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WKU task force reviewing public comments on naming issue

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The Western Kentucky University task force that could recommend changing colleges and buildings on campus that bear historical slaveholders' names is now reviewing the public's feedback.

“We appreciate those who took time to share with us, and we are working through that information,” said Sandra Ardrey, a political science professor who’s co-chairing the task force, called the Naming and Symbols Task Force.

The extended deadline for submitting comments at the task force’s official website ended March 15. According to records obtained by the Daily News through an Open Records Act request, nearly 300 respondents weighed in on the issue.

The full document is attached to this story online at www.bgdailynews.com and is available to read and download.

Since it was convened in August at the behest of WKU President Timothy Caboni, the group has been working to develop a set of recommendations for campus administrators to consider.

According to its website, the task force's job is to "audit the names used on buildings and other campus symbols to determine which may be connected to exclusion, segregation, racism or slavery" and to "create a set of guiding principles and a range of options for how we should address any issues raised."

The group's formation came after it was brought to light that the namesakes of WKU's Potter College of Arts and Letters and its Ogden College of Science and Engineering historically held people as slaves and came from slaveholding families.

The comments indicate that the issue has divided WKU's broader campus community, with faults forming between its faculty and staff and the university's alumni, particularly those who said they attended WKU in the 1960s or 1970s.

Many alumni – though certainly not all of those who submitted comments on the topic – opposed changing the contentious campus names.

For example, one WKU graduate who was identified as a “second-generation alumni” wrote the following comment verbatim: “This is history and no matter what the people did at the time (which was perfectly legal) they still have history and were major parts of WKU being established. It is time to take a stand and quite [sic] trying to erase history for our future generations.”

Another commenter, who was identified as a “faculty/staff” member, wrote that leaving the name of the Ogden College unchanged is antithetical to the message that

anyone, regardless of their background or immutable traits, can find success in the sciences.

“It is untenable. This is not a question of ‘erasing history’ or ‘judging the past with the eyes of the present.’ This is a question of what matters to us now, and how we chose to ACT to show the values we posit.”

WKU’s current student body also appears somewhat divided on the question, a reading of the comments suggests.

One current student wrote that: “I fully support the removal of these racist namesakes and would love to see our campus free of historically hateful and discriminatory monuments and representations.”

In contrast, another student expressed the opposite opinion, writing: “I believe that changing the name is no different than hiding our history or ignoring it.” The student urged the university to “promote diversity and inclusion through acts that actually hold weight, not some name change.”

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