



HerStory

A Q&A with Nancy McIntire

Portrait by Kevin Kennefick

A citation for Nancy McIntire read at her retirement luncheon probably says it best: She “is a part of Williams’ history.” During her 36 years here, as Williams has doubled in size and broadened its community, McIntire has been central to guiding the College in its efforts to more fully seek out and support students, faculty and staff from previously marginalized groups. It’s hard to talk about McIntire without using words like “pioneer” and “visionary,” and countless members of the Williams community describe her as “the conscience of the College.”

McIntire talked with **Kate Stone Lombardi** '78 in May about the College’s transformation since “co-eds” arrived on campus, the changing nature of diversity at Williams and the work still to be done.

Nancy and I used to skate together at noon. ... The rink always felt warmer when Nancy was there. Around and around we would go. Nancy's skating was always steady and strong, like her work for the College, like her leadership for Williams women. Consistency, dependability and warmth. I never saw Nancy fall. I don't think anyone at the College ever has. —Mary Schendel '73

What was your first job at Williams?

Assistant dean of the College, but I was splitting my time with admissions. The offices were both in Hopkins Hall at the time, so it was just a matter of going up and down the stairs. My first year, 1970-71, there were 90 undergraduate women—45 transfers and 45 exchange students—and about 1,200 men. There were maybe six or seven full-time women on the faculty, only a couple of whom were on the tenure track.

We agreed that I would *not* be called the dean of women, although most people frequently assumed I was and would introduce me that way. I always corrected them. I thought all of us in the dean's office ought to be working with men *and* women. I constantly reminded all of us that this was a shared responsibility, even though I was hired to make sure the transition for women was as smooth as it could be.

What had been the decision-making process concerning coeducation at Williams?

The first decision was whether to expand the student body—should the College grow so that it was more efficient in terms of space and faculty? And the second question was should those additional 600 students be men or women? One of the things that had a great impact on Williams and the other men's schools was the Patterson report (a 1968 study of the "advisability and feasibility" of enlarging Princeton's role in the education of women), which discovered that fewer high school men were interested in going to single-sex institutions. The handwriting was on the wall.

A Committee on Coordinate Education and Related Questions was formed at Williams (to study inclusion of women students). One model would have been the Radcliffe-Harvard model; that is, you set up a separate women's college. President Jack Sawyer and others talked about that in the late 1960s, but they quickly decided not to go in that direction, because the women's college would always be secondary. The "related question" was full coeducation, and in fact the committee recommended that to the faculty. The faculty voted in January of 1969 to recommend that Williams include undergraduate women in significant numbers as early as feasible. The committee and the trustees concurred.

How smooth was the transition?

The College had done a lot of planning for women. There was already a women's locker room, two gynecologists, and they had added me. One big difference was that the College had already started to expand the student body and was building dormitories. What we didn't face was crowding, as they did at Yale. Men and women were not in competition here for space.

The positive alumni response and the positive faculty response were also really significant, in contrast to other places. When I went out on the road to talk to alumni groups, even those few alums who admitted they sort of regretted that Williams no

longer had fraternities and said, "Oh gee, it's co-ed," would then have this light bulb go off—"Oh, but that means my daughter as well as my granddaughters can go to Williams."

What were some issues that weren't anticipated?

We made a couple of mistakes. In the first year or two for women students, many of them were living in small houses around campus. We divided up the women, assigning them to the "row houses" for social life, because we wanted as many residential houses to be co-ed as possible. But in any row house there were just too few women, and that was awkward, especially when there were "retro" men who were apt to say, "Co-ed, go home."

Another thing not anticipated was how similar the women would be to the men that were already at Williams. The College thought that women would enroll in undersubscribed courses and provide different cultural niceties. Williams really didn't anticipate the way in which women students were like their brothers. When we did a review of coeducation in 1974-75, we found that women were taking many of the same courses that men were, and women were also athletes.

The athletic stuff really surprised Jack Sawyer. I remember a very interesting conversation with him about women's sports, and I said, "Well, what about lacrosse?" And he had this amazed look on his face and said, "Do women play lacrosse?"

But Jack Sawyer, Steve Lewis '60 (then provost), Neil Grabois (then dean of the College), John Hyde '52 (former dean of the College) and others were extremely supportive of me and the women at Williams in the early days of coeducation. They were always accessible and willing to listen.

A 1972 *Berkshire Eagle* article described you as "the young, pretty and perky associate dean of Williams." The reporter also asked what you would do if you were married and your husband was transferred across the country. Was that kind of sexism common?

I hated that article! The vocabulary then was still very much old fashioned. Women were girls, even adult women.

There were also periodic moments of invisibility. I would go into a meeting and make a contribution, and, five minutes later, someone else would say the same thing. You began to doubt if you were even there.

The other thing that would frequently happen is that faculty or staff would turn to you and say, "What's the women's point of view?" On the one hand, you kind of like to be invited for your opinion. On the other hand, you don't want to speak for all women. But you know if you don't speak for women, no one else will, so you are caught in this bind of hating that question and feeling as though you really need to respond.

The early women faculty were significant pioneers, since there were so few of them. They had to cope with careers and family, including childbirth, when the College had no children's center

When I think of Nancy McIntire, I remember not only the good advice and direction she offered, but also the comfort she brought to a 35-year-old transfer student and others like me by gathering us together in her home. —Theresa (Slomkowski) Manning '82

or adequate maternity leave or other support mechanisms, and they were often dealing with somewhat indifferent colleagues.

At the same time there was this ferment nationally. It was the height of the civil rights movement, and it was the beginning of the contemporary feminist movement. I was in a Winter Study class about feminism. I was in a consciousness-raising group that included some of the non-working wives of new faculty and some local community women. It was a really exhilarating moment for women.



McIntire with Pam Jennings '78 (left) and Paula Moore Tabor '76 at the "Celebrating 35 Years of Women at Williams" symposium in March.

You were one of the few women in administration at Williams during the early 1970s. Did you form especially close bonds with the female students from those days?

The early days of coeducation were very special, and the closest connections I have are with all of you who were here in the '70s and '80s. One thing I think I have achieved is friendship with many, many women as well as men. I'm pleased about that.

How has the notion of diversity changed over the years at Williams?

When I came, what diversity really meant at Williams was women and black students. It was before much attention was paid to other racial or ethnic groups and certainly before any self-identification of gay and lesbian students. It was not until the '80s and early '90s that Latino students were much more recruited.

Diversity has changed over time. When I came, most of the faculty were men, and they were married to very talented women who also stayed home and raised the family. That was the primary model. Today, Williams faculty and staff are single, are single parents, are dual-career couples, are commuting couples, are gay and lesbian partners. It's just a very different place. That is so exhilarating, but it is also so challenging. That really means the institution needs to focus more on faculty retention and support as well as recruiting.

Your title is assistant to the president for affirmative action and government relations. How has your work at Williams changed?

I spend more time on issues like child care and also on a new job that was started three years ago and reports to my office—the spouse/partner employment counselor. That person is available to

talk about employment to spouses or partners who are relocating to Williams and also to people who are already here and looking to get back in the job market.

When I was in the dean's office, I did a lot of student advising, particularly focusing on issues of women in the early days of coeducation. But all the deans did multiple things, and I worked with incoming transfer students and began working more with students interested in studying away and studying abroad. I got involved with the Williams-Mystic program. When I moved into this job, though it's no longer a student-related job, it really was an extension of what I'd been doing with undergraduates—to work with faculty and staff on hiring women and minorities.

The other way in which my job has changed is that when Hank Payne was president, he wanted the institution to become more actively involved in the community. He asked some of us to spend some time working with local schools and working on how we can be supportive. Jim Kolesar '72 (public affairs director) is the primary outreach person. We are working with the elementary school, the high school and the regional vocational school on programming and support for teachers, professional development and financial support.

What's the next chapter for Williams?

There will be a continuing demand on Williams to be engaged with the community and on those local services that have the biggest impact on our faculty and staff. We want to say to prospective faculty and staff, "Come to Williamstown and you'll have good schools and also good medical care."

The College will also continue to think of ways of being more hospitable to under-represented staff, faculty and students and continue to think of new initiatives to diversify the student body, particularly for students who thought they might not be able to afford to come here—and then assisting that diversity and helping this place to be supportive and welcoming. The College will spend more time on support systems, perhaps rethinking the way the dean's office works and making sure a larger number of low-income students have the academic, financial and personal support they need.

What is the next chapter for Nancy McIntire?

This summer I'm going to Maine for a vacation. I'm going to Sicily in September on an alumni trip. I'm only thinking in short-term segments. I know I am going to have some kind of systematic approach to community activity. ■

Kate Stone Lombardi '78 is a freelance writer in Chappaqua, N.Y., and a frequent contributor to The New York Times. She's known McIntire since the mid-1970s and says her former dean helped her reconnect with the College in 1991, when Lombardi served on a panel about women at Williams. The quotations on pages 21 and 22 are from "The Nancy Book," presented to McIntire at a women's reunion during Williams' 1993 bicentennial.