission as a single-sex institution. However, we reemphasize that we believe the College has not been marketed effectively or aggressively, nor has it utilized its strong alumnae base sufficiently, to adequately represent any successful liberal arts institution, let alone a woman's college of distinction.

Presentation of Scenarios

We do *not* endorse whole-heartedly any of the scenarios presented by A&S. As previously stated, we have specific recommendations that will support and strengthen the mission of the College stated in our separate document, "R-MWC Blueprint for the Future." We also realize that the College has instituted a long-range planning process led by the Board of Trustees, and more specifically, the Strategic Planning Steering

Committee. Since alumnae membership to this committee is limited to Trustees, though they did solicit ideas from all alumnae, we do not know if their findings will concur with either A&S or this alumnae group.

Speaking globally to these scenarios, we strongly believe that A&S has underplayed and misunderstood both the financial resources and personal vitality and loyalty that many alumnae have to offer for retention of the mission of the institution. Admittedly anecdotal, when asked if they would give sacrificially to retain the mission of the College, we have heard two reactions time and again: 1) Yes, we are in a financial position to give more and would have given more if we knew the immediacy of the issues R-MWC faces. 2) While we cannot immediately increase our giving, we can volunteer to do more in the areas of student recruitment and retention. For example, if just one alumna, who cannot donate significantly to the College financially, can make a commitment to recruit one excellent student a year, she will be doing as much as the person who will give money sacrificially. It is clear that the strengths of this alumnae base have not been sufficiently tested. However, we also understand that the College must respond more aggressively and forth-rightly to both market trends and the future positioning of the College in this decade, and this demands strong, visionary leadership.

While we will not systematically critique the various scenarios, since none seem, in and of themselves, to be viable, let us be clear about several A&S erroneous assumptions or future scenarios:

1. The idea of an institutional merger is physically impossible. R-MWC is not physically located to become either a coordinate woman's college or to be merged into non-contiguous spaces of land. Vassar College examined such a physical merger with Yale University in 1967 and realized that it was not viable. (See: Yale-Vassar Report, 1967)
2. It is obvious that Sewanee—University of the South (TN), Davidson College (NC), Washington and Lee University (VA), and other former men's colleges in

the South became co-educational *in order to enhance the academic reputation* of their institutions and, indeed, all three have done so. However, as one looks at the recent contemporary examples of former women's colleges such as Goucher (MD), Wheaton (MA) and Hood (MD) Colleges, their early entering classes of men are not comparable to the academic quality or backgrounds of the entering and continuing excellence of women at the former southern men's institutions. Indeed, recent reports highlight the declining academic performance of male college applicants (Tyre, 2006). Therefore, from a historical and comparable standpoint, R-MWC's excellent academic reputation would be significantly endangered through the institution of co-education.

3. Furthermore, to attract more men to R-MWC, the College would have to raise significant amounts of money for the following: 1) Residential space; 2) Student Center; 3) Athletic spaces; 4) Fraternity spaces; 5) Cafeteria space. While many of these spaces are also needed for women, the idea that granting men entrance to the College would be the least expensive act for the greatest amount of pay-off is highly suspect, and a poorly staked gamble.

4. The other issue for us is encapsulated in the following question: **What types of men have been historically attracted to women's colleges?** According to our research and experiences, it is the following: 1) men who cannot academically compete at the public flagship institutions in their respective states; 2) local men who want to commute to college; 3) men with weaker academic backgrounds; 4) those who favor "traditional" women's fields such as education, music, etc. 5) men who desire a high female-to-male ratio for social reasons; 6) men who want to play varsity sports in a new institution and cannot compete at an established collegiate sports institution. Are these the archetypes anyone would desire for an academically reputable co-educational institution (Tidball, 1998)?

In conclusion to this formal response to the A&S report, we believe that had the alumnae been asked to be a "full partner" in alleviating some of the distressing statistics recently

revealed by President Bowman, we could have saved the Board of Trustees the money granted for this report, and such funds might have been allocated to deserving strategic projects. R-MWC educates women for positions of leadership, and we are now just that—fully mature and well-developed leaders in our respective fields—ones who can assist in leading this College that we dearly love out of any exigency it finds itself. We ask that our second document, “R-MWC Blueprint for the Future,” be seriously considered for the future survival (and eventual thriving) of our alma mater.

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