



Report of the Subcommittee on Recontextualization
Building Naming Task Force

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The Subcommittee on Recontextualization prepared the following report that the Task Force endorses and recommends to the President and the Board of Administrators for consideration.

Throughout the task force's meetings and deliberations, several issues were raised and discussed that do not fall within the task force's charge from the president. However, the task force thought that the administration should consider the following recommendations.

Among many programs adopted at universities and other institutions that had confronted the challenges of confronting problematic elements in their history, the Subcommittee found the comprehensive, long term approach laid out in the "Report on Memorialization and Mission" of the University of Virginia to be the most satisfactory of those that have been advanced by peer institutions. It recommended that UVA "embark on a comprehensive and systematic evaluation of all problematic building names, monuments, and memorials across Grounds, subjecting them to a detailed review leading to potential renaming, recontextualization, or removal. This process will take time and should unfold in a careful, systematic, and transparent manner."

The report went on to recommend that this work should be institutionalized as an ongoing priority of the University through the constitution of a "Committee on Memorialization and Mission," ideally chaired by the President of the University to signal its importance. The report further recommended that the "committee should reflect racial, ethnic, and gender diversity and especially include student and staff representatives from historically marginalized communities," and stressed that its work should be transparent and visible to the university through regular reporting.

Historical contextualization is an essential first step to the project of recontextualization, so the Tulane Subcommittee on Recontextualization began with a rough inventory of philanthropically and honorifically named physical spaces on campus that might be subjects of contextualization. Its focus was on legacies of slavery, segregation and racial politics, although that mandate could be much broader. The inventory began with buildings named before about 1963, when Tulane was desegregated. Fourteen of those after whom buildings were named were born before 1861—five served or actively supported the Confederacy. Ten were born between 1871-1888 during the period of Reconstruction and Jim Crow; five were born following 1898.

The Subcommittee recommended that Tulane deepen the historical scope of its recontextualization project to reach beyond the institution's establishment in 1834 to consider the deep history of the spaces the University occupies now and has occupied in the past.

The place beside the Mississippi that became New Orleans in 1718 was called *Bulbancha* by the indigenous peoples of the Lower Mississippi Valley who traversed and occupied the site for thousands of years before Europeans displaced them. In the more recent past, the city's spaces were filled with plantations and other enterprises fueled by the labor of enslaved people. Part of the university's uptown campus constituted the 18th-century sugar plantation of Etienne de Boré. The downtown campus sits on the site of a former HBCU, which itself sat on the plantation of New Orleans founder Bienville, who introduced slavery to Louisiana.

Widening the embrace of the recontextualization project to include a more complex, deeper history of the sites the University has occupied and currently occupies in the city and region of which it is a part opens the door to a path-breaking intellectual project that matches the distinction and ambition of today's Tulane.

Changing the names of buildings, mounting plaques, and creating physical memorials that aim to address specific circumstances and moments in history is an intervention that is tied to its time and makes engagement with the remedy dependent on the interest of the observer. This is not

enough. The university should work to acknowledge and act on the need for appropriate naming of buildings, spaces, programs, ceremonies and regular activities, but the recontextualization project should not be restricted to these static markers. Instead, consider living vehicles for recontextualization.

The University should also take action to ensure that all sectors of the University carry out their roles in a way that is in alignment with the value and mission of Tulane and contributes to successful recontextualization. When such alignment is breached, the psychological damage to members of the University community can be significant and educational attainment compromised. This happens most obviously in naming buildings, but there are many other insidious, powerful ways that such misalignment manifests itself

Renaming buildings or contextualizing building names may help create a more diverse, equitable, and inclusive university, but the culture of Tulane needs to shift profoundly. Such “quick fixes” only go so far if the culture of Tulane remains stagnant, if day-to-day efforts to dismantle white supremacy practices on campus are nonexistent. In this way, renaming buildings should be teaching moments that go beyond the day the buildings were renamed.

Tulane should employ ceremony, ritual and commemoration to contextualize these names and acknowledge history while ensuring that that history/context reaches everyone on campus. Such efforts would not be confined to those moments when a name is changed, an explanatory exhibit unveiled, or a new campus tour launched. Commemoration can and should be woven into university ceremonies and rituals that occur on a regular basis, including the convocation that takes place at the beginning of each academic year, homecoming and commencement and other degree ceremonies.

The goal of contextualization writ large is to preserve history, to correct history, to apologize and to reconstitute and ensure the future of a fully inclusive community. These are not exclusive of one another, but inextricably intertwined. The educational mission of Tulane requires that we re-historize the university and reframe its place in recognizing the power of memory and ensuring that whatever it does becomes inscribed in and part of the community and institutional memory. Such a project must attend not only to the impact of naming and renaming, but to the power and centrality of symbols and symbolic actions in making and sustaining the intellectual community as a place that recognizes, nurtures and reflects the value and potential of all of its members.

Accomplishing this goal demands intellectual rigor and the kind of carefully thought-out process that we have outlined here. If we are successful, no student, visitor, alumnus/a, or employee will be able to encounter Tulane, whether by setting foot on one of its campuses or participating in one of its programs or contributing to its mission, without being invited – indeed provoked – into an engagement with the University's history and its vision for its future expressed in the statement of Tulane values proposed by the Task Force.

Recommendations of the Subcommittee on Recontextualization

The work of the Task Force was directed primarily at consideration of the appropriateness of the Hébert name on F. Edward Hébert Hall. In that work, it developed suggestions that apply more broadly than in that particular naming issue.

As a result of its discussions, the task force requests that the Administration consider the following recommendations:

1. Recognize and acknowledge that renaming buildings is one small step/part of Tulane's commitment to creating a more diverse, equitable, and inclusive university.
2. Establish an institutional framework and formal process to carry out the ongoing work of reviewing, both prospectively and retrospectively, the names of buildings and parts thereof, programs, practices and other elements of the university that bear the names of individuals with the objective of insuring that such names are consistent with Tulane's values and mission.
3. Consider the practice of philanthropic naming, where donations are contingent upon the fulfillment of donor-recipient agreements, within the larger project of recontextualization.
4. Deepen the historical scope of its recontextualization project to reach beyond the institution's establishment in 1834 to consider the deep history of the spaces the University occupies now and has occupied in the past.
5. Seek purposeful and inclusive dialogue with students, staff, faculty, alumni and the community in addressing the key findings in the Task Force report and in the larger task of recontextualization.
6. Assure timeliness and transparency in all proceedings involving naming and renaming, being particularly sensitive to inquiries from and concerns expressed by students, faculty, staff or alumni concerning naming and contextualization issues.