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A Tale of Two Colleges

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“All students take classes together, use the same dining and student life facilities on campus, belong to the same student organizations and live on both sides of campus together,” according to the admission blog’s description of the coordinate college system. When Westhampton College was established as a separate, coordinate women’s college to the pre-existing Richmond College in 1914, it was intended as an institution “of equal grade, and having similar courses of instruction.” Until the 1970s, both colleges grew simultaneously but separately, until they merged into the same academic mission. Regardless, separate deaneries still exist for men and women, as well as separate student government organizations – WCGA (Westhampton College Government Association) and RCSGA (Richmond College Student Government Association). Increasingly throughout the years, the coordinate college system has been brought into question – does it fundamentally empower women, or limit them?

The separation is felt in the management of both deaneries; the Westhampton deanery, under Dean Kerry Fankhauser, attends to all women, and the Richmond College deanery, under Dean Joe Boehman, caters specifically to men. “It divides the amount of work the dean has to do, because they’re only focusing on half the student body, so it gives more individualized attention to each student,” said Nik Zapata, a Richmond College Class of 2019 senator.

For Zapata, the deanery’s separations enable each student to receive a more tailored approach throughout the course of their college career, since he believes having a dean of the same gender is important. “Having somebody with the same mind frame and similar experiences is great – you’ll talk to them and they’ll be able to relate back to your gender and be more understanding about that,” he said. In recognizing gender differences, both colleges undertake different methods when dealing with student issues, as well as having separate traditions, including Proclamation Night and Investiture.

Advocates for the system emphasize that it provides more leadership opportunities, since both colleges have separate student governments, honor and judicial councils. “I think what’s really awesome about the system is that the size of it allows for compartmentalization, so the student body as a whole is able to accomplish more,” said Zapata. “It also removes that gender competitiveness in an election.”

Holly Blake, associate dean for Westhampton College and director of the WILL* program, said that given the problems of gender inequality, having a structure that supports students through a gendered lens is powerful and unique. Blake said Richmond is above the national average for number of leadership positions held by women at a collegiate level because of support from the coordinate college system.

Nevertheless, there are many who feel the creation of separate leadership spaces is constraining. “I understand that the coordinate system was originally created to empower women and to create spaces that women would not normally occupy, because men usually take these over. However, that assumption is working under the assumption of ‘separate but equal’, and that’s very problematic,” Claudia Soliz said, ’14. “It perpetuates the idea that power
isn’t meant to be for women, or that you have to forcefully create these spaces.” For Soliz, an alumni of the WILL* program, there is more to the system than the creation of leadership opportunities, including the arguably discriminatory nature of on-campus housing.

The issue of housing has recently seen controversy, as arguments have risen against the dichotomous gender-separate dormitories in freshman year. “When you apply [for housing], you have to be either a part of Richmond College which is predominantly male, or Westhampton, which is predominantly female,” Kassandra Brieva, ’19, said. “I feel that’s very uncomfortable for people that don’t align with the gender binary, and so it strains them, since they have to be put somewhere they don’t necessarily agree with and there’s no leeway, or a neutral sort of designation for them.” Dean Blake agrees, and said that having space on campus for all students is critical. “The colleges have changed over time and need to continue to change,” she said. “Individuals who do not identify with the gender binary must have space and must feel welcome.”

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—Associate Dean Holly Blake

The supposed inclusivity of LGBTQ students in the system has been questioned, as many of those students feel they don’t belong. For Brieva, this feeling came not only from the dichotomy of housing choices, but also from the simple use of pronouns. “I prefer the gender neutral pronouns, like they/them. Once, the Westhampton Deanery passed out little cards, saying, ‘We congratulate Kassandra for her academic achievement.’ It was that assumption that because I am from Westhampton College I identify as one specific gender; that kind of rubbed me the wrong way,” Brieva said. “I’d rather have them put a pronoun preference in place, so that I can feel identified, I can feel empowered as a member of Westhampton College, but also as part of who I am.” Brieva did concede, however, that no attempts to talk to the deanery directly had been made. “But from what I’ve heard, they’re open and always offer to talk about it and try and address it,” Brieva said.

“Ultimately, the college system can be improved, and we must strive for diversity,” concluded Soliz. “I know it’s hard for the administration to go against the desires of alumni, donors and tradition. As an alum myself, I believe we can build new traditions, and know that we left something behind at Richmond.” As Soliz stresses, there are still changes that can be made to the coordinate college system. Granted, there are many strengths that the system boasts, especially in providing personalized attention to its students, and in providing students with more opportunities to engage in leadership positions; nonetheless, steps can be taken to foster a more inclusive environment for the entire student body.