

Dear President Worden:

I address this open letter to you because you've had the courage to step into a difficult position and you've impressed me as one who truly knows and cares about this place, who listens with an open mind, and who responds with patience to those with differing views – all the best qualities RMWC encourages in its students. Like me and my faculty colleagues from whom students and alumnae seek answers to their frustration over recent events, I'd guess you've struggled with how best to respond to those who feel blind-sided, betrayed, unheard, disheartened. I believe it's time to engage our college leadership in an honest dialog with other community constituents – staff, alums, students and faculty – beyond the public announcement to accept male students: a focus on what style and model of leadership best suits RMWC.

I promote this dialog as another who cares about this college, its mission, and its power to transform students. In listening, I've come to understand that it's RMWC's unique culture that students and alumnae value above all else. The proposed discussion concerns a prevailing model of leadership inadvertently eroding aspects of RMWC's culture (as on campuses everywhere), one responsible for a series of disappointing decisions. It's a corporate model promoted in board rooms, business and professional schools.

According to sociologists who study the advantages and limitations of such models and the leadership styles they promote, decisions are made top-down by a small group that guards and controls information; directives are issued to employees and stockholders, who are on a need-to-know basis. Reports about the health of the organization are routinely subject to spin since, the argument goes, so much is at stake. The "bottom line" and issues of legal liability dominate decisions. CEOs are rewarded handsomely even when the organization faces financial hardship. If issues of culture even arise, it is hard to put such intangibles into cost/benefit analyses. This model increasingly influences how decisions are made here, and it's not surprising that often they are at odds with campus culture.

In contrast, certain values drive RMWC's culture: openness and inclusiveness, consensus-building and shared decision-making by fully-informed stakeholders, a sense of trust and respect for the intelligence and character of those around you, an honor system that frees us to do what other communities or organizations cannot. I recall the bewilderment of a previous financial administrator who couldn't understand why students and faculty so strongly resisted an edict insisting that new campus mailboxes be kept locked at all times. Perhaps because such administrators don't live on the campus in the same way, they fail to understand the value of not having to lock your mailboxes or remember the combination, to revel in the trust, openness and honor of which this speaks, to enjoy knowing that other students or faculty are free to place things there anytime. This far outweighed the possibility of something stolen or the potential liability should someone crack their head on an open mailbox. Or maybe it's a type of disconnect proceeding from the model.

Of course, financial models are essential for many decisions and using corporate business principles sometimes makes sense. It's understandable that many administrators or trustees may favor a model they're comfortable with -- many are career business leaders. But if a leadership model is myopic about cultural issues or doesn't fully weigh the input of those most familiar with the culture (and most affected by those decisions), then too easily we may find the tail wagging the dog. Moreover, soon there will remain little of the valued traditions that make RMWC unique. We may preserve a college, but what college? Will alumnae on whom we depend so heavily recognize it or feel a connection to it? Might it be a small college anywhere -- global honors notwithstanding -- or worse, one with all the impersonal qualities of a large university and none of the advantages?

Reactions to recent decisions are not merely an inherent resistance to change by those being led. Rather, they are reactions against decisions that so swiftly impoverish campus culture: the disappearance of people and traditions that preserve what those in the trenches value most. Without throwing out business acumen, the most appropriate leadership model for RMWC would prioritize "culture first" and would be built upon the values already mentioned.

If such a model were already in place, perhaps recent decisions and press releases would have been handled differently. If trustees had been more fully informed by all campus constituents, we may have avoided the Reading debacle (even as we seek to emphasize our global reach). I'm not sure we'd so quickly consider converting a truly unique art collection into "financial assets." Such a "culture first" model would have more skillfully guided decisions about (real) security issues, the resulting "outsourcing" of valued community members, and all the predictable ill-will. Perhaps the bottom-line would not be so prominent a feature in changes to the dining hall service (which, at the moment, delivers "anywhere college" food and replaces an honor system with the need for students to swipe a card to enter). Already, fewer faculty are choosing to share an informal lunch with students and each other, compromising that rather unique aspect of the campus experience. We wouldn't get a message from trustees that prevailing business practices dictate Presidential candidates may not need to come to campus to meet or get to know us and that we may not even be privileged to their names! We might stop receiving press releases like the August 19th *RMWC on the Move* that misleads the community into thinking that the faculty are of one mind to carry forth a plan (when actually they are divided). A key passage concluding that publication stresses "the college is a business." I'm hoping we all begin to stress and value the myriad ways the college is *not* a business and develop a model more suited to what it is -- a unique learning community. And here, administrators must take the lead.

In hindsight, trustees and administrative leaders (yourself included) have issued apologies for aspects of how recent decisions have been executed, including the co-ed decision. Undoubtedly our leaders work very hard toward what they perceive is in the college's best interest and the apologies are sincere. But working hard within an inappropriate model always produces less than

desirable results, and even the sincerest of apologies fail to inform us about how future decisions will be made differently. New habits must be built into a model's structure (e.g., regular, informal meetings where trustees and faculty share views directly; new forums to garner input from students, alums, and faculty – i.e., beyond appointed representatives; or even orientation of new administrative staff by other constituents about our campus culture). Naming the college is a great place to start a new process.

Without presuming to have the answers, I'm suggesting we revisit the current model and reframe some of the questions. Greater consideration of campus culture is not a hindrance to securing the college's financial future. Instead, such consideration will preserve the life blood of RMWC for many generations of students to come, students who will graduate knowing they received the RMWC experience.

Respectfully,

Brad Bullock