

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, stating that black people were more similar to apes than they were to white people, in addition to other anthropological works that refer to "lesser races", "uncivilized", or "primitive" peoples. These comments have done irreparable damage to communities of color 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 a prominent supporter of 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 nineteen) by the University's Black Student Organization to make WWU more inclusive to Black students at our Predominantly White Institution.

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, acknowledging valid alumni-related sentimental connection, is a more than reasonable request to fulfill.

In addition to the reasons outlined above, the renaming of the College of the Environment (CoE) is widely supported by both faculty and students. Many of the CoE's faculty participated

in writing an op-ed in favor of having a college named not after a singular person, which refuted the talking points of those who wish to retain Huxley's legacy as a scientific hero, instead of recognizing him as an influential scientist of the late 1800s with faults. All three of the students running to represent the College of the Environment supported renaming of the college, proving that the pro-Huxley faction had virtually no support from the student body in student senate elections. As such, there is sufficient evidence to argue that the removal effort has a mandate from the staff, students and Legacy Review Task Force, the latter which voted unanimously to remove the name from the CoE.

Despite this, 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 hurt the positive scientific contributions he made during his lifetime, and feed into the narratives of creationists who deny the biological theory of evolution. We believe this argument lacks credibility. If one considers Darwin and the Theory of Evolution, historical evidence proves that Darwin was racist and his work contributed to scientific racism; Darwin held views which are rightfully regarded as indefensible in modern society. However, the vast majority of people, scientists included, still respect Darwin's Theory of Evolution and his other evolutionary science writings despite Darwin's views, yet many still acknowledge the harmful impacts of Social Darwinism on the development of scientific racism. Therefore, we believe that the argument against removing the name 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 blight not only on the College of the Environment, but Western Washington University as a whole. To be fully in support of racial equality and people of color, we must fight back against the wishes of a few who are willing to undermine a process decided upon by the President and Board of Trustees in order to maintain the status quo. Removing the name is the moral decision, and will act as a first 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

Commented [1]: I love the strength of the language overall in this statement. However, one thing to keep in mind is that some of the language here might invoke a certain reaction from the opponents of the fact that Huxley had racist teachings or works. Due to some decisions that were made or actions from last year, this topic has been made into a discussion that involves people from even outside of the WWU realm. Therefore, keep in mind that whatever we write and vote on and then publish will be on the internet, widely accessible, and accessible to reporters from all backgrounds, and the internet is forever.

Additionally, we know that Fox News recently slandered the Black Affinity Housing development as "segregation" even though it was a Black student demand, so Fox News eyes might be on us even more now, especially with some people at WWU equating the process to "cancel culture" already.

Just hoping that y'all will be able to do a read through of some very strong sentences to keep in mind these groups of people that might be "watching WWU" as this moves forward and will be watching student activists and students of color, and we want to prioritize the safety and wellbeing of students of color in student gov and outside of student gov.

Feel free to ask me for any clarifications!

Commented [2]: I love all the additions! I think you removed all the language that attributed adjectives to this group of people fighting against a name change that may have elicited dangerous reactions.

Thank you, again, for all this writing! Since the concerns of this comment have been addressed, feel free to delete this big ol' comment whenever you like

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.
- 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.

Commented [3]: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2672903/>

Commented [4]: Oops, I think I accidentally removed a note that was here. Maybe the person who posted it wanted a link to the faculty’s full response? Sorry. I’m trying to find that on the internet now.

Commented [5]: There might be quotes/evidence in some past stories by The Front

12.) The BoT did not make their meetings accessible this past year —

References:

Brantliner, Patrick. (2003.) *Dark vanishings: discourse on the extinction of primitive races*. Cornell University Press.

Roste, Steven. (2009). Darwin, race and gender. *EMBO Rep.* 10 (4), 297-298, doi: 10.1038/embor.2009.40