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On the Status of Ring Dance

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DEAR FUTURE DEAN OF WESTHAMPTON COLLEGE:

As a member of Westhampton College’s class of 2017 cabinet, I was one of five junior women who had the honor of collaborating with the Westhampton College Dean’s Office to plan this year’s Ring Dance. Through this experience, I grew to appreciate the diligence and organization required to execute a successful event and gained a new perspective on this old tradition.

I first heard about Ring Dance as a prospective student on a campus tour. Such traditions within Westhampton College and Richmond College serve as physical representations of the coordinate college system. My tour guide, in an attempt to sell such a system to potential tuition-payers, glossed over the following question posed by a male student’s mother: “Junior year, is there any equivalent of Ring Dance for male students?” The tour guide responded, “I do not think so,” and adeptly shifted the conversation to the budding daisies in the Jepson quad. I did not think much of this question in the moment — I was probably preoccupied taking a picture of the flowers for Instagram — but while planning this event, I could not seem to evade the nagging feeling that this inequality was unjust.

As a feminist, I believe in equality and possess a strong desire for my male friends to participate in the fight against systemic limitations, even when they systematically benefit. I thus feel obligated to interrogate the unequal nature of Ring Dance, as a Westhampton College (WC) student benefiting from the current structure. After personal evaluation and conversation with other members of the University of Richmond community, I concluded that Ring Dance should no longer exclude Richmond College students from full participation, given the original intent, the evolving nature of the tradition, and the university-wide commitment to democratic norms.

I learned more about the origins of Ring Dance this year from one of my role models, Dean Kerry Fankhauser. The exact date of the first Ring Dance is unknown, with a 1930s yearbook serving as the earliest written record of the event. This publication depicted junior women gathering on-campus to celebrate the milestone of completing the majority of their college careers. To contextualize this accomplishment, many women at this time dropped out of school to pursue household responsibilities. Participants in the earliest Ring Dances celebrated their personal motivation, support systems, and academic accomplishments.

The tradition has since evolved from an on-campus celebration of junior women to an off-campus event of junior women and their supporters, including family and friends. In the past two years alone, we have witnessed significant changes to the Ring Dance tradition, with adjustments in
dress colors and escorts. These changes were intended to remove economic barriers and emphasize the event’s initial intent: to celebrate WC students’ achievements. Ring Dance, like most traditions, has evolved given the context of the time and needs of the community. I do not want to lose the essence of this tradition, but contend that the event should continue to progress, by revamping Ring Dance into an inclusive celebration that highlights the academic achievements of the entire University of Richmond community.

From my own experience as a member of Westhampton College, women today are not abandoning their academics to get married. In my opinion, at least within the university context, there do not exist clear systemic barriers that impede females from succeeding academically and graduating from this co-ed institution. In fact, the most recent graduation statistics released by the University, based on the 2008 cohort, indicate that 82 percent and 78 percent of women and men, respectively, graduated in four years. To reiterate, Richmond men and women learn within the same co-ed spaces and the most current data shows that four percent more women graduated in four years than their male counterparts.

It should be noted that spaces of learning were not always integrated by sex and race. While we have made strides toward creating a community that represents the democratic norms of equality, inclusion, participation, understanding, and self-rule, there remains room for progress. I believe that Ring Dance, in its current form, could be improved to better reflect the democratic norms of equality, inclusion, understanding, and participation.

I have established that having an event for one gender but not the other is prima facie, or on the face of it, unequal, but I would like to go a step further and explain why violating the democratic norm of equality is not permissible in this case. There are instances when treating groups differently is justified because it promotes equity. For instance, it can be equitable to devote unequal resources to address problems that disproportionately affect certain populations. Examples would include the Westhampton Dean’s Office creating extra support systems for victims of sexual assault, the Richmond’s Dean’s Office creating programs to deconstruct concepts of masculinity, and minority and multicultural students’ proposing a five-point plan last semester of additional on-campus supports. In these instances, administrations allocate resources disproportionately to satisfy a specific need. Given the graduation rates, women do not seem to possess a special need to celebrate

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their choice to remain in college, making this tradition unjustifiable on the grounds of promoting equality or equity.

The unequal treatment of Richmond College (RC) and WC students also fails to promote inclusion, or the professed notion that we are “One Richmond.” Although juniors from RC can attend the event, they do not possess the opportunity to process; to have their hometown, major(s), minor(s), and accomplishments announced; or to see their name listed on the program. The event also excludes non-gender conforming students, who feel alienated by the coordinate college system, as highlighted in recent Forum and Collegian articles.

Making Ring Dance a co-ed event would increase the whole community’s participation, another democratic norm. At the current moment, Richmond College juniors do not have the opportunity to participate in a school-sponsored event that allows them to celebrate academic accomplishments with family and friends and distributes their class rings. One could argue that senior year males have such opportunities during parents weekend and before graduation; however, females participate in these events as well, in addition to Ring Dance. Many Westhampton junior women told me that the highlight of their Ring Dance was spending time with their families, especially those who were abroad or who would not be returning home for spring break or the summer because of internships. I cannot speak from the perspective of a Richmond College man, but if I were in his shoes, then I would like to have the opportunity to share Ring Dance with my family junior year.

As a member of WC cabinet, I also learned that a portion of the funding for these senior year co-ed events comes from Ring Dance revenues. Therefore, the product of the Westhampton Dean’s Office and a select group of Westhampton students’ laborious work benefits members of WC and RC equally. In the defense of RC, they do not have an opportunity to participate in the planning or execution stages of this event. For instance, when organizing ushers for the junior women processing, I initially experienced difficulty recruiting enough WC volunteers. As a result, I asked the WC Dean’s Office if I could reach out to members of RCSGA to serve as escorts, but my request was denied. I found this troubling because such conversations and collaboration between sub-groups within a larger community would allow for increased respect, sympathy, and understanding, another democratic norm. If the coordinate college system restricts us from working, living, and socializing in the same spaces, we will continue to see those not in our college as “other.”

I believe demystifying this otherness through interaction, conversation, and collaboration would result in consequential goods.

The one democratic norm, which I have yet to discuss, is self-rule. I acknowledge that Westhampton College has the autonomy to continue Ring Dance as an all-female tradition. It is rare that a female institution can leverage such power, but I have faith in informed and just decision will be made, in which we treat the “other” as we would want to be treated. I am also sympathetic to the fact that breaking away from any norm presents logistical challenges, but I am confident this vision could become a reality.

I envision a co-ed Ring Dance event honoring the initial intent of the tradition, which emerged in the context of the 1930s. I contend that all juniors and their families gather on campus — perhaps in the Robins Stadium in the morning to mingle, receive their class rings and listen to a presentation of awards to students with particularly stellar achievements. A screen would display every student’s picture, hometown, major(s), minor(s), and a major accomplishment, playing on a loop. This information would not be announced, as in the past, when frankly not many people pay attention or are able to hear. All students, after retrieving their rings, would be asked to respectfully listen to the presentation of awards. After this ceremony, students would be free to spend the rest of their day with family members and friends, as well as to get ready for an evening spent at the Jefferson.

The event at the Jefferson would no longer include a procession, eliminating concerns involving escorts and the debutant-like nature of the tradition. Like this year, there would be a photographer by the stairs to take photos of participants and their supporters. The emphasis of the night would shift from worries about tripping down a grand staircase or meeting an usher at a specific time to spending time with family and friends. For the Jefferson to accommodate more family members and participants, guest tickets to the celebration that night might have to be more limited than the current restrictions.

I believe these structural changes would bring the entire University of Richmond community together, restore the deeper meaning of the Ring Dance tradition, and promote democratic ideals. I hope this article has prompted a conversation about potential for growth and evolution. My hope remains that in the future all tour guides can say, “Yes, all University of Richmond students and their families can participate in an inclusive Ring Dance celebration their junior year.”

Sincerely,
Liz Nigro, Class of 2017