

# 1979: Save Wilson

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Members of the Save Wilson Committee rally to keep Wilson College open.

On Monday, Feb. 19, 1979, Wilson College was blanketed with snow. The storm kept some faculty and staff from arriving at work and drew many students outdoors. An all-campus meeting was called for noon. Most students assumed that there would be an announcement of cancelled classes, an unexpected snow day. As they arrived in Thomson Chapel dusted with snow, they were greeted by college President Margaret Waggoner and Board of Trustees Chair Martha Baum Walker '69. Wilson College was not to be closed for the day due to snow. Rather, Walker announced that as of June 30, 1979, Wilson College would be closing—permanently. Those present drew a collective breath.

The reasons Walker cited—declining enrollment and financial difficulties—were no secret. Projected enrollment for the entering class in the fall of 1979 was between 30 and 40 freshmen. The College carried considerable debt, even before it had purchased the neighboring Penn Hall campus in 1973 and assumed some of the prep school's debt. Wilson's enrollment had been in decline since 1967, when it peaked at 732 undergraduates. During the 1970s when many women's colleges were going coed and many liberal arts institutions were branching out into career-oriented curricula, Wilson chose to stay the course and remain an all-female liberal arts college.

But in 1974, when enrollment had dropped to 364 students, with a retention rate of 41 percent, the Board of Trustees sought outside evaluation. They engaged consultants from the Academy for Educational Development, led by Rex Moon, to study Wilson's programs, finances, structure and market, and to make recommendations to keep the College viable.

The "Moon Report," as the consultants' findings became known, emphasized the College's financial distress and criticized the secrecy that kept the extent of that distress hidden from the campus community. It criticized Wilson's curriculum for being behind the times, the faculty for being isolated, leadership for being inefficient and finances for being a mess. It also noted that power was unnecessarily concentrated in the president's office and that the Board of Trustees was disengaged. It did not, however, say that there was no hope for Wilson. It made many recommendations designed to save the school money and increase admissions.

The College implemented some of the changes recommended by the Moon Report, most notably the "One Plus One" recruiting initiative, which involved the idea that everyone involved with the College would recruit one student. In 1977, an anonymous \$5 million donation and an unexpected \$1 million bequest made it appear as though



the College was heading in the right direction. And as late as Jan. 9, 1979, Waggoner spoke optimistically of the future of the College and its commitment to the liberal arts in an interview with the *Public Opinion* newspaper. So when Waggoner and Walker stood before the campus community on Feb. 19 and announced the closure of the College, it stunned those in attendance.

The closure of the College was done with the support of the Board of Trustees. After more than a decade of financial and enrollment losses, and a dismal forecast for future enrollment in early January 1979, the board sought advice from a group of experts. A panel of professionals in college admissions, finance, development and leadership was selected and given information about Wilson's financial situation and future prospects. The panel studied the issue for a mere six hours—without visiting campus—before making its report.

The findings were presented orally to the board on Feb. 17 by the President and board chair. The panel did not find any major failings with Wilson's operations, but emphasized the restrictions of the local market, challenges of recruiting students to a women's college and the shallow pool of alumnae available to solicit for donations. The panel recommended that if the Trustees decided to close the College, it should be done swiftly so as not to "fritter away" additional assets.

The Trustees voted at that same meeting to close the College. While individual members of the board struggled personally with their votes to close the College, the vote on closure was 19 in favor and one abstention with five members absent. The assets of Wilson College would be converted to the Wilson College Foundation, a nonprofit charged with providing scholarships to young women.

While the closure of the College was being announced on campus that Monday through official channels, an unofficial phone chain was bringing the news to thousands of alumnae throughout the United States. In addition to helping run the phone chain, students were protesting, taking classes and meeting with advisers to

make sure they had plans for continuing their studies elsewhere. Wilson College Government Association (WCGA) officers met with Waggoner and Walker separately, but neither waived in their insistence that Wilson must close.

Alumnae did not wait for an official letter from the College before responding. Though they did not take to the streets and join student rallies, by Saturday, Feb. 24, concerned alumnae were on campus meeting with students, WCGA officers and alumnae Trustees, where a number of strategies began to take form. Alumnae and student leaders decided that there was a need for media coverage, meetings with the president and trustees, assemblies of concerned parties, and a petition.

On March 3, a meeting of the alumnae association, students and faculty was attended by more than 300 in Thomson Chapel. Committees were formed to research admissions, curriculum, finances, public relations and leadership, and the C. Elizabeth Boyd Fund to cover legal and mailing expenses was established. In the following days, Waggoner would deny requests from the group for the use of address plates for alumnae mailings and copies of documents presented to the board's panel of experts.

Alumnae association representatives were granted a meeting with the Board of Trustees in New York City on March 10. At the conclusion of the meeting, the Trustees voted not to reconsider the closure of the College and alumnae decided to take further action. The Save Wilson Committee, chaired by Nancy Adams Besch '48, was established and on March 27 filed suit in Franklin County Court of Common Pleas, Orphans' Court Division, representing some 6,500 alumnae, faculty, staff and students. The suit sought the removal of the Board of Trustees and the president, and charged the Board of Trustees with 17 counts of mismanagement.

While the Save Wilson Committee was opening its downtown Chambersburg headquarters, launching a national media campaign,



**Prof. Jim Applegate announces Judge Keller's ruling that Wilson College would remain open to an elated crowd of students, staff and faculty outside the library on May 25, 1979.**





Original banner from the Save Wilson Committee.

and managing the Preservation of Wilson College Trust to raise funds to keep the College open, the College was preparing to close at the end of the academic year. Valuable objects, including art, china and silver were removed from campus to prevent theft. Prospective students were informed of the closing, and faculty and staff began to find employment elsewhere, in some cases leaving their offices abandoned. Letters went out to donors and those with Wilson College in their wills, encouraging them to instead entrust their bequests to the Wilson College Foundation.

On May 7, 1979—78 days after the announcement of Wilson’s closing—the hearing in the Franklin County court began. Judge John W. Keller instructed the parties that the burden of proving it impractical or impossible to continue the operation of the College rested with the Board of Trustees. Five days of testimony from students, alumnae, faculty, trustees, staff, the president and expert witnesses followed. Meanwhile, 37 former members of the faculty filed their own lawsuit seeking \$669,906 in severance pay from Wilson College, claiming that their termination was handled improperly. Fundraising efforts of the Save Wilson Committee continued as well, reaching \$1.1 million before the end of the hearing.

On May 25, 1979, Judge Keller ruled that Wilson College would remain open. The ruling was rushed to campus by students who were awaiting the decision at the courthouse and given to Prof. Jim Applegate, who read it to a crowd of students, staff and faculty outside of the library. A mood of elation spread across campus as the bell in Edgar Hall rang out. The scene at the Save Wilson headquarters was described as “bedlam.” Students and faculty celebrated throughout the night.

The details of Judge Keller’s ruling harshly criticized the Board of Trustees. He ruled that the board neglected its duties to Wilson in many ways, and unlawfully implemented the closing of the College and allocation of its assets before seeking the approval of the court.


Waggoner was immediately removed from the Board of Trustees and was admonished for “gross abuse of authority and discretion.”

While commencement for the 44-member Class of 1979 was scheduled for May 27, there were issues and tensions still to be worked out before then. The day following the ruling, Trustees met on campus and 13 members resigned. Elisabeth “Nan” Hudnut Clarkson ’47, one of the remaining board members, was elected as temporary chair of the board and President Waggoner’s resignation was announced. Dr. Donald Bletz, a political science professor, accepted the role of acting president of Wilson.

The Save Wilson Committee moved its operations onto campus on May 30. Besch, still its chair, was appointed to serve on the Board of Trustees. The other vacancies on the board were selected from a list of names prepared in advance by the Save Wilson Committee, with Clarkson becoming the full-time chair of the board.

With nearly half its faculty and staff already departed, alumnae and their families, board members and students assumed roles within the College’s administrative offices. Many more alumnae and students answered the call of their alma mater that summer, volunteering for jobs from weeding and painting to office work in order to prepare the campus for the fall 1979 semester.

Bletz would, by design, serve as president until 1981, by which time the search for a new president resulted in Mary-Linda Merriam assuming the Office of the President. That same year Wilson would introduce the first pre-professional program—veterinary medical technology—to its curriculum. And in 1982 the College would launch the Division of Continuing Education, now the Adult Degree Program, allowing women and men, at least four years out of high school, to enroll in degree programs.

*This story is based on archival documents from the Hankey Center for the Education and Advancement of Women. A full bibliography is available online at [www.wilson.edu/savewilsonbiblio](http://www.wilson.edu/savewilsonbiblio). *