

The New York Times

ABOUT EDUCATION

JUNE 5, 1979

How College Was Saved

By FRED M. HECHINGER

WHEN the Wilson College Alumnae Association marks its 100th anniversary this weekend, it will also celebrate an unprecedented event in American higher education — the resurrection of a college proclaimed dead less than four months ago by its own trustees. The saving of the small 110-year-old liberal arts college for women in Chambersburg, Pa., was accomplished by an extraordinary show of loyalty by hundreds of alumnae and by a local judge who performed an unusually thorough autopsy on the alleged corpse only to rescind its death.

Beyond the jubilation of the "Save Wilson Committee," which not only went to court to prevent the closing but also raised more than a million dollars

in cash and pledges to pay for keeping it open, the Wilson College case has important implications for other hard-pressed small colleges.

On Feb. 19, the trustees of Wilson College announced that the institution would cease operation at the end of the academic year and that its remaining assets would be used to create a Wilson College Foundation to aid the higher education of women.

The trustees' action was backed by a dismal record of decline. The modest endowment had been invaded to close budget gaps for six years running. Since the college had its largest entering freshman class — 252 students — in 1965, the pool of first-year students had shrunk to 92 in 1975, 39 in 1976, 62 in 1977 and 55 in 1978.

Although faculty and facilities were adequate to handle 650 students, enroll-

Continued on Page C6

Continued From Page C1

ment was down to 214. Forty-two full-time and eight part-time faculty members meant an intolerably costly student-teacher ratio of 5 to 1, against a normal 12 to 1 ratio at comparable colleges. Moreover, those who supported the closure decision said, the college was in a relatively remote, though physically attractive and serene area, and thus too distant from datable men to attract enough women students.

Difficult as it might have seemed to argue against the trustees' contention that the situation was beyond repair, the 10 alumnae, students and faculty members who went to court maintained that the closing was unjustified, that the college's plight was caused not by inevitable conditions but by an inept, rigid and unimaginative leadership.

Judge John W. Keller of Franklin County ordered a week ago that the college remain open. He also ordered the removal of two trustees — Dr. Margaret Waggoner, who had resigned as the college's president, and Dr. Mary Patterson McPherson, whose position as president of Bryn Mawr College, also in Pennsylvania, he considered a possible conflict of interest. Fourteen other trustees resigned.

In the closing section of his 87-page opinion, Judge Keller recalled the "singular appropriateness" of the historic Dartmouth College case in 1818 when Daniel Webster said: "It is, sir, . . . a small college, and yet there are those who love it."

What errors by Wilson's leadership made the judge conclude that wiser heads might yet save the college?

Despite the 1974 recommendations of a group of consultants ("Survival for Wilson College: Time for Stewardship

and Sacrifice," published by the Academy for Educational Development), the college continued to do business as usual. The consultants had urged these basic reforms:

¶A redefinition of the role of a women's college to make it responsive to the demands of the women's movement and the changed lives and aspirations of young women.

¶The addition of career-oriented courses to a strong basic liberal education program.

¶Effective recruiting and a more realistic admissions policy.

¶A balanced retrenchment to bring students and faculty in alignment.

¶Better communication among administration, faculty and students as the basis for tackling difficult decisions.

In early 1978, the official college accrediting team that visited Wilson found the situation to be worse than it had been four years earlier.

Wilson's administration had sneered at the suggestion of career-oriented programs, calling them fit only for "a trade school." No persuasive prospectus for a modern woman's education had been devised. Recruiting had deteriorated as admissions directors came and went; many inquiries by potential applicants were ignored or answered in an impersonal fashion. The faculty, uninformed about the crisis, asked for a steep raise one day before the fatal trustees' meeting.

More prestigious experts were convened. They were given reams of documents and, after six hours' deliberation, supported the shut-down. Judge Keller, unimpressed by academic celebrities, called that whirlwind study "utterly devoid of merit or value."

Wilson College, the judge concluded, is not bankrupt. He did not find any malfeasance among trustees and ad-

ministration — only ineptness and inaction. But he made it clear that he considers the role of college trustees far more than merely honorific. He spoke caustically about self-perpetuating boards.

The judge cited Hood College, a small women's school in Frederick, Md., that at one point had "suffered the same problems." In 1973, he said, Hood's enrollment was down to 500, but the board and a new administration revitalized admissions, reorganized the curriculum and created a new understanding among faculty, administration, students and alumnae. Today, he said, Hood's enrollment stands above 1,000 and academic standards are high.

Technically, Judge Keller made a point that may set academic-judicial precedent: A private college chartered as a teaching institution cannot, without approval, shed its teaching function. If the time should ever come, as it may, that Wilson cannot make it, the judge said, let it come back and persuade me.

That time, he said, is not now. He acknowledged difficulties ahead, particularly since Wilson must quickly insure a September class, a Herculean task now that everybody has been told to go away and study elsewhere.

But some key "Save Wilson" alumnae are filling the board vacancies, and acting president Donald Bletz says: "We're open for business." If Wilson remains precarious, Judge Keller said, he doubts "that those future days are any more fraught with peril . . . than the conditions and circumstances which confronted the incorporators 110 years ago."