

# A Plea For Civility From W&L Alum

Judith Conlon's paid letter to the W&L community in the Feb. 7 paper strikes me as being more than anything else a mean-spirited attack on W&L President Dudley, suggesting that he is a "woke" agent of the "cancel culture" that is threatening our American society by attempting to destroy our traditional sense of history, our values, and the very essence of what Washington and Lee stands for, the liberal arts with their Eurocentric, Classical base.

While I have never met Mr. Dudley, I have enjoyed his posts in the alumni magazine and found him to be an intelligent, hard-working leader of my alma mater who teaches classes (I guarantee you won't find presidents teaching in most American colleges and universities!) and projects a friendly demeanor to those with whom he works and associates. I have come to understand that he is in a most challenging position in having to lead our great school through a time of enormous cultural, social, and generational changes.

I believe that to pick on Mr. Dudley as a convenient scapegoat in this controversy is totally wrong and grossly unfair, the idea apparently being to find somebody to blame and then pile on as if he caused the problem in the first place. Ms. Conlon repeatedly attacks Mr. Dudley with hardly a mention of the Board of Trustees, but as one who worked full-time at two public universities for 30 years, I can assure you that he is working directly with the advice and consent of the Board or would have been removed a long time ago. If I had a serious problem with the way our university is being run, I would take it to the Board, name them by their names, and proceed from there. It happens that I do not have a problem with the administration of W&L and am acutely aware of the very difficult challenge it is facing in having to mediate between seriously conflicting viewpoints.

My own perspective may be helpful here. I had a close-up view of the generational aspect of this change not only because I didn't become a father until I was in my 40s, but also because I taught college English for 30 years beginning in the late 1970s, didn't retire until just a few years ago and thus observed the changes as they were occurring. The thing I admire most about my own sons and the students I taught during the last decade or so of my career is that they are not homophobic, racist, or chauvinistic. It just isn't in their nature. My own generation was not as sensitive in these respects and I see the change as a big step forward.

My plea in all this is for civility. I truly believe that we can continue to value the historical legacy of W&L while embracing the changes we are undergoing. The incomparable beauty of the Shenandoah Valley, the loveliness of Lexington and our beloved campus with its stunning neoclassical appeal, the historical associations going back to the 18th century, through the Civil War and on to the present are ours to view and value as we choose to.

I believe that above all, both Mr. Washington and Mr. Lee, if they were alive today, would urge us to treat each other civilly and respectfully. Throwing around terms like "woke" and "cancel culture" in a mean-spirited attack on a gentleman who is just trying to do his job to the best of his ability will never bring a peaceful resolution because it clearly conjures MAGA associations that regardless of how one views contemporary politics, will call up images of the former U.S. president who, whether or not you vote for him, will never be a gentleman in any sense of the term, unlike Mr. Washington and Mr. Lee.

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