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Princeton University will rename a programme to remove association with Woodrow Wilson, who discouraged enrolment of Black students.

UNIVERSITIES SCRUB NAMES OF RACIST LEADERS — STUDENTS SAY IT'S A FIRST STEP

Activists are glad to see progress, but now call for deeper cultural change in academia.

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Nearly five years ago, the Black Justice League student group at Princeton University in New Jersey organized a sit-in at the office of the institution's president to demand that Woodrow Wilson's name be removed from its vaunted public-policy programme.

When he was president of Princeton from 1902 to 1910, Wilson discouraged the enrolment of Black students, and as president of the

United States from 1913 to 1921, he supported segregating white and Black employees in the federal government. Although the 2015 sit-in didn't convince Princeton's trustees to wipe Wilson's name, this year's wave of demonstrations against racism prompted action. The protests, sparked when George Floyd was killed by police in Minneapolis, Minnesota, in May, are part of the Black Lives Matter movement, which calls for an end to police violence and systemic racism against Black people. In June, Princeton announced that it would rename the programme, as well as a residential college.

The university is not alone in rethinking its legacy. In June, the University of Southern California (USC) in Los Angeles removed a former president's name from a central campus building because he supported eugenics. In the same month, the University of Mons in Belgium removed a bust of Leopold II, the Belgian king who at the turn of the twentieth century led a brutal and bloody colonial campaign in what is now the Democratic Republic of the Congo. And in July, Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory in New York removed DNA scientist James Watson's name from its

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biological-sciences graduate programme, citing his past racist comments.

The Black Lives Matter movement has spurred institutions worldwide to announce that they will change or review the names of campus buildings, programmes and memorials dedicated to scientists and other figures who had discriminatory beliefs. Many of these announcements followed years-long campaigns by students and faculty members who risked their careers to remake their institutions from within. “We got to a tipping point,” says Susan Reverby, a historian of medicine who studies equality and ethics in public health at Wellesley College in Massachusetts. “But we wouldn’t have gotten to the tipping point if people hadn’t done all the work they’ve been doing for generations to try to fight this.”

Still, those who fought for the changes say that renaming buildings is only the first step towards improving diversity and inclusion in academia; they are advocating sustained efforts to transform university culture.

Delayed action

Like Princeton, many of the institutions that have recently renamed buildings and memorials had earlier opportunities to do so and didn’t take them.

“It’s not that Princeton changed its mind, it’s that public opinion changed around them,” says Abyssinia Lissanu, a graduate student in public policy who is part of the Princeton Policy School Demands group, one of several that have been pressuring the administration to make the university more inclusive.

In February, University College London (UCL) committed to dropping the names of Francis Galton and Karl Pearson, celebrated statisticians who supported eugenics, from buildings and lecture halls on campus. “Then

there was a long pause and nothing happened,” says Michael Sulu, a UCL biochemical engineer who campaigned for the removal of the names.

According to a university spokesperson, the COVID-19 pandemic delayed action. After George Floyd died and worldwide protests erupted, UCL announced on 19 June that three spaces would have Galton’s and Pearson’s names removed immediately. They now bear generic names such as Lecture Theatre 115. Sulu credits student groups at the university with keeping up the pressure to ensure change.

Similarly, USC convened a task force last year to re-evaluate its campus buildings and memorials. At the top of the list was the Von KleinSmid Center, one of the university’s most prominent buildings. The centre,

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which houses the department of international relations, was named after past USC president Rufus Von KleinSmid, who was a member of the now-defunct Human Betterment Foundation, a eugenics organization in southern California that advocated the forced sterilization of people with disabilities. Students had been campaigning for the building to be renamed for years. On 10 June, the university abruptly removed letters spelling out Von KleinSmid’s name and a bust of the scientist from the building.

The recent protests haven’t sparked swift change everywhere. In February, a student organization at Stanford University in California delivered a formal request that

the institution’s leaders rename Jordan Hall, which houses its psychology department. The building is named after Stanford’s founding president, David Starr Jordan, a marine biologist and famous eugenicist. The psychology faculty delivered its own request with unanimous support for the move the following month. Stanford’s naming-review committee says it won’t deliver its recommendations until the beginning of the autumn term, although it announced last month that the evaluation was being expedited.

At Stanford, faculty members were instrumental in driving action. Irene Newton, a microbiologist at Indiana University Bloomington (IUB) who co-authored a June petition to rename an IUB building also named after Jordan, says that this is the first time faculty members at her institution have coalesced around the issue, despite previous actions by students. As a faculty member, “you need to look at the power you have and try and make the change you can”, she says.

Chris Jackson, a geoscientist at Imperial College London, agrees that faculty members should put their weight behind such efforts. “You have to kind of stand for something. For me, at least, as a professor at a fancy university, what are you going to use your platform for and your position for?”

Beyond renaming

For many, institutional renaming is only a first step towards universities examining their own racist legacies and becoming more inclusive. Campus groups are now ratcheting up the pressure to diversify faculty and student bodies and to improve support for Black academics. “To me, the treatment of the people in the institutions matters just as much as the name that’s on them,” Lissanu says.

Jackson agrees that more action is needed. The renamings are “very low-activation-energy things”, he says. “I’m happy they’ve done at least that.” But he says he’d like to see policy changes with “far more teeth”.

More transparency and accountability around how universities handle cases of racism would help to rebuild trust with Black academics, Jackson says. He also calls for universities to pay the students and faculty members who serve on diversity and equity committees. This sort of “invisible work” is important but isn’t often rewarded monetarily or factored into career-advancement decisions.

Renaming buildings will be just a gesture if it is not backed up by meaningful change elsewhere on campus, says Ben Maldonado, who founded the Stanford Eugenics History Project, the student group that petitioned the university to rename Jordan Hall. And, he adds, that gesture is long overdue. “It’s a thing you have to do but it’s not something that you should praise Stanford – or anyone else – for doing.”



Stanford University’s psychology department commemorates David Starr Jordan, a eugenicist.