

Chicago Town Meeting 11-14-06

Ellen James Ramsburgh '68 with edits/additions and comments from others at the meeting.

It was really discouraging, an exercise in futility except for the fact that our comrades in arms were impressive and admirable and true sisters.

Present from RMWC: Ginger, Heather, Skip Kughn. Trustees: Amanda Clark Fox '67, Mary Scovanner '77 and Gail (?) who said she had only been a trustee for one month,

Two or three alumnae were present who spoke in favor of the BoT's decision. A much larger number (15-20) were very much opposed.

Ginger spoke for about 25 minutes. We didn't hear anything new. Sally Spangler Miley '68 had to ask her (politely) to let us get to questions since we knew most of the information she was giving. She went on for about 10 more minutes, ending her speech with a quote from Pearl Buck, something about combining the energy of women and men. They did let us continue asking questions until about 9:30 when we were all so tired that we ran out of steam.

Ellen asked how the BoT can insist that coeducation will give R-M the opportunity to educate more women when Goucher and Hood are educating fewer women than before coed. Their GPA & SATs are down, and men hold a majority of leadership positions. [Ellen passionately said "Your principle may be dead wrong.] They are abandoning an educational philosophy that still has recent research to support its value for women and sacrificing principle for an undeveloped plan. Mandy Fox replied that we have a product that no one wants.

Ellen asked if she had seen Monday's editorial in the Roanoke paper [it said that a film crew, hired by Wheaton to show how well coeducation was going, instead discovered how professors now turn to women for factual answers and men for opinion answers]. She said they had seen it and called Wheaton and Wheaton was totally surprised by the editorial and I think she said that Wheaton knew nothing about the filming and was going to look into the allegation.

Sheri Carroll '91 got emotional at one point and kept asking how they could betray the alums and particularly how they could betray the young women who had been recruited to a woman's college. She was pretty eloquent, but very upset. Skip got quite defensive and said they had been trying to answer her questions for 3 months, but she still was not satisfied.

Ellen told Skip that she understood the college had had a balanced budget for the last two years. He said they had NOT balanced the budget in the last two years and had only balanced the budget five times in the last 21 (or 20) years.

Katy O'Malley Bunder '80 worked in admissions at R-M for 5 years after graduating and now works for Purdue in admissions in engineering/business (the students she works with are 85% male) and has a daughter who is at Reading. She said she was quite familiar with what young men were seeking when applying to colleges and it was definitely not R-MWC. She said that fewer men are enrolling in college now, that fewer were looking at small liberal arts schools, that they were looking for business, engineering, etc majors, big sports teams, basketball on ESPN, a college with name recognition and degrees that are good for jobs, and that picking co-education as a solution to R-M's problems was not going to provide the answer. Ginger's reply was more or less that we don't plan to take students from Purdue and they have a marketing plan for the name so it will be recognized. I guess part of that plan was to let us spread the word that the new name is Randolph College.

Mary Ostrom from '66 made the point that the tide is turning in the realm of demand for single-sex schools, as evidenced by the City of Chicago school system (which has just introduced single sex academies with wildly popular results) and that this may be the cusp, or turning point and that R-MWC should wait at least 6 years before implementing the co-ed plan. The BoT, or was it Skip Kughn, replied that they cannot take a chance on waiting. Ginger also said that A&S surveyed 500 alumnae; yet, in the rebuttal sheets from BoT, they claim that the approx. 1750 surveys returned to the PEC questionnaire did not represent a scientific sample! Hmmm. I beg to differ.

Ondre Huston '68 told Ginger how disturbed we are that the BoT is dismantling or discussing dismantling piece by piece everything that makes RMWC unique. We should be promoting this uniqueness rather than discarding it. She mentioned single sex education, the Reading program, the Riding Center and the Art collection. She referred to and spoke a little about the letter by Dr. Laura Katzman, assoc professor of Art at RMWC, and then asked Ginger directly if any art has been sold. "no" and, "Are you discussing, either publicly or privately, the sale of the pieces of art." "Yes". Ginger said "We are not a museum." and Ginger added, if it comes to choosing between the college and the art, she will choose the needs of the college. At some point, Mandy said that they did "ask the market" about programs using the art. They tested its appeal to new students and were surprised to learn that there wasn't any interest.

Sheri said that HSC never specifies a financial trouble or enrollment issue, or any one reason for why they may need to go co-ed one day, just the fact that one day it may happen. The letters are real general, that it's a consideration that's pretty much always on the table, not in a threatening "give or else" way. Yet, the alumni continue giving and the students keep coming. Doesn't this defeat the theory that people don't give to a sinking ship? She asked why R-M had not leveled with the alums about how serious the problems were. Skip said that when they began the capital campaign they wanted to have a 100 million goal, but were told by the consulting group that 75 million was the most they should ask for. Skip said that normally in a 75 million dollar campaign you would receive one 10 million dollar gift and two 5 million dollar gifts. During the campaign, no gift was higher than 4 million. Because of that fact, they felt another campaign would not be successful.

There were 2 husband/fathers at the meeting, both strongly opposed to the coed decision. One of them told Ginger and the board members that they have abandoned their mission. Looking at the other man, who is an Episcopal priest, he asked, "if your church were not working would you say let's abandon Jesus?"

Brenda Nelms '68 said that she is not so much opposed to the coed part of the plan as she is to the degradation of the curriculum. The direction is to set the curriculum to attract people, let them do what they want. In Brenda's words this has the earmarks of a diploma mill. The answer was more or less that the curriculum was not set but evolving. Brenda also asked what the college was doing to keep its faculty members, since she expected all to be out looking for positions at other schools. Ginger's response was that they were working with the faculty and particularly providing incentives (unspecified) to "younger" faculty. There was no opportunity to follow-up on that remark to determine if that meant that senior faculty were unalterably alienated or simply were too senior to move easily to new schools.

Some Other "Facts" we Learned

- 1) Audited financial statements for June 30 are available now.
- 2) SB and Hollins are struggling still – SB has just established year exchange program with VPI Hollins' MA program supports its undergraduate program. I did say that I didn't see anything wrong with that – happens all the time in sports – varsity football supports half the athletic dept.
- 3) Cambridge Associates is the investment firm that helps the BoT monitor investments. Asked about the alternative investments, Skip said the portfolio contained, among other things, investments in real estate, I

assume REITS, and other alternatives to equities and bonds. Not a lot of detail, but he did say that segment had performed well for the college over the last year. In the equities segment he said the college had moved out of individual equities and into mutual funds.

4) Housing for men: \$375, 000 for next year. Title 9 requires 5 sports (proportionality).

5) KGB's salary was mentioned, but no answer. The new president's house (bought when Lorimer was there) was paid for by 3 major donors and the alumnae house was bought by alumnae gifts.

6) Ginger said either before the meeting actually began or during the meeting that they had talked to PEC on numerous occasions.

7) They were asked about the rush several times, but other than give the old time line of a three year process, and to state that the committee represented everyone again, I don't think it was answered adequately. But when Ginger talked about the BoT making up its mind about the plan before giving it to the faculty, it was obvious that inclusion was not part of the plan.

8) It is now called a "strategic direction" not a "strategic plan"

9) What does happen to the endowment and other assets should the new college fail? (not really answered)

10) Keeping the honor code and other traditions will be no different with new male students than with the new students each year.

11) According to Skip, "quite a bit" was factored into the projections for decreased alumnae giving. He added "but maybe not enough".

12) A&S told them last fall that they could improve their enrollment and stay single sex with some marketing changes but it would not be enough. The "non-urban" environment of Lynchburg outweighs any gain with single sex marketing changes.

and finally a few comments from those in attendance.....

a) I got the distinct impression that Ginger sees the PEC group and the Reading list-serve posters as a disgruntled activist few. Although some of the posts do push the limits of what I consider civil discourse I'm sure that is more a function of my age than of their content. However, I still read them all faithfully and use them to firm up or challenge my own thoughts and feelings. Thanks to all of you who post. Without your input I would still be largely in the dark about what has been going on at RM for the last 12 months. I was recently in line at a stop light in Ann Arbor behind a car with a bumper sticker POLITE WOMEN RARELY MAKE HISTORY. It made me smile. I think it is important, even at this late date, for the Board to hear from the rest of us.

b) ['51 alum] I attended that meeting to put CLOSURE to my life as a Randolph-Macon woman. With tears in my eyes and a lump in my throat I did hug Heather and told her this was the end. I am so grateful for the many years I have had as a student and an alum of the College, of my many lasting friendships, and my educational training. Meeting the women last evening with so many outstanding positions made me so proud of my Randolph-Macon sisters.

It is said that there is nothing so certain as change. May this change work out for those that don't care. I care and am so very sorry. I am thankful for all of you who have worked so tirelessly to keep Randolph-Macon Woman's College alive.

c) My thought this morning is that we really do need to hold this board accountable and push for resignations. They may be big donors but I doubt their donations are going to offset the lost funds from other alums. I think we are all dismayed at the shoddy way the board and this administrative group have handled everything from the planning to the decision to the communication and even to this road show. I have absolutely no confidence because I don't think they had any idea how to come up with a good plan, how to present it, and apparently have no idea how to implement it. I think lack of transparency is present all along the way and still is.

d) Sheri Carroll asked directly at the Chicago meeting if Ginger and the BOT would resign given the error of their ways and Ginger said "No." This train has left the station, as we have long suspected, and I think the board and management have killed the college. Mandy and Ginger both said it would be closed in 10 years if no coed--I put my money on 10 years either way.

e) I was so disappointed in the meeting we all attended last night. It was a draining experience and I left more convinced than ever that this BoT is not going to budge in spite of the evidence they have been given that their plan is flawed. The honorable thing for them to do is resign, now that they have lost the confidence and support of so many of the alums.

f) As I stood outside waiting for my husband, Ginger, Skip, and Heather all left in the same taxi, with exceedingly grim faces. They are entrenched.

g) It will not be my school any longer with this change. I just cancelled my R-MWC "affinity" credit card and on my to-do list is change my will. Then a letter to Skip K.