College marks 20 years of coeducation

One alumna predicted that "more and better campus riots" would result from coeducation at Lafayette, as male students would muster all their machismo to impress female classmates. Jack Sher, a local associate, imagined an age of romance and sentiment on College Hill in his poem, "On Co-educating at Lafayette." The newcomers would be "Heaven accented."

Other dire or wishful auguries, ranging from the collapse of engineering and varsity sports to more modesty in male students' grooming habits, preceded the arrival of Lafayette's first "coeds."

Faculty members, who overwhelmingly supported the admission of women, hoped for a higher-quality education at Lafayette, as male students, faculty members, who overwhelmingly supported the admission of women, hoped for a higher-quality education at Lafayette, as male students. They were the women's first coeds.

Other dire or wishful auguries, ranging from the collapse of engineering and varsity sports to more modesty in male students' grooming habits, preceded the arrival of Lafayette's first "coeds."

Faculty members, who overwhelmingly supported the admission of women, hoped for a higher-quality education at Lafayette, as male students. They were the women's first coeds. Strengthening classroom discussions, a happier and more balanced extracurricular life for students, and a strengthening of the humanities curriculum. Their opinions came pretty close to the mark.

Women's 20-year presence on campus has changed the College significantly. At the same time, Lafayette's particular culture has affected the lives of its women students and graduates. Some of those effects were discussed in a series of events marking both Women's History Month and the twentieth anniversary of coeducation at Lafayette. Alumnae, students, faculty members, and administrators participated in three programs which examined the transition to coeducation and its aftermath. After 20 years and more than 3,100 female graduates, many argue that the transition is not complete.

A panel discussion entitled "Women's Lives in the Real World: Alumnae Speak Out" considered how well the College had prepared alumnae for their careers, relationships, and family lives. A markedly diverse panel expressed surprising unanimity in a number of areas. Participants were Thembi Mhlambi '86, reporter for a trade journal in NYC; Tanya Jackson '85, a PhD candidate in anthropology at Harvard; Barbara Kerlavage Siegel '79, market segment manager for Du Pont; Diane Vollweiler Elliott '74, a Bethlehem, PA, attorney; and Robin Wiessmann '73, a principal and co-founder of Artemis Capital Group, Inc.

It so happened that not one of the panelists had followed a straight or traditional path through college and into a career; each one was grateful that Lafayette had given her the opportunity and the courage to maneuver into changing areas of academic interest. Lafayette had thickened their skins, they said, and taught them to compete head-to-head with men. Elliott, who recently ran for public office, recalls being asked why she wasn't at home with her kids. Sexism is very much alive in the real world, they agreed. One surprising point made by the panel was that they had learned to handle alcohol at Lafayette. In their personal and professional lives, this proved a handy skill to have.

George Woodring '19 remembers that his class was 100 percent opposed to coeducation, according to their responses to a 1969 survey conducted by the Lafayette Alumni. But he also remembers how quickly classmates' opinions changed when their grandchildren began applying to, and attending the College. Of the classes of the 1960s, on the other hand, 58 percent supported the moves to coeducation, and many of their daughters and sons matriculated at Lafayette during the 1980s.

That 1960s generation was heard from in another panel discussion involving two sets of Lafayette fathers and Lafayette daughters, who compared the College of the 1960s with the coeducational institution that replaced it.

Doug LaPasta '67 and his daughter Lara '92, Jim Oehlert '64 and Sandra Oehlert Yanisko '86, and Jennifer Kinard '91, daughter of John Kinard '52 (who couldn't attend) made up the panel. Doug LaPasta said that while he still finds it odd to see pictures of women in engineering classes in Lafayette publications, he is glad about the changes; nothing was particularly valuable about the all-male environment, he believes. Doug LaPasta agreed that he had made no conscious decision to attend a male college; nevertheless, most of the schools he considered applying to were selective colleges in the Northeast-excluded women.

Continued on page 4
20 years of acculturation (continued)

Mr. LaPasta recalled that an inordinate amount of students' time was spent trying to arrange for contacts with women. He also noted the absence of depth in arts and music courses. "You couldn't even film program except during a party weekend," said LaPasta, a philosophy major and McKevitt Scholar who described an environment of intolerance for differences in any form.

The daughters of Doug LaPasta and Jim Oehlert said they hadn't thought about Lafayette's all-male heritage when applying to college, but they found evidence of it later. Sandi Oehlert considered it unfair that, in the mid-1960s, all sororities were housed on campus (in some cases, several blocks away) and that there were no weekly meal plans available. Lara LaPasta agreed that men still enjoy preferential treatment in terms of housing, dining, and athletic facilities. Jennifer Kinard, a softball team center fielder, said coeducation had been mostly successful. She doesn't expect her athletic team will ever catch the publicity or the resources assigned to football or men's basketball. She does believe that campus friendships between men and women students are now natural, relaxed, and healthy.

One of the arguments offered against coeducation was that women on campus were a distraction. Anthony Ross '63, who played in the program with his daughter, Jennifer '93, explained that in light of the unnatural all-male environment, women were indeed a distraction. "If a man walked into the front door of a fraternity house on a Wednesday night, jaws would drop to call it a "distraction" would be an understatement. But in the normal situation, with women and men living and relating as friends, the problem disappears."

Cherisse Capone Sandy '74 represented Lafayette's first class of women on a panel entitled "The Transition Years." Other panelists included Professor Albert Gendebien '34, who chaired the faculty committee which ultimately recommended coeducation; Dr. Ronald Bergeth, then president of Lafayette; and Professors Jim Fisler and Joanne Follweiler, who were the only women on Lafayette's faculty before the start of coeducation. Cherisse Capone Sandy, who graduated in 1970, majored and graduated as an art history major and a business minor. Her first job was with Midatlantic National Bank, where she was the first woman management trainee to be placed as a credit analyst in the head office's lending department. Later, looking for a career that would link her interests in art and applied mathematics, she entered a Cornell master's degree program in landscape architecture.

Sandy now works part-time doing landscape design in partnership with her husband's site construction business and cares for their two children.

Sandy credits the administration and faculty with supporting women and they explored different paths and then settled on the one that was right for them. "There was a warmth and the community was all great fun," she recalls.

The biggest drawback, according to Sandy, was the social situation. The number of women students was still low, and Lafayette was still "very much a male institution."

Sandy "was upperclassmen in classes of the men's dorms, and there was only a handful of women on Lafayette's faculty before the start of coeducation. Cherisse Capone Sandy, who graduated in 1970, majored and graduated as an art history major and a business minor. Her first job was with Midatlantic National Bank, where she was the first woman management trainee to be placed as a credit analyst in the head office's lending department. Later, looking for a career that would link her interests in art and applied mathematics, she entered a Cornell master's degree program in landscape architecture.

Sandy now works part-time doing landscape design in partnership with her husband's site construction business and cares for their two children.

Sandy credits the administration and faculty with supporting women and they explored different paths and then settled on the one that was right for them. "There was a warmth and the community was all great fun," she recalls.

The biggest drawback, according to Sandy, was the social situation. The number of women students was still low, and Lafayette was still "very much a male institution."

Sandy "was upperclassmen in classes of the men's dorms, and there was only a handful of women on Lafayette's faculty before the start of coeducation. Cherisse Capone Sandy, who graduated in 1970, majored and graduated as an art history major and a business minor. Her first job was with Midatlantic National Bank, where she was the first woman management trainee to be placed as a credit analyst in the head office's lending department. Later, looking for a career that would link her interests in art and applied mathematics, she entered a Cornell master's degree program in landscape architecture.

Sandy now works part-time doing landscape design in partnership with her husband's site construction business and cares for their two children.