

Dear sirs,

I want to thank you for leading an effort on behalf of the Washington and Lee University Board of Trustees to examine more thoroughly our school's identity as it relates to its history and future. You may remember a letter I sent to the Board this past July in which I described my own family history of persecution and tragedy - and how Washington & Lee was a supportive refuge to me. My letter was published in *The Spectator* and garnered more than 30,000 views. I am truly humbled by that.

As I've observed things play out (and not so well) within the Washington and Lee community, I am compelled to send this note to you with a strong sense that there is a lack of leadership coming from President Dudley. Of course, I could be wrong. I feel that as alumni we have been "Trumped;" we are a fractured community that is desperate for reconciliation in the midst of an identity crisis, not a crisis of a lack of diversity initiatives. As alumni of our great school, we know that Washington and Lee is not only situated in the American South, it is imbued with a history that very few other schools possess. Civil War history is painful; it can be tough to bear, but we can rise above it without erasing it.

I attended Washington and Lee between 2000-2004. Diversity initiatives were firmly in place. A Dean of Diversity was appointed at that time, and I worked for him within my work study program in the Dean's Office. I can only speak for the time I spent there, but I think their student recruitment practices have forced a segment of students to be a part of a rural, historic, Southern college (by being offered financial packages that are impossible to reject) when I dare say these students may be happier at a larger school that provides the social movement vitality that they hunger for. This isn't a racial issue - this is a cultural issue. I applied to Washington and Lee because the culture spoke to me; it felt like home, and yet I do not fit into the "wealthy white" category. I also applied to schools like Haverford and Mount Holyoke, but I knew those campus environments were not ones that resonated with me, so I didn't pursue them further.

When Washington & Lee aggressively pursues a student with an irresistible financial package because he/she fits into a "diverse" category - a student who may not want a rural, Southern setting, they do him/her a great disservice by eliminating his/her ability to freely choose where to go to school. Very recently, a Tiktok video was posted by a current W&L student describing her version of "triumph" over Robert E. Lee because she attends W&L "almost for free." I found this video offensive - not because she insulted Robert E. Lee (I believe very strongly in freedom of speech), but because she expressed herself without the personal honor and sense of graciousness that one would expect from a Washington and Lee student - especially one who has been given a precious gift of graduating almost debt-free. If I had been offered a full-ride to a

school I didn't particularly care for, I would'nt have taken it. Instead, I worked two jobs in college and took on tremendous student loans because I knew W&L was the place for me. When I married, my husband and I assumed responsibility for the loans my parents took on so that I could attend the University. I finally paid off all of this debt at the age of 37 - 15 years of payments for 4 years of education. I never once regretted making a payment because W&L enriched my life beyond anything quantifiable.

Here is the video:

[https://www.instagram.com/p/CFsQvY\\_FadC/?igshid=ydhp0yxc9poj](https://www.instagram.com/p/CFsQvY_FadC/?igshid=ydhp0yxc9poj)

Below the video, I shared my own experience of paying for my own college education and implored students to behave with more grace in their hearts. I have very thick skin, but some of the responses I received from current students and young alumni were abhorrent:

"Paying for WLU is cringe"

"Ignoring bigotry is vile, Victoria"

"Keep your head up king. Your white hood is slipping."

"You aren't better than her because you paid more to go to school."

If these young people are responding to me in such a way, I question the health of Washington & Lee campus culture.

To conclude my thoughts, I want to share with you that three of my great-grandmothers received no formal education. All three of them were SOLD into marriages to much older men so that they could emigrate to America and escape rape, torture, and death by Ottoman soldiers. Their experiences bring me to my knees. How blessed I am to have achieved the ultimate success in their honor: receiving an elite education at an institution that loved me as much as I loved it, living freely in America, and now married to whom I choose.

With very kind regards,

Victoria Guroian Sanders '04

