

Statement on Huxley Name Change

TO: Board of Trustees, Western Washington University

FROM: WWU Executive Board and Student Senate

DATE: November XX, 2021

SUBJECT: Board Response to Legacy Review Task Force Recommendation

Dear Members of the Board,

Concerning the unanimous recommendation made by the Legacy Review Task Force to remove T.H. Huxley's name from the College of the Environment, the WWU Student Government offers this statement of support.

The fact that Thomas Huxley was racist is irrefutable. He openly endorsed theories that are now classified as scientific racism such as "Huxley's Rule" which stated that Black people were more similar to apes than they were to white people¹, the content and results of his debate with Richard Owen², in addition to his anthropological works that refer to "lesser races", "uncivilized", or "primitive" peoples (Brantlinger, 2003). Huxley also established a taxonomy of 11 different "stocks" or races, and viewed the dark skinned group of white people, Melanochroi, as the near equal race of the light skinned white people, the Xanthochroi, in terms of "physical beauty" and "intellectual energy", while not attributing such descriptions to other races, and used especially harmful language in his category for Black people under the guise of using empiricist evidence and purely scientific language for his racial categorizations (Huxley, 1870). He was an imperialist in the Enlightenment era of England who supported white supremacist beliefs, and believed that people of color, otherwise known to him as "barbarians" and "native savages," were unfit to become "civilized" as members of society (Brantlinger, 2003). These claims have done irreparable damage to communities of color, established racism in the scientific community and their work, and fanned the flames of racism worldwide. They continue to hurt people of color within our university, with many students — particularly Black students — feeling degraded attending an institution named after such a prominent scientist that supported hurtful, racist sentiments. This alone provides enough justification to remove Huxley's name from the College of the Environment, and is just one of several demands (number six of 19) by the University's Black Student Organization to make WWU more inclusive to Black students at our predominantly white institution (Black Student Organization, 2020).

¹ See the Rupke citation below and his [lecture](#) from 18:50 onward about Huxley or the whole video for more information

² See the Flannery citation below

However, there are additional reasons for renaming the college. As recognized by the Legacy Review Task Force, not only does Huxley's glorification hurt people of color, but it also does significant damage to the reputation of Western Washington University. An institution which prides itself on inclusivity and acceptance cannot afford to be degraded by ideologies which entrench racism in a country built by racism and colonization. Removing Huxley's name from the College of the Environment will demonstrate that the University is committed to fostering inclusive learning environments and social justice in education. Given the fact that Thomas Huxley and his descendants never had any connection, financially or otherwise, to Western Washington University or Washington State, the removal of the name from the college, is a more than reasonable request to fulfill, while acknowledging valid alumni-related sentimental connection (WWU Legacy Review Task Force, 2021).

In addition to the reasons outlined above, the renaming of the College of the Environment (CoE) is supported by both faculty and students. Former College of the Environment senators Laura Wagner and Francis Neff held a virtual public forum Jan. 25 to discuss the removal and renaming of Huxley College. They were joined by the former AS Senate Pro-Tempore Sargun Handa, who's supported the name change since 2020, and other Western students and faculty members. The senators of 2020-2021 wanted the College of the Environment to have a name that respects people of all identities and backgrounds. Gene Meyers, an environmental studies professor who attended the forum, said, "This is the time to do it, if there ever was one" (Angulo, 2021). Then, on May 19, several CoE faculty members participated in writing an op-ed published in the Western Front backing the name change. The op-ed refuted those who wish to retain Huxley's legacy as a scientific hero, and instead the op-ed recognized him as an ethically flawed scientist of his era. Faculty proposed the idea of not naming the CoE after one specific person, in order to "better support our commitment to creating a more inclusive college culture" (Environmental Studies Faculty, et al., 2021). In addition, last spring all three candidates that ran to represent the College of the Environment supported the renaming of the college, proving that the Huxley name retention faction had virtually no support from the student body in the Student Senate elections. The Legacy Review Task Force demonstrated support also, sending its unanimous recommendation for the Huxley name change to President Sabah Randhawa on June 14 (WWU Legacy Review Taskforce, 2021).

However, we cannot write this letter without acknowledging the arguments of those who wish to keep the name. Some within the University argue that removing Huxley's name will discredit the positive scientific contributions he made during his lifetime, and preserve the narratives of creationists who deny the biological theory of evolution. The AS Student Senate and Exec Board believe this argument lacks credibility. If one considers Darwin and the Theory of Evolution, historical evidence proves that Darwin was racist and that his work contributed to scientific racism (Rose, 2009). Therefore, this demonstrates that Darwin held views which are

rightfully regarded as indefensible and unscrupulous in modern society. The vast majority of people, scientists included, still respect Darwin's Theory of Evolution and his other evolutionary science writings despite these views, while many still acknowledge the harmful impacts of Social Darwinism on the development of scientific racism (Rose, 2009). Therefore, we believe that the argument against removing the name for the above reasons is unfounded, if not in bad faith. Regardless, whatever positive contributions Thomas Huxley made to science cannot undo the damage his ethnological work has done to people of color, meriting the removal of his name from the college.

Huxley's name is a detriment not only to the College of the Environment, but Western Washington University as a whole. To be fully in support of racial justice and people of color, we must fight back against the wishes of the few, some of whom were willing to undermine a process decided upon by the President and Board of Trustees, in order to maintain a status quo that negatively impacts students. Removing the name is a moral decision, and can act as a symbolic step for further efforts in the CoE to heal the racial divides and discrimination within our community. We humbly request that you, the Board of Trustees, remove Huxley's name from the College of the Environment, and rename it with a title that is respectful to all people regardless of race, class, gender, LGBTQ+ identity, ethnicity and other identities.

Thank you,

WWU Executive Board and Student Senate

- 1.) We support the name change of the College of the Environment.
- 2.) Huxley practiced scientific racism, saying that people of African descent were "inferior" because they were closer to apes than they were to white people. Huxley believed that only certain human races are "fit" to survive, and his ultimate goal was to taxonomize (compare and categorize) all races in the world in order to eradicate "savagery" and establish "hierarchy." Huxley identified nine distinct races which he believed were the "lower humans" who were "primitive" and "uncivilized" in comparison to whites (Brantliner, 1800). He also used other demeaning terms which are clearly offensive and harmful to people of color — especially Black and Indigenous peoples.
- 3.) Huxley has no link to the college, so there's no reason why his name still needs to be attached. (Huxley's grandson, Julian, reached out to the university but T.H. Huxley had no official affiliation with Western.)
- 4.) Even if Huxley did contribute to science, his racial views are reprehensible in modern society and his scientific work doesn't "outweigh" his harmful work.

Commented [1]: This is very well-written and I feel gets your points across nicely. My main suggestion is also a question. Is this submitted and read electronically? If so, I really think linking sources, linking data, will further strengthen this piece and the evidence you're claiming. When folks won't trust the writers, (which usually not "everyone" will) they will typically trust third-party research or data collection. I see some citations in the bullets you made last time, maybe we can bring some of that back.

- 5.) Critics may say that removing Huxley from the name of the college is to cancel culture, and that canceling Huxley will also mean discrediting any legitimate contributions he made to science. However, Darwin himself was clearly racist, but virtually the entire scientific community believes in evolution regardless (Rose, 2009).
- 6.) Changing the college's name shows that Western is committed to education and growth, and also supports healthy change. It also shows the university's commitment to racial equality and social justice.
- 7.) It's hypocritical of the BoT to excuse eugenics while spouting dedication to DEI and anti-racism.
- 8.) Prior to 2020, some students and faculty at Western began avoiding using the name "Huxley" or "Huxley College" to refer to the College of the Environment. The students and faculty body both support the name change in majority, evidenced by the faculty's response to Hollenhorst's op-ed and (what evidence can we provide here that the student body supports the name change--I feel like there must've been a poll or an open meeting at some point, I'm going to look into Laura's past work for this). All three of Huxley's senate candidates in the 2021 elections supported the name change. 100% of Huxley voters supported candidates who sided with removing the name, an "electoral mandate."
- 9.) The Legacy Review Task Force unanimously supports changing the name, as they recognize the damage it's doing to the college and the students.
- 10.) People of color feel degraded by being associated with the name of someone who was fundamentally discriminatory against them, fueling the flames of racism which have inflicted irreparable damage on their communities. The name change falls under BSO Demand #6: "Rename Huxley College, and rename campus buildings to honor important figures in Black history."
- 11.) We will not be bullied or intimidated by a vocal, but very small minority who wish to retain the name. Several individuals have had their academic and professional lives threatened for standing up against inherent racism within our communities. High ranking individuals within WWU who abuse their power and unfairly retaliate against those with differing opinions will be held accountable. The greater communities within Huxley and WWU will not stand idly by and let the nepotism of a small, extremist faction ruin the lives of those who speak out for racial justice.
- 12.) The BoT did not make their meetings accessible this past year —

Commented [2]: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2672903/>

Commented [3]: This would be a good addition statistic-wise if we knew the source!

Commented [4]: The senate results are on the internet, and I know for a fact that Jacob (the third and only other person to run) was for the name change, but I don't have a document that states it.

Commented [5]: Is this piece no longer being included?

Commented [6]: I am not disagreeing, just a question :) -Ryan

References:

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