

Good afternoon everyone. For those of you who don't know me, my name is Tahri Phillips, and I am a sophomore from Wrightsville, PA. I am double majoring in English and Cognitive & Behavioral Science and minoring in Africana Studies.

Coming into W&L in the fall of 2019, I reminded myself that I was "as ready" as any student of color could be to take on W&L. I thought that my experiences growing up had prepared me well. But truthfully, I don't think that there is anything that can really prepare a student of color to take on W&L. I didn't realize how hard it would be to be the only black student in my classes and on my hall. I'm constantly justifying and explaining to others why I chose to come to W&L, why I deserve to be here, and how my day-to-day experience differs from the experiences of my white peers. I didn't realize how often I would feel out of place.

However, I made the decision to become a University Ambassador. At the time, I thought that one solution to a lot of W&L's issues with diversity and my own personal discomfort would be recruiting more students who looked like me. I wanted prospective students to look at me and know that there is a place for them here. I wanted them to know that there are people like them on this campus and that they deserve all of the good that W&L does have to offer. But I often find myself wondering if I am just leading them into a situation where they could feel uncomfortable or experience trauma.

Being a University Ambassador of color is one of the most difficult things I've done. In training, we are told to never lie to prospective students. So when a prospective student of color asks me what it's like to be a black student on campus, in my head, I am thinking of the times I cried in my dorm room because of the isolation I felt or the time I overheard two boys comment that it's easier to get a scholarship if you're black. I am thinking of the night that I was called the n-word on my way back to my room. But instead, I say something along the lines of, "There are challenges from time to time, but I have found that I have an incredible support system of friends, faculty and staff that are always here for me."

When a prospective student of color asks me "what made you choose to come to a school named after Lee?" In my head, I am asking myself, "How do I justify my choice to come to a school that glorifies a man who fought for the continued enslavement of my ancestors?" Then, I tell them that Lee was the President of what was once Washington College and made really impactful changes that he is recognized for. I tell them that the academic, financial, and professional opportunities for me outweighed the name. I am disappointed with myself because although I haven't lied to them, it feels like I haven't been truthful either.

We don't like to talk about ugly truths on this campus, not with prospective students and not even with ourselves. The truth is that I am ashamed of the way we glorify Lee on this campus, in name and in the way we teach his life. W&L tries so hard to see Lee as an educator, but we have to accept that the rest of the world doesn't see him in this light. I bet, at most other schools, student ambassadors don't have to defend honoring a man who would've preferred to see them and their loved ones in chains.

Before anyone misconstrues my words, I am not saying that I hate W&L nor am I saying that I would have chosen to go somewhere else. I am standing here in front of you today because I am invested in the University and know that we can be better. There are incredible people and opportunities here, and I want students everywhere to feel like they can have access to all the good that W&L has to offer.

I went to high school with some of the most brilliant girls from all over the world. I've even worked for my high school the past two summers and tried to encourage students to apply to Washington and Lee, but I have not been able to get a single student to even apply, regardless of academics and regardless of the financial benefits. One even said to me that she can't imagine that campus is welcoming for students of color if it is both in rural Virginia and Lee is in the name. Yes, our geographic location poses challenges to bringing in diverse students, but even Lexington is changing as we speak. The Robert E. Lee Hotel is now "The Gin." Stonewall Jackson Hospital is Carilion Rockbridge Community Hospital. If all of this is changing around us and we choose not to, what does that say about who we are now and what we value? The world is changing quickly, and we need to keep up. We were late to integrate and we were late to coeducate. Let's not be late to this too.

While changing the name alone will not magically solve all of the issues minority students face and make this a supportive environment for everyone, Washington and Lee must understand that its name attracts ignorance and racism and repels diversity and inclusion. To create a progressive, inclusive culture, the types of students we have on campus *matter*. One day, money alone will not be enough. How many passionate, qualified students do we need to lose out on every year until we decide to change something about our image to the rest of the world? We need to rid ourselves of our unwillingness to engage with our difficult history in honest and meaningful ways and our unwillingness to make large-scale changes on our campus. Changing the name is a change that is long overdue. Thank you so much for listening.