

A University For All:

A Report from the W&L Advocate Coalition

*Without virtue and without integrity
the finest talents of the most brilliant accomplishments
can never gain the respect or conciliate
the esteem of the truly valuable art of mankind.*

George Washington to Bartholomew Dandridge, 1797

*I think the worst part of attending W&L
is being promised a community and university that upholds strong values,
then discovering that right is not reserved for everyone.*

Student of Color, Class of 2021

No problem is so deep that it cannot be overcome.

Nelson Mandela, 1999

6 October 2020

Dear President Dudley and The Board of Trustees,

Our University has achieved the prestige and educational reputation it enjoys thanks to the passionate work and dedicated practices of generations of good stewards. We write today to highlight another reputation of our renowned institution: its indisputable ties to white supremacist culture and male privilege. As a reckoning on issues of race, gender, equity, and marginalization unfolds on the national stage, the same issues permeate our community and threaten to forever define the University we hold dear. We are invested in the future of W&L, and we have composed this comprehensive report with respect, care, and urgency to inspire you to courageous action.

Institutions across the nation are under examination as overdue demands for social reform and racial justice manifest throughout our society. Given W&L's ties to the Confederacy, white supremacy, and patriarchal culture, it has and will continue to face particular scrutiny. With the Report of The Commission on Institutional History and Community, W&L took the first necessary step in seeking the truth about its foundations and complex history. We acknowledge and appreciate the openness to change revealed by the Board of Trustees' recent decision to consider the University's name, and to conduct outreach to the larger community. That initiative, however resolved, will do little to address the matters addressed in this report. Accordingly, we write to ask for more than a change to the University's name. We write to urge the University to fulfill its promise to consider and support the aggregate W&L community.

The writers of this report are members of the W&L Advocate Coalition (WLAC), a group of alumni working with faculty, students, and staff to transform campus culture toward inclusivity. We come from a place of love and respect – though, for the majority of us, the University did not extend the same qualities in return. We identify as male, female, non-binary, black, white, brown, queer, straight, liberal, conservative, younger, older, Christian, Muslim, Jewish, atheist, Greek,

and Independent. We are athletes, activists, scholars, public servants, artists, scientists, lawyers, homemakers, doctors, investors, parents, grandparents, and children. Many among us do not look like your stereotypical W&L student. Nevertheless, **we are W&L.**

How do we know this? Because you told us we were. The moment our acceptance letters were opened, we were yours. Now we ask, in return, that you be ours. That you join us in creating a University For All.

In an effort to provide aid in this historic moment and to help W&L become an example to other institutions, this report provides thoughtful and deliberative feedback based on our own experiences and research. After visiting campus last fall, WLAC members heard from current students about the exclusion, hazing, and discrimination they face; experiences that have persisted, unchanged and unaddressed, over decades. Students endure racist, homophobic, and sexist threats and harassment that is inconsistent with the University's commitment to honor and inclusion, and would be intolerable in any workplace or truly inclusive institution of learning. The continuity of these oppressive practices over time illustrates that differences constituted by wealth, race, gender, and sexuality are weaponized to make life at W&L unusually difficult for underrepresented groups, both psychologically and physically. No student is well served by an institution that allows these practices to continue. This damaging culture of harm requires immediate action, and we appeal to you for leadership. Campus culture must be transformed in order to prepare students for, in the words of the University's Mission Statement, "engaged citizenship in a global and diverse society."

We acknowledge that this is a time of unprecedented challenges for institutions of higher education. But times of great trial are often opportune moments to initiate great reform. For decades on our own, and over the past three years as an organized group, members of the WLAC have been listening, reading, and reflecting. We know that the historic comfort with which W&L memorialized the Confederacy, and the University's ties to a social order based on white supremacy, are manifested in more than its name. While we recognize the importance of removing Robert E. Lee's name and ask you to do so, we write to

appeal for holistic transformations. Any promising future for W&L – one that upholds the “valuable art of mankind,” as Washington said – will depend on the undertaking of sweeping changes to campus life. It will depend on the actions of this Board and this administration.

The Calls to Action outlined in this report, and expanded in the “living” Appendices available on our website, imagine a **University For All**, with structures that accommodate the multiple and intersecting identities of our students, faculty, staff, and alumni community. We urge you to initiate these actions to fulfill your duty as stewards of the University, improve the experience and safety of current students, and ensure a bright future, financially and otherwise, for the University we hold dear.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely yours,

The W&L Advocate Coalition (WLAC)

Part I: Historical Ties & Financial Futures

Throughout its history, Washington and Lee University has engaged in symbolism and cultural practices that contradict its commitment to fostering “a welcoming, friendly, and mutually supportive community.”¹ The symbolism is self-evident: every experience at our University begins with its name, an homage to two men who owned human beings as property. The name of our University implies approval of the institution of slavery, as well as the systemic racism that persists in our nation. As a result, our institution holds irrefutable ties to Lost Cause mythology, a pernicious fiction that no academic institution dedicated to “developing the intellect and character of [its] students”² should embrace. As long as these ignoble commitments remain, the University’s efforts to create a diverse and respectful community will never be realized.

We support the immediate removal of Lee's name because he is known to the wider American public as the most notable fighter for the Confederate States of America and its proslavery ideals. Despite the University’s recent efforts to focus on Robert E. Lee as a post-war educator, his inclusion in W&L’s name attracts negative attention, damaging the University’s reputation and admissions efforts. Many of our peer institutions share this kind of negative attention. They have chosen to act, even when their ties to Lost Cause ideology are less publicly identifiable. Many have renamed their schools and programs to eliminate ties to white supremacy.³ Others renamed buildings that bear the names of those who devoted their lives to racist ideology.⁴ Some have even issued compelling public apologies.⁵ With Robert E. Lee’s name and likeness being removed

¹ “University Strategic Plan,” Community.

<https://www.wlu.edu/the-w-l-story/strategic-plan/#Community>

² “University Strategic Plan,” Curriculum.

<https://www.wlu.edu/the-w-l-story/strategic-plan/#Curriculum>

³ Brett Tomlinson and Carlett Spike, “Princeton Renames Wilson School and Residential College, Citing Former President’s Racism,” *Princeton Alumni Weekly*, 27 June 2020.

<https://paw.princeton.edu/article/princeton-renames-wilson-school-and-residential-college-citing-former-presidents-racism>

⁴ Associated Press, “University Renaming Buildings Honoring White Supremacists,” *The Washington Post*, 30 September 2020.

https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/university-renaming-buildings-honoring-white-supremacists/2020/09/30/a182b08e-031b-11eb-b92e-029676f9ebec_story.html

⁵ “Davidson College Apologizes for Support of Slavery, Announces First Steps Toward Greater Equity,” Davidson College News, 19 August 2020.

<https://www.davidson.edu/news/2020/08/19/davidson-college-apologizes-support-slavery-announce-first-steps-toward-greater-equity>

from the national public square, W&L is fast becoming the last enshrinement and tribute to a man whose name is synonymous with racism.

As one of the few remaining public monuments to Lee, the University becomes less able to distinguish itself from the Lost Cause to those outside of our community. The name instead takes on a life of its own, becoming more symbolic and politicized. Qualified students already refuse to consider our institution, despite its academic reputation and generous financial aid opportunities. This trend will only accelerate. What message will we convey to prospective students of color and students who consider themselves anti-racist if, in the face of the events of 2020, the University fails to institute meaningful change and instead affirms its veneration of a Confederate general appointed to its Presidency? We submit that the University will be forced to increase its acceptance rate and will experience a decrease in admissions yield, thus eroding our national rankings and stature. Such a reputation occludes faculty and staff recruitment and retention efforts, further jeopardizing W&L's status as a leading academic institution.

Regarding the name, consider those who find our brand and culture attractive. The Ku Klux Klan has been active on and around campus many times over the last few years.⁶ Within our community, students experience frequent racist, sexist, and homophobic attacks that, when reported, face few consequences. W&L risks becoming a haven for white supremacy: an institution where the students who do enroll believe they have found a space where racist, sexist, and/or exclusionary views are supported.

Perhaps even more significant than its name, however, is the University's exclusionary culture. W&L spent its first 217 years as a white-only institution.⁷ It spent its first 236 years as a male-only institution⁸. The effect of these lengthy periods of exclusion lives on today. It thrives and percolates in social structures like the Greek system, which overwhelmingly serves the school's white population, often to the exclusion and detriment of those who identify as BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color). It

⁶ Hannah Denham, "Students Find KKK Chapter Fliers on W&L's Campus," *The Ring-Tum Phi*, 26 October 2018.

<https://ringtumphi.net/4033/news/students-find-possible-kkk-chapter-fliers-on-wls-campus/>

⁷ Working Group on African-American History, "African Americans at Washington and Lee: A Timeline."

<https://my.wlu.edu/presidents-office/issues-and-initiatives/institutional-history/working-group-on-african-american-history/timeline-of-african-americans-at-wandl>

⁸ This statistic is for the undergraduate portions of the University, which enrolls the majority of students. See also Blaine Brownell, *Washington and Lee University 1930-2000: Tradition and Transformation* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2017), 459.

lives on in a campus culture where sexual assault is rampant and not considered a breach of honor.⁹

Some believe governing bodies like the Board of Trustees can do little to change a flawed culture. The University's history indicates otherwise. Previous Boards took bold steps to fundamentally change the culture of the University, even if they chose to do so much later than peer institutions. In 1964, the Board changed the University's admissions policy to include the statement: "No provision of the charter, no provision of the by-laws and no resolution of the Board has established a policy of discrimination among qualified applicants for admission."¹⁰ Two years later, Dennis Haston became the University's first Black undergraduate.¹¹ The school's culture had changed. In the 1980s, the Board and administration launched the Fraternity Renaissance, which coupled renovations of Greek housing with "clear and strict rules governing occupant behavior."¹² The school's culture had changed. In 1984, the Board voted to admit women as undergraduates. The first women matriculated in 1985.¹³ The school's culture had changed. In the 2010s, the Board established Third Year Housing, which eliminated nearly half of "off-campus" party locations and enabled the junior class to live together, in community. The school's culture had changed. In 2020, we are living in a time of change once more. We must act to reflect this progress, just as our predecessors have done. Our institution's future depends upon your willingness to lead the way.

Failure to take bold action to enact the University's mission and purpose will negatively affect its financial health and reputation and threaten the University's ability to educate effectively. While some believe that the school's brand and culture must be maintained to ensure continued donations from established benefactors, we submit that the school must consider the opinions and convictions of its future donors as well. There are now decades of graduating classes that did not experience W&L as a white-only or

⁹ "Crime Statistics," *Annual Campus Safety Report*, Washington and Lee University.

<https://my.wlu.edu/student-life/health-and-safety/public-safety/campus-safety-and-crime-reporting/annual-campus-security-report/crime-statistics>

¹⁰ Working Group on African-American History, "African Americans at Washington and Lee: A Timeline."

<https://my.wlu.edu/presidents-office/issues-and-initiatives/institutional-history/working-group-on-african-american-history/timeline-of-african-americans-at-wandl>

¹¹ Working Group on African-American History, "African Americans at Washington and Lee: A Timeline."

<https://my.wlu.edu/presidents-office/issues-and-initiatives/institutional-history/working-group-on-african-american-history/timeline-of-african-americans-at-wandl>

¹² Brownell, *Washington and Lee*, 476-484.

¹³ Brownell, *Washington and Lee*, 459, 464.

male-only institution. They are looking for positive change before they lend their financial support. The school also stands to gain reputational support if it acts for cultural change. For example, prominent progressive alumni, who currently decline to highlight their W&L ties in recognition of the University's image, might instead choose to publicly associate with a more forward-thinking institution.

There are also litigation costs to consider. In the last two years, the school's exclusionary culture and lack of sufficient mental health resources led to at least two suicide attempts, one of which ended in the death of a student. While we first and foremost mourn the loss of members of our community, we also note that these incidents led to litigation against the University, which attracted local and national media coverage.¹⁴ These unnecessary costs, and the attendant negative attention, can be mitigated by addressing W&L's problematic campus culture. Most importantly, such action is vital to ensure students' physical and mental health.

Finally, we call upon you to look beyond financial considerations to consider this moment in the University's history from an ethical standpoint. In the words of former University President Kenneth Ruscio: "[Alumni support is] just not something that frankly enters this kind of calculation. . . [W]hen you know you're going to face criticism, you decide to do what's right."¹⁵ If, however, the University's finances must be your first consideration, do not fear the loss of donations today because you did what is right, but, rather, fear the loss of donations tomorrow because you did not.

As W&L's Board of Trustees, you have the responsibility to foster the campus culture described in the University's Mission Statement and Strategic Plan in a timely, transparent manner. The remainder of this report summarizes the decisive actions we believe are necessary to accomplish that goal. We hope you will embrace our vision of a University for All and take immediate steps to achieve it.

¹⁴ Susan Svrluga, "Former Student Who Attempted Suicide Sues Washington & Lee University, Alleging Negligence," *The Washington Post*, 9 January 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2019/01/09/former-student-sues-washington-lee-university-negligence-after-his-attempted-suicide/>; and Elizabeth Tyree and Emily Swecker, "Family Files \$24M Lawsuit after Son Takes his Life, Claims School Knew his Intentions." *WSET News* (Virginia), 16 October 2019. <https://wset.com/news/local/family-files-24m-lawsuit-after-son-takes-his-life-claims-school-knew-his-intentions>

¹⁵ Quoted in "Washington and Lee Confronts the Weight of its History," *All Things Considered*, NPR News, 10 July 2014. <https://www.npr.org/2014/07/10/330496157/washington-and-lee-confronts-the-weight-of-its-history>

Part II: Steps toward Transformation

Overview: Racial Inequality, Colonialism, and White Supremacist Culture

While its rural location and small size might imply otherwise, W&L is not sheltered from racial inequality, colonialism, and white supremacist culture. On the contrary and as we have been arguing, these cultural phenomena are embedded in the University's history and practices. Strategies to eliminate these longstanding aspects of W&L's culture ought to be required elements of all University initiatives. Doing so will ensure the stability and future of the University, and is also simply the right thing to do: students, faculty, and staff members of all backgrounds should be able to thrive and feel safe during their time on campus. The University's long-standing veneration of Lee makes it a magnet to white supremacist groups – such as the KKK – whose several appearances on campus have threatened the physical and emotional safety of BIPOC students and faculty members.

In predominantly white institutions, students from under-represented groups often fear that they were recruited chiefly for their contribution to campus diversity. The institution, and their fellow students, may reinforce that notion. At W&L, these feelings of exclusion are compounded by a history of racial discrimination in the Greek system, a dominant aspect of W&L's social environment. If there is any doubt as to the negative impact of this culture on student life, we invite you to read the personal testimonies available on the [@DearWLU](#) Instagram feed.¹⁶ There you will find compelling stories from current and former students, reflecting candidly on their time at W&L.

A strategy to reform campus culture significantly will strengthen efforts to recruit and retain students and faculty from under-represented groups. It is the University's duty to support and encourage historically marginalized perspectives. While this is not a simple task, the calls to action below are starting points toward fostering a more racially inclusive and safe community.

¹⁶ <https://www.instagram.com/dearwlu/>

Racial Inequality Calls to Action:

- Publicly acknowledge the racism in W&L's history and the long-standing consequences of that racism which endure today.
- Reject and condemn the University's glorification of the Confederacy (be *truly* mindful of the future) by removing Lee from the University name.
- Recognize and deconstruct the traditions derived from a culture based on white, European, and male perspectives: work towards true inclusivity on campus, from the curriculum to how decisions are made.

Overview: Sexual Harassment & Gender Inequality

The authors of this section are women.

We are women who attended W&L; women who reported sexual harassment or assault; women who did not report assault; women who regret not reporting; women who regret reporting; women who helped another student report; women who heard about women who did not report; women who never wanted to make these decisions at all.

The thoughts and regrets expressed in this section stem from an incontrovertible truth: *the reporting system is flawed*. The system in place at our University is unjust and unmanageable for survivors of stalking, sexual harassment, and sexual assault.

Fraternities have a near-monopoly on campus social life, and non-academic interaction takes place almost exclusively in male-controlled, male-dominated spaces. As a result, students do not feel empowered to say no to sexual experiences they do not want, or yes to sexual experiences they *do* want, lest they suffer grievous social consequences. Compelling young women to enter male-dominated spaces, often in remote rural locations, in order to consume alcohol and socialize is a duplicitous recipe for assault culture. These rules and social norms are enforced by the national offices of Greek organizations and are supported by chapter alumni, reflecting the “glory days” when sexual violence was omnipresent but never discussed. The University must break away from these sexist and deleterious traditions.

An unsafe campus negatively affects the academic performance and mental health of affected students and increases the use of alcohol and other addictive substances. Survivors of sexual assault and rape are more likely to suffer anorexia, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, and to abuse alcohol and drugs.¹⁷ Victims often skip class, avoid libraries and dining halls, and withdraw from campus life. Even female-identifying, as well as LGBTQIA+ students, who did *not* have an experience they consider sexual assault, endure an oppressive culture of shame and stigma around sexuality on campus.

¹⁷ Allison Tombros Korman, “Shifting Culture to End Campus Sexual Assault.” *Diversity & Democracy* (Association of American Colleges and Universities) 18.2 (Spring 2015).
<https://www.aacu.org/diversitydemocracy/2015/spring/korman>

One of the most troubling things we have uncovered in preparing this report is a lack of transparency, consistency, and ease of access to statistics on stalking, sexual harassment, and sexual assault on campus, and statistics on the mental and physical health of W&L students. Because W&L doesn't publicly report on assault issues in a manner that permits a complete understanding of the situation, we are forced to cite only posted crime statistics. For the year 2018 (the most recent year for which statistics are published on the University's website), W&L reports a total of 17 crimes in the forcible sex offenses, stalking and dating violence categories.¹⁸ This is misleadingly low in light of the lived experiences of students and the statistics of peer institutions with more transparent reporting practices.

According to Know Your IX, a school's federally mandated Clery Act crime statistics under-report the prevalence of sexual assault on campus. According to the most recent American Association of Universities survey, 13% of all students and 26.4% of female undergraduates report nonconsensual sexual contact by physical force, threats of physical force, or incapacitation.¹⁹

If W&L students' experiences are in line with the rate of other institutions, the true number of undergraduate and law school students who experience sexual misconduct is likely around 294. Our lived experience indicates that it is not uncommon for students to experience sexual assault more than once, likely pushing the total number of incidents even higher.

A 2007 study conducted by the National Institute of Justice also supports the conclusion that the true number of sexual assaults at W&L is higher than reported, saying "the likelihood of reporting assault is lower on college campuses . . . because 'date and acquaintance rapes are less likely to be reported than stranger rapes.'"

While it may not be surprising that W&L's small campus and tight-knit community may lead to even lower instances of reporting compared to other institutions, even

¹⁸ "2019 Crime Awareness and Public Safety ('Clery Act') Report: October 1, 2019." <https://my.wlu.edu/print?title=2019+Crime+Awareness+and+Public+Safety+%28%22Clery+Act%22%29+Report%3A+October+1%2C2019&ids=x9903%7Cx9892%7Cx9891%7Cx9893%7Cx9894%7Cx9895%7Cx9896%7Cx9905%7Cx9897%7Cx9898%7Cx9899%7Cx9900%7Cx9901%7Cx9902>

¹⁹ "AAU [Association of American Universities] Releases 2019 Survey on Sexual Assault and Misconduct," 15 October 2019. <https://www.aau.edu/newsroom/press-releases/aau-releases-2019-survey-sexual-assault-and-misconduct>

repeat perpetrators are rarely discovered and/or sanctioned at W&L. It is not that these offenders do not exist, but rather they are protected by a system purposely designed to hide them from view until they can enter society and secure prestigious jobs.

We call on the University to make transformative change, in reporting and in addressing sexual assault on campus.

Gender Inequality Calls to Action:

- Reform, equip, and support the Title IX office.
- Create and implement an accessible, transparent, and effective system for reporting assault on Campus.
- Make W&L's data on sexual misconduct available and accessible to the community.
- Denounce, confront, and arrest the injurious and unacceptable culture of sexual assault at W&L, and address gender-based safety and inequality issues on campus.
- Eliminate the profound social power imbalance between members of fraternities and the rest of the student community.

Overview: Further Oppressive Practices

Race and gender are perhaps the most prominent areas of exclusion, yet additional barriers disproportionately affect the experiences and education of W&L students from other historically marginalized groups. For example, students who do not identify as cisgender²⁰ face a repressive environment on both individual and systemic levels. The residential and academic physical environments do not follow minimal accessibility guidelines, which discourages students with disabilities from applying and/or attending W&L. The Greek system and social environment *actively* exclude and discriminate against students in the LGBTQIA+ community, in non-Christian religious groups, and those coming from low-income households. And for these lower-income students, financial limitations mean they will not have the same opportunities on campus as students from more affluent backgrounds, even if these chances are presented as available to the entire W&L community.

As our peer institutions make great strides in recruiting and retaining diverse students, including low-income and first-generation applicants, W&L has not achieved the same success. This stagnation was recently highlighted in a 2017 *NY Times* feature²¹ that starkly showed our University's failures in these areas relative to peer institutions. Failure to make gains here in turn propagates a homogeneous culture resistant to change, creating a positive feedback loop.

Even if W&L were more successful at achieving the Strategic Plan's goal of a "diverse" student population, the University lacks a strategy of support for those students once they arrive on campus. Consequently, students belonging to the aforementioned marginalized populations will lack a sense of belonging, security, and social acceptance that is commonplace for their white, straight, cisgender, and financially secure peers without disabilities. Clearly, many remarkable and multifaceted students suffer as a result. It is not enough for W&L to simply open the gates: we must create space for all those invited to enter, and we must ensure that space is safe and liberated.

²⁰ "Cisgender" refers to people with a gender identity that matches their sex assigned at birth. "Transgender" refers to people with a gender identity or gender expression that differs from their sex assigned at birth.

²¹ "Economic Diversity and Student Outcomes at Washington and Lee University, Lexington, Virginia." The Upshot, *The New York Times*, 2017.
<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/projects/college-mobility/washington-and-lee-university>

Further Calls to Action:

- Support the academic and social success of historically marginalized students by eliminating physical, educational, and financial barriers to full participation in campus life.
- Promote inclusive structures and policies to meet the needs of LGBTQIA+, religious, low-income, disabled, and first-generation students.
- Develop proactive, sustainable initiatives that gauge accessibility and retention for incoming students with marginalized or under-represented identities.
- Accelerate the need-blind admissions policy listed in the W&L Strategic Plan to ensure an applicant's financial status is not a factor in decision-making.
- Diminish or eliminate legacy preference when reviewing student applications.

In Conclusion & Next Steps

These Calls to Action summarize necessary cultural shifts that we call upon you to consider, instigate, and execute in order to ensure sustained progress and a bright future for our University. This Report was collaboratively composed by 18 individuals: a manifold committee of alumni, students, staff, and former faculty, all members of the W&L Advocacy Coalition. At its submission, this document has been signed by members of our organization, and will now circulate and continue to garner signatures within the greater W&L community. This Report is available on our website, accompanied by appendices: living documents where more detailed ideas, data, and evolving Calls to Action are available for your reference. You will also find information on the website regarding our upcoming Community Forum, taking place on Friday, October 16th.

We thank you for reading this Report. As an organization that cares deeply for our university, we are available and eager to continue this conversation with you. We look forward to the opportunity for ongoing dialogue and working together to create a University For All.

Signed,

The W&L Advocate Coalition

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