

October 2021

An open letter to the Wofford community in response to the August 16, 2021 statement from the Board of Trustees.

As faculty of Wofford College, we are grateful to the founders, leaders and benefactors who have built and sustained the college over the years, as well as the faculty and students who have come before us. Thanks to them, Wofford is ready to face new challenges with a culture of openness to a changing world, and of readiness to hear the contributions of the broader Wofford community of today.

In this spirit, we have participated in the JEDI listening process and the creation of the new Strategic Vision. Last year, 108 faculty signed the Faculty Anti-Racism Petition calling for the renaming of Carlisle, Shipp and Wightman Halls. We welcome the statement by the Board of Trustees made on August 16<sup>th</sup>, 2021, committing to an emphasis on common history and recognizing the need to ensure that the experience of both current and future students is one of honesty. We look forward with enthusiasm to the formation of an Ad Hoc Committee on Buildings and Spaces, which the Board has stated will “examine in greater detail the college’s history and the names of all buildings that are named honorifically (without donor funding).”

In the same spirit of open dialogue, and to ensure that this committee carries forward the work done by the students, faculty, staff, trustees, and all members of our community over the last 16 months, we offer a response to the Board’s statement on the naming of buildings on Wofford’s campus.

We are deeply concerned that a committee process not be used to indefinitely delay a decision on the building names, and we share with many students a strong sense of urgency. Expediently renaming Shipp, Wightman and Carlisle residence halls is in the interest of current and future students, who deserve a campus whose building and monuments reflect an inclusive and just account of our shared history. After listening sessions with students and reading their comments online, the JEDI committee concluded that these building names are doing real harm at Wofford. Responding to the perspective of those students calling for change without delay is an appropriate indication of Wofford College’s commitment to them. It is also an appropriate indication of Wofford’s commitment to the shared values of our wider community.

Comparing the name of our institution with the names of individual buildings is both misleading and distracting from facing the challenges set before us by the Strategic Vision for Justice, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion at Wofford College. Neither the JEDI committee nor the students nor the faculty propose re-naming the college. Retaining the names of any buildings cannot be justified solely by a nonexistent link with the name of the college. The name of Wofford College has a life of its own as an institution. It lives in every graduate, faculty, and staff of our college and in the work that they carry forward into the world.

The first three presidents of Wofford College enslaved people, and while such enslavement may have been consistent with the moral outlook of most white South Carolinians in the 1850s it was never consistent with the moral outlook of the majority of the people in the state, most of whom in 1854 were Black. As the Board's statement acknowledges, most Americans find the institution of slavery repugnant in 2021; yet it must be said that enslavement is morally wrong now—as it was in 1854. Renaming the three residence halls in question, at the students’ request, is an open and clear indication that Wofford College is making a concerted effort to wrestle with its past and to bring its future into alignment with the mission of the college and the tenets of the Methodist tradition. An open acknowledgement of the past does not tether us to it, and removing names that have come to be associated with morally repugnant practices does not punish those named nor diminish their positive achievements.

At stake in the naming of buildings, spaces and monuments on Wofford's campus is the recognition of our full heritage of college benefactors, including the enslaved people of African descent who gave so much, so that our gratitude today can be more complete as we move forward.