Engendered Differences

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ENGENDERED DIFFERENCES:
ARE THE COORDINATE COLLEGES TRULY TREATED DIFFERENTLY?

STORY BY MIA HAGERTY

More than 100 years ago, Westhampton College was established for the purpose of a pioneering women’s education program. Now, there are many long-standing traditions (Ring Dance, Proclamation Night) and establishments (The WILL* Program, Westhampton College Government Association) that define the college. However, as gender is recognized as a more controversial and nuanced topic in modern discourse, it simultaneously defines and blurs the lines of many aspects of the university. Disciplinary procedures, social interactions, and student government have all become defined by gender, but which arenas of campus life does it make sense to draw this division, and where might the division remain be harmful?

THE DISCIPLINARY PROCESS:
SEPARATE BUT EQUAL

It is a common myth that Richmond College (RC) and Westhampton College (WC) differ in their disciplinary procedures. All students at the University of Richmond are held accountable to the Standards of Student Conduct. When a student violates the standards of conduct, he or she enters into the disciplinary process. First, a member of his or her’s respective Dean’s Office schedules an administrative hearing where the administrator will decide whether or not to give the student a sanction. The number of RC students and WC students that are given sanctions are nearly identical from year to year. “We work to ensure that the same sanctions are metered out for the same offenses … and to ensure that the severity of sanction aligns with severity of infraction,” Dean Joe Boehman said. When students do not agree with the findings of the dean’s office they may appeal their case to the student conduct council.

Why might there be a misperception about the equality of disciplinary procedures at UR if the sanctions are equal? “We are typically at a disadvantage because we cannot discuss the outcome of specific conduct cases due to privacy laws,” Boehman said. This results in the student’s own retelling of their story, which can be influenced by social pressure. “I have seen students who have left my office with a very clear understanding that they are close to suspension and very worried about that, but they play it off to their friends that ‘nothing happened,’” Boehman said.

Still, the number of RC students entering into the disciplinary process is much higher than WC students, and that is a trend that can be found across college campuses nationally. Dean Boehman believes this is a result of the outward social pressure placed on men to assert their masculinity in ways that go against the Standards of Student Conduct. Junior Max Thornton also agreed, adding two possible explanations for this trend: “The first is our culture of masculinity on campus that increases the incidences of vandalism,” Thornton said. “The second is the Richmond College hosting of the social scene thereby causing more cases of ‘party’ write ups.”

According to data provided by Dean Boehman, in the 2014-15 academic year, 88 WC students and 181 RC students had administrative hearings for underage possession or consumption of alcohol, public intoxication, illegal drug violations, noise and possession of false identity cards. Though there is a noticeable discrepancy between men and women undergoing these hearings, the percentage of students found responsible is statistically identical: 67 WC students (76 percent) and 136 RC students (75 percent) were sanctioned. Sanctions range from disciplinary warnings or probations, fines and community restitution hours, and substance abuse education classes, Boehman said.

THE TWO ARCHETYPES OF GENDER

The attempts of those receiving sanctions, especially male students, to brush off the severity of the offense forces the UR community to confront its own social expectations of women and men on campus. The long-standing stereotype of a woman’s role in society was to minimize herself while a man’s role is to assert himself. Today, with the topic of gender identity finally reaching the national stage, those stereotypes are being challenged through issues such as equal pay and transgender rights.

However, students still find that these traditional archetypes are observed in the classroom. “In my gender and work class last semester we talked about how general-
governments — Westhampton College Government Association (WCGA) and Richmond College Student Government Association (RCSGA). In 2011, the Washington Post reported that at the top 50 colleges ranked by U.S. News & World Report, less than a third of campus leaders were women, despite the fact that women outnumber men at many colleges across the country. Presidents of both groups, Olivia Karahan and Angelo Suggs, respectively, agree that communication can be challenging between the two bodies. “RCSGA is looking to work with WCGA on a constitutional amendment that would require an increase in joint meeting of both of our executive leadership teams,” Suggs said. But Karahan in particular feels strongly about the leadership opportunities that WCGA creates for women on the UR campus. “I can say that without the empowerment of the coordinate college systems, I myself would not have run to be a senator my first year, and would not be the WCGA President today,” Karahan said.

It is likely that even with the strong tradition of female leadership from Westhampton College, the integration of our student government would follow the trend of most of the colleges in the U.S. Professor Yellin already finds such a trend in classroom discussions: “When we discuss feminism as a historical topic, women students are quick to distance themselves from the term,” Yellin said. “I sense a deep lack of appreciation for both how much previous generations of women have struggled and sacrificed to bring us where we are today and a profound misapprehension of where there are still gaps in gender equality. I’m very uncomfortable with the idea that feminism is less relevant today than it was 40 years ago. Let’s see how Hillary Clinton is portrayed in the upcoming election cycle before we decide that feminism can go away.” With the evolving conversation about gender in contemporary society, it is also important to recognize how we as a university might adapt these gender definitions.

“Sometimes I wonder if the coordinate college system has an impact on the social climate and the expectations of women on our campus,” Yellin said. “Westhampton College can provide some wonderful spaces for women’s leadership and community. But does the separation of men and women segregate cultures so that male students view female students as something other than as fellow students — intellectual beings with a variety of interests and talents that might overlap across genders?”

Throughout human history, women have been cast in passive, subservient roles while men have been expected to display dominant, “macho” qualities. But with the rise of gender equality and even more broadly, gender identity, as a topic of global discussion, institutions are being forced to confront divisions down the line of male/female. The expectations of college students, both for themselves and for their peers, tend to negatively affect men’s behavior. “This is also behavior that is affirmed in our culture as ‘boys being boys,’” Boehman said. “It is harmful to our men because this behavior is disruptive to their educational achievement as well as the educational environment for everyone else on campus.” In student government, WCGA carves out a great space for female leadership, but the ultimate division of women and men at the university could reinforce perception of the other gender in only those gender archetypes. As UR continues to maintain its coordinate college tradition, it will have to re-evaluate how students fit into its binary system.