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WKU president won't recommend dropping names linked to slavery

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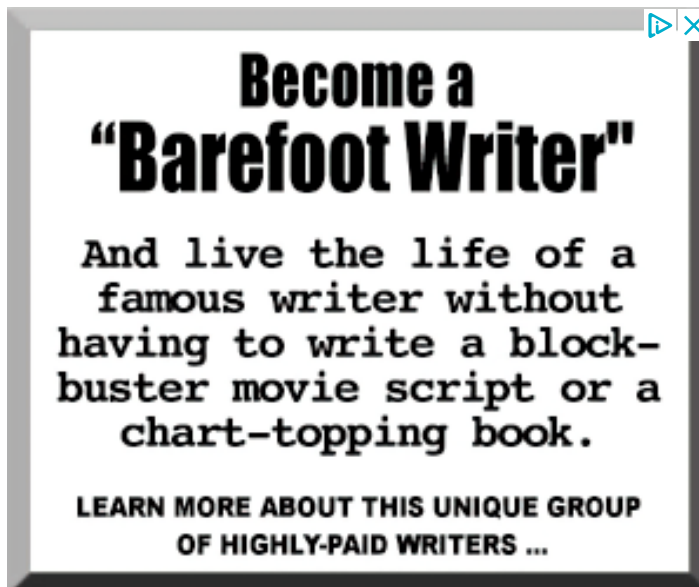
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Timothy Caboni

Despite recommendations from the Naming and Symbols Task Force he convened nearly a year ago, Western Kentucky University President Timothy Caboni said he will not recommend to the university's board of regents the removal of campus building and college names whose namesakes were historically linked to slavery.

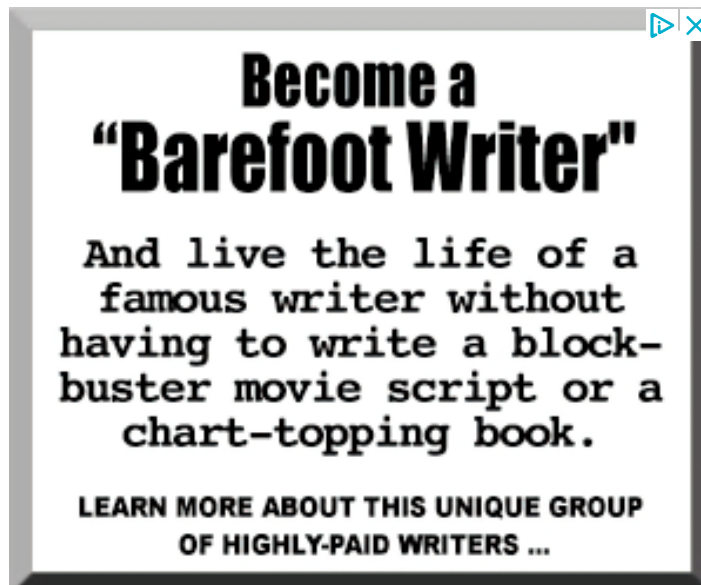
“After much consideration and reflection, I am not prepared to recommend to the Board of Regents the removal of any names from university buildings or academic colleges,” Caboni announced in a campuswide email Wednesday, in which he outlined about a dozen other recommendations the task force developed that the university will immediately implement.



These include establishing a Jonesville Reconciliation Working Group, named after a local African American neighborhood WKU displaced to make room for its expansion, and hosting an annual reunion/conference for Jonesville residents/descendants and the WKU community, among other actions.

But Caboni said he wasn't prepared to recommend that the university remove any campus names because doing so would be too "divisive."

Caboni's decision contradicts the task force's recommendation that WKU remove the names for Van Meter Hall, the Potter College of Arts and Letters and the Ogden College of Science and Engineering and in each case "provide context for the change."



“The topic of removing names from buildings and colleges generated the most public interest and comment since I announced the task force at Faculty and Staff Convocation last year,” Caboni wrote in a lengthy email Wednesday.

“The removal of honorific names has been the most polarizing and divisive of considerations. Even the task force could not reach unanimity in support of its three recommendations to remove the names Robert Ogden, Pleasant J. Potter, and Charles Van Meter.

“The same schism appears in the comments solicited from our community, alumni and friends. However, as an institution of higher learning, we have an obligation to

engage in these challenging conversations and to educate our community about the role slavery played in the history of both our nation and in the lives of early university supporters. Education involves telling stories, and allowing some parts to be omitted results in an incomplete and disingenuous story,” Caboni wrote.



“In many ways, Robert Ogden, Pleasant J. Potter and Charles Van Meter illustrate the ongoing conflict with which America has wrestled for more than two centuries: a nation founded on the principles of liberty and justice for all, even though many of its citizens remained enslaved long after its establishment,” Caboni continued in his email.

“While we fervently disagree with their views on slavery, we also acknowledge that their perspectives were not unlike many of their time. We should exercise caution when judging those in the past using a modern lens. The decisions we make today also will meet with the scrutiny of future generations. We hope our choices will be evaluated with the same humility and the understanding that after decades or longer of history, views and perspectives necessarily will change,” Caboni wrote.

Caboni also stressed his “fiduciary responsibility” to the university and said he could not “accept any recommendations that would cause us immediate and lasting financial harm. Nor can I put at risk any agreements that are in the long-term best interest of the institution.

“Make no mistake: the views of these three individuals from more than a century ago are inconsistent with our university’s values. However, we recognize that their contributions, particularly those of Ogden, have made a better life possible for individuals of all ethnicities and

backgrounds. Yes, these names are reminders of their namesakes; but they are now also associated with well-known traditions of excellence in the liberal arts and social and physical sciences. Potter College and Ogden College have developed international reputations for academic excellence, and Van Meter Hall is recognized as one of the premier performing arts venues in the region,” Caboni wrote.



Going forward, Caboni announced he would recommend to the board of regents at its next regular meeting that WKU rename Northeast Hall to Munday Hall, “in honor of Margaret Munday, the first African-American student to attend WKU, who graduated with a degree in music in 1960.”

Caboni said Munday Hall would be the first building named after an African American on WKU's campus.

The university will also “contextualize and make visible the full histories of the names on our buildings and other important spaces,” beginning with the Ogden College of Science and Engineering, the Potter College of Arts and Letters, Van Meter Hall and Kelly Thompson Hall.

“While the Task Force recommended this for only Thompson Hall, we will implement this recommendation and extend that contextualization to Ogden, Potter and Van Meter. We must share honestly the backgrounds and the lives of those who contributed to our university,” Caboni wrote.

Caboni outlined 11 other task force recommendations the university would implement immediately, including:

1. Update the Philanthropic and Honorific Naming Policy and Protocols
2. Establish a Jonesville Reconciliation Working Group: “We will establish a working group to appropriately address the issues that remain from the dismantling of the Jonesville neighborhood,” Caboni wrote.
3. Add honorific naming of spaces on campus after Jonesville.
4. Host an annual reunion/conference for Jonesville residents/descendants and WKU community.
5. Increase financial support for the Cynthia & George Nichols III Intercultural Student Engagement Center.
6. Recruit African American owned businesses to develop feeder programs. “This year we will create a program to increase minority owned business participation in university (request for proposal) processes. We will continue this work and enhance our efforts to target local businesses who would benefit from doing business with WKU and educate them about the processes of being

- considered,” Caboni wrote.
7. Ensure the Admissions Office maintains bi-lingual staff.
 8. Add minority-owned restaurants on campus that serve culturally diverse food options.
 9. Join the National Studying Slavery Consortium.
 10. Change the names of the bus lines to no longer be associated with colors. “I have directed WKU Parking and Transportation Services to begin redesigning and relabeling our transit system to use labels that are not associated with colors,” Caboni wrote.
 11. Solicit the Ogden College Foundation: “We will engage them to determine their interest in being involved with implementing these and other Task Force recommendations,” Caboni wrote.

– Follow education reporter Aaron Mudd on Twitter @NewsByAaron or visit bgdailynews.com.

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