

Viking Mascot Change Quotes - 2021 WWU Legacy Review Task Force Report

You can read the entire report [here](#).

After the [2020 WWU Black Student Organizations' \(BSO\) Demands](#) called to remove the Huxley name from the College of the Environment, President Sabah Randhawa and the Board of Trustees created and charged the WWU Legacy Task Force to evaluate the names of the Huxley College of the Environment, Mathes Hall, Haggard Hall, and Viking Union. The WWU Legacy Review Task Force then submitted a report in 2021 with their recommendations.

Page 2:

“A strong majority of the Task Force recommends removal of the name ‘Viking’ from the Viking Union. The Task Force was concerned about the harm caused by asking all members of the Western community to identify with a figure that is potentially exclusive on the basis of both ethnicity and gender. Furthermore, the Task Force found names idolizing conquest as out of line with the university’s contemporary values around honoring local Indigenous communities. Task Force members who did not recommend renaming in this report proposed the building name be evaluated alongside the mascot by a separate committee.”

Page 20-23:

“Recommendation Regarding Viking Union

Six Task Force members voted to recommend the removal of the name ‘Viking’ from the Viking Union. The three members who voted against recommending removal of the name believe that the building name should be reviewed by a separate Task Force in concert with the wider use of the Viking mascot.”

“Does the behavior or legacy of the person for whom the feature is named compromise or conflict with the University’s mission, including both its commitment to intellectual integrity and its commitment to diversity and inclusion of all members of the Western community?”

The Viking Union is named after Western’s mascot, which dates to 1923. The Task Force recognizes that the Viking as Western’s mascot has been a topic of conversation and some controversy in recent years. In 2015, the first Black woman to be the WWU Associated Students President faced racist and misogynistic threats for contemplating initiating a discussion about changing the mascot. Western’s Viking mascot was originally selected, in part, due to its connection to Scandinavian communities who were prominent in Bellingham’s demographics at the time. At the least, this regional and ethnic particularity limits the inclusiveness of the icon for an institution that is aspiring to increased diversity. Further, some Task Force members reflected on the ways in which the icon’s symbolic relationship to histories to conquest make it especially harmful to celebrate on Coast Salish land occupied by the US military during the 1850s. Finally, some members of the Task Force were especially concerned about the fact that, in recent decades, Vikings have been romanticized by white supremacist groups as icons of conquest.

Such concerns seemed particularly timely given recent activities by white supremacists on WWU's campus.

In the case of the Viking Union, a substantial portion of our deliberations focused on what would be the right procedural path given the connection between the building name and the school mascot. Ultimately, there was a difference of opinion on whether making a recommendation about the name of the Viking Union was a part of our charge. A majority of Task Force voted to recommend renaming the Viking Union in this report, seeing the harm in retaining the name as outweighing any impact it might have on the broader discussion about the mascot, and seeing a renaming as actually give a broader evaluation of the mascot more integrity by rendering this potential tangent moot. Those that voted against making a recommendation to rename the Viking Union saw the name of the Viking Union as too strongly tied into the broader question of the Viking mascot for us to address at this time. In their view, the question of the Viking Union exceeds the scope of our charge. In their view, removing the name from the building might give people a false sense that the mascot had already been reviewed and addressed.

Despite these differing opinions on procedure The Task Force was unanimous in agreeing that the building name and mascot should be addressed and evaluated in some manner.”

“Broader community identification with the feature.

Viking Union is a central feature of campus, focused on the student experience. It is home to the Multicultural Center (including the Ethnic Student Center), Associated Students offices, LGBTQ+ Western offices, the Campus Bookstore, a dining hall, the campus food court, several, multipurpose rooms, and other resources. Colloquially, the building is known both as ‘Vee-yoo’ and ‘the union,’ an unconventional shorthand when compared to other buildings that tend to be known more so by the proper name attached to them (e.g. ‘Haggard’ for ‘Haggard Hall’). It’s unclear whether this is an incidental shorthand or due to attempts by community members to avoid the term ‘Viking.’ While the Viking mascot itself is a key aspect of Western’s brand, identification with it varies across the community. The logo is particularly significant for those involved in intercollegiate athletics but has less appeal amongst the broader campus community. Unlike many gender-neutral mascots, WWU’s Viking is stylized as a man in a way that neither reflects the reality of Viking society nor the many accomplishments of women, who have been educated and educating at Western since its founding.”

“The strength and clarity of the historical evidence.

The Task Force is aware of but has not dedicated time to evaluating debates within the history of actual Vikings, including issues of gender as well as slavery, with a focus on the mascot and logo as it has existed at Western and in living memory. That there are, in the contemporary juncture, significant representational issues connected to the icon is unambiguous.”

“Possibilities for mitigation of harms

In considering possible harms of removing the name: First, no individual namesakes are at risk of being disrespected by removing the word 'Viking' from the Student Union. Second, the centrality of the feature on campus including that it is the site of the Ethnic Students Center is one barrier to options to mitigate the harm caused by the retention of the iconography. Debates over mascots have generated a great deal of attention locally and nationally in recent years, but the Task Force does not consider that debate to have fully run its course here. Those members who voted to recommend removing the word 'Viking' from the Union building do not see this move as disrupting this debate, but rather as removing a constraint on it by allowing a conversation about the mascot to emerge without having to address the related but distinct issue of the building name. The Task Force also notes that the overwhelming direction of these mascot debates across the country in recent decades has been towards changing older mascots regarded as potentially exclusionary and the creation of exciting new icons with which the whole community can identify."