DEEP SPRINGS
DEEP SPRINGS COLLEGE, CALIFORNIA
Founded 1917

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A Decision on Coeducation at Deep Springs

Dear Alumni and Friends,

As you know, the Deep Springs board has been deliberating whether to admit women as students. At our trustees meeting this weekend, we decided that we should. By a 10-to-2 vote, we determined to plan and implement a transition to a coeducational student body.

In our process, we received input from hundreds of people. We reviewed the work done in previous decades. We held listening sessions around the country and read many letters and emails. One group shared thoughts on an electronic bulletin board. In addition, we called and interviewed five past presidents of Deep Springs. We selected a number of alumni with particularly strong views and called them. The trustees held a retreat at Deep Springs to read from the archives and to deliberate in person. We exchanged large volumes of email. And, finally, many of us arrived early to the trustees meeting for more reading and discussing.

I would like to thank everyone who participated. Many commented on the cordial tenor of the discussions. The Deep Springs community seemed less polarized than in previous debates, and even when people disagreed, they shared their views in thoughtful, constructive ways. Your advice was a crucial part of the process.

It is hard to explain a board's vote, because trustees each vote their own conscience, but I can describe important themes.

For those who voted in favor of coeducation, there was broad agreement that Nunn's key mission was preparing leaders for a life of service. *Leader* is an awkward word, because Nunn meant not just politicians or bosses, but a broad group of people who disproportionately influence society. They might be teachers, judges, religious leaders – anyone who others turn to for advice or as role models. Nunn described them as "forerunners and pacemakers who anticipate progress perhaps by decades" and who "break the trails and point the way." He said Deep Springs's mission was to prepare this small group that he called *the few*. In today's world, this group includes women. Most trustees believe that effective training must include women and men working together. (The quotes are from *The Purpose*, which Nunn wrote in the final year of his life. It starts on page 37 of the Gray Book.)

Many of us felt under qualified to assess the risks of coeducation. Presidents have a deep understanding of their institutions, so we interviewed every living past president who ran Deep Springs for a year or more. They *all* said to go coed, as did the current president. They felt that the risks could be managed. When asked about their rationale, all pointed to changes in the role of women in society and the need to educate leaders in a coed environment. Such consistent input from men who had devoted years of their lives to Deep Springs weighed heavily with many trustees. Some trustees who had managed both single-sex and coed groups felt that adding women made institutions healthier and more diverse, in addition to improving the educational quality, and especially education for leadership. For some, the issue of basic fairness was especially important.

For all trustees, whatever their preference, a big theme in the discussions was identifying our moral (and legal) obligation to L.L. Nunn in making this change. We focused on the language of the Deed of Trust, and also interpreted more broadly, including writings like *The Purpose* and our sense of the Gray Book as a whole. We explored the difficulty of running a single-sex school today. Sometimes, even presidents of women's colleges find themselves on the defensive. Fund raising, especially from foundations, is challenging, and the all-male policy often hinders recruitment of faculty, students, and administrators. Over the years, many people have told us that Deep Springs is fascinating, but they could not bring themselves to participate in a school for men only.

In letters and conversations, many alumni described the value to them of an all-male environment: it provided a time for introspection, for maturing, for especially strong camaraderie, and for reflection on the meaning of being a man. I felt this myself. The battle for mixed-sex schools, workplaces, and clubs has mostly been won, and society is becoming more accepting of people wanting some time in single-sex environments, so some argued that now is not the time to change. We wrestled with this. In the end, most trustees regretfully concluded that there will be a loss, but that Nunn's focus on leadership and service justifies the change.

All trustees explored these same themes, but some disagreed on the conclusions, and some weighed particular arguments more or less heavily in their overall assessment.

We had an open deliberation, with members of the community welcome to attend. It was a long, thorough process, because we never did reach unanimity, and we felt it was critical for people to hear each other out, have time to sleep on people's arguments, and then discuss again the next morning. In the end, we held a secret ballot, to ensure that people could vote their conscience.

Enough about rationale; let me talk about next steps. Our approach of focusing first on *whether* to go coed, and only later on *how,* had the benefit of focusing our deliberation, but this means we have yet to develop a comprehensive plan. That said, work has already begun. David Neidorf and Chris Campbell, president and general counsel respectively, both began planning, in case the board decided in favor.

Three critical stages are: (1) Petition the court to determine whether we may legally go coed. The court may let us interpret the trust as allowing women to be admitted, it may allow us to modify the trust, or it may disallow the transition. (2) Design the "support infrastructure" required for coed. There must be strong women role models, and wise community members of both genders who can be mentors and confidants to students during this transition. (3) Develop a strong applicant pool of women. Friends and alums refer many of our current students, so the whole community can help. We will also reach out to high schools that have traditionally sent us students. Thru all of these steps, we commit to preserve the traditional values of a Deep Springs education, including its small size, isolation, labor, deliberative self-governance, and rigorous academics.

The summer of 2013 is the earliest conceivable date that we could admit women, but it is too early in our planning process to know for sure whether that is possible. We hope to announce the date of our first coed class by next summer.

In closing, let me again thank everyone who participated. I am proud of the community for how it handled this potentially divisive process, and I hope that others will join me in the pledge I made at the outset:

> I commit to love, support, and nurture Deep Springs, whichever way the coed decision turns out.

Last night, after the decision, one of the trustees who had been most fervently in favor of all-male, came to me and said, "I've been reading David Neidorf's transition ideas, and I have some thoughts about how I can help." That brought tears to my eyes when he said it, and again now as I type.

Respectfully,

Dave Hitz
Chairman, Trustees of Deep Springs