

Katana Evans
23 March 2021
Walkout Speech

Acknowledgement

Before I read my letter, I would like to thank all the individuals involved in organizing this event. It took a lot of time and deliberation to turn this idea into reality. Thank you for making the necessary steps to minimize harm.

I would also like to thank everyone who is taking action today, whether it be in-person or virtually. We know that change, especially at W&L, is not easy. We just need it to be possible, and everyone's presence here today creates possibility.

Now, I am going to read some excerpts from a letter I wrote to the Board of Trustees back in January.

To the Board of Trustees

Lee's name intrinsically links our university to slavery and the Civil War. Both resulted in horrendous tragedies and violations of human rights and dignity. This aspect of our identity undoubtedly makes our institution distinct but in the most appalling manner.

For decades, members of our community have expressed that this campus is not a safe or supportive place because of the institution's overt connection to the Confederacy and white supremacy. Especially, in the past decade, white supremacists have employed Confederate symbols to intimidate and threaten violence within and outside of our campus. Lee's image and values will continue to bring violence and division to our campus. The University cannot fully reconcile with their past and honor its commitments to inclusion and equity while community members are living in fear.

For those who are concerned about our institutional history being erased or forgotten, [...] presenting Robert E. Lee's story will best be conveyed in a museum where his narrative and connection to W&L is explicitly described. Respectful discourse and educational opportunities about the Confederacy and its implications belong in our classrooms, academic texts, discussions, and museums. *Not in our institutional identity.*

Now, some alumni have publicly threatened to withdraw funds and opportunities because of the name change. People who cherish Lee's name and values more than the student success, inclusion, and engagement are not allies nor representative of the W&L's current goals and values.

As more people, especially prospective students and faculty, commit to anti-racism, clinging to a divisive idol will curtail prospective students while simultaneously alienate students, alumni,

and faculty who feel that Lee does not represent them or who they want to be. After an overwhelming majority of students and faculty and thousands of alumni have supported changing the name, a decision to keep the name would be detrimental to the University's future as a whole by associating the University and ALL of its affiliates with white supremacy and racial violence.

I chose W&L because of the phenomenal professors, academic opportunities, sense of community, and dedication to public service. Now, as a junior, I argue the University's divisive identity will diminish what makes it extraordinary. We are an ambitious community of leaders, scholars, entrepreneurs, change agents, and public servants at a liberal arts institution with a long, complex history located in the beautiful Shenandoah valley. Our loyalty to W&L is to its success and goals as an academic institution; we do not owe any care or loyalty to a former W&L President, who was and still is a modern symbol of hate, violence, and division to the nation and members of our community. A Confederate idol is not who we are today nor who we will be tomorrow. Renaming the University and decentering symbols of violence and division will be a necessary step forward towards racial inclusion and equity within our institution and community.

Thank you.

Now, I would like to address you all.

W&L is not academically distinctive or elite because of George Washington or Robert E. Lee. W&L has become a top liberal arts university because of **us**. We are this university, and the Board continues to resist the reality of what W&L is today.

An institutional identity that centers Robert E. Lee erases the fact that the enslaved people built this school. It also ignores how Black students and women not only saved this school but made it more selective. Our history should inform us that racial and gender inclusion and equity only elevates the entire community.

While the name is important, remember that we all have political power within this community to achieve racial and gender equity and inclusion. I am so proud to see students, faculty, staff, and alumni collectively active and engaged today. If you can, please engage in the upcoming local elections. Don't give up your power where it matters the most.

Thank you for listening.