Examining Naming Issues on Campus

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SCUP Fellow 2020–2021
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# Table of Contents

**MEET ERIN JOHNSON** ...................................................................................................................... 1

WHAT PROMPTED YOUR CHOICE OF RESEARCH TOPIC? ................................................................. 2

**THE PROJECT** .................................................................................................................................. 4

HOW DID YOU APPROACH AND CARRY OUT YOUR RESEARCH PROJECT? ......................... 4

FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS ............................................................................................................. 6

WHAT LESSONS FROM YOUR RESEARCH WILL HELP OTHER PLANNERS AND
BENEFIT THEM IN THEIR WORK? ........................................................................................................... 14

**LAST WORDS** .................................................................................................................................. 17

HOW DID YOUR SCUP COACHES SUPPORT YOU IN YOUR PROJECT? ...................................... 17

ERIN’S SCUP COACHES ......................................................................................................................... 18

HOW DID THE SCUP FELLOWS EXPERIENCE IMPACT YOU PERSONALLY? ............................. 19

ENDNOTES ............................................................................................................................................... 21
MEET ERIN JOHNSON

Erin Johnson is assistant vice president of strategic initiatives at Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey. In that role, she works across the university on projects that advance the mission, goals, and strategy of the university. Prior to joining the Rutgers community, she spent several years at Northwestern University, where she earned a master’s of science degree in higher education administration and policy, and is currently enrolled as an MBA candidate.

Her professional work experiences include Northwestern’s Office of the Provost, where she contributed to the institution’s COVID-19 pandemic response, with a particular focus on academic affairs-related policies, and a decade working at Yale University in a number of roles, including inaugural associate director of the Yale Center for the Study of Race, Indigeneity, and Transnational Migration; assistant secretary of the University; assistant to the president and secretary for special projects, and Woodbridge Fellow.

This diverse set of roles is one of the reasons she has found a home within SCUP, an organization that unites planners across functional areas, fields, institution types, and from inside and outside of higher education. In addition to serving as one of three SCUP Fellows in 2020-2021, she has engaged with SCUP through participation in the Planning Institute.
WHAT PROMPTED YOUR CHOICE OF RESEARCH TOPIC?

This SCUP Fellows project examines the practice of renaming (or de-naming) campus buildings with controversial namesakes. The idea to pursue this topic developed out of the master’s project I completed while enrolled in Northwestern’s School of Education and Social Policy (SESP). It focused on the experiences of American colleges and universities that faced a decision to remove or retain a contested building name (or set of contested names) on their campuses during a wave of naming debates that took place between 2015 and 2019 on college and university campuses in the United States and abroad.

In 2015, I experienced firsthand how complex and painful naming discussions can be for institutions, their campuses, and their surrounding communities. While I understood the complicated web of issues related to the naming debate at that institution—which was both my place of work and my alma mater—I wondered if the factors that influenced the discussion at our institution were the same ones that influenced institutional decision-making on other campuses.

To what extent were student protests and demands driving administrators’ decisions to remove contested names from buildings? Were buildings with certain purposes or of certain ages more likely than others to keep their names? Were buildings named for alumni and former administrators renamed as often as buildings named for those who did not have such clear ties to the institution? The master’s project grappled with these questions but stopped short of establishing clear guidance or frameworks that could be used to help higher education administrators navigate these issues when they arise.

Lingering questions about the tangible implications and practical realities of naming debates on campus and the growing frequency of these discussions across higher education inspired my decision to apply to the SCUP Fellows Program. It was my hope that focusing a SCUP project on naming discussions—a subset of the broader conversations about commemoration and memorialization that are underway in and beyond higher education—would positively contribute to the SCUP knowledge base by shedding light on the scope and scale of naming debates across higher education and introducing some thoughts about how to address them.
Renaming and de-naming buildings has become an increasingly popular means of redress for institutions confronting problematic aspects of their histories and past decisions about who is (and should be) deserving of commemoration and memorialization. Re-evaluating the names on campus is an opportunity for institutions to convey responsiveness to the needs—and in some cases, the demands—of a diversifying campus community in a rapidly changing higher education landscape.

Art historian Paul Venable Turner asserts that the physical environment of the campus reflects “the embodiment of an institution’s character.” If we agree with this characterization, then it can be argued that de-naming and renaming are tools for ensuring alignment between the campus-built environment and a contemporary understanding of the institution’s core values. This perspective also aligns with the “campus racial climate” framework advanced by Hurtado et al., which considers elements of institutional context—including an institution’s historical legacy—to be the primary drivers of the sense of racial campus climate. Although not explicitly articulated in the framework, the campus-built environment can and does reflect an institution’s historical legacy, and it impacts how one experiences and interprets the campus racial climate.

At the same time that renaming or de-naming can significantly improve a sense of inclusion on campus, decisions to rename and de-name can stoke concerns about erosion of campus heritage and erasure of institutional history. Even in cases where an institution successfully navigates all relevant legal and institutional constraints that could inhibit its decision to change a name or set of names on campus, questions remain about whether institutions should remove names from campus buildings and whether such removals actually improve campus climate.

This report summarizes the specific cases of US institutions that addressed a naming issue between 2014 and 2021 and what each of them chose to do when faced with this challenging decision.
THE PROJECT

HOW DID YOU APPROACH AND CARRY OUT YOUR RESEARCH PROJECT?

In the absence of an existing database of naming issues on college and university campuses, I constructed one of my own during my master’s research, using information collected from content analysis of various types, including federal data and articles from on-campus, trade, and mainstream media. The resulting database catalogs a range of data (see Figure 1) about an institution that had a naming issue arise, the building that carried a contested name, the person or persons for whom the building was named, and the factors that appeared to play a role in the decision of whether to retain or remove the name in question.

Figure 1. Database Categories

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DATA CATEGORIES</th>
<th>EXPLANATION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Institutional Factors</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control/Authority</td>
<td>Whether the institution is public or private</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carnegie Classification</td>
<td>The basic classification of the institution using the Carnegie Classification® framework</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geographic Region</td>
<td>Region of the US where the institution’s primary campus resides, using regions as defined by the US Bureau of Economic Analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>US State</td>
<td>Within each region, the US state where the institution’s primary campus resides</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carnegie Classification</td>
<td>The type of institution as characterized using the Carnegie Classification® “basic classification” framework</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Building Details</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary Function</td>
<td>The primary purpose of the building with the contested name, as reported in institutional sources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Construction or Dedication Date</td>
<td>Region of the US where the institution’s primary campus resides, using regions as defined by the US Bureau of Economic Analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Namesake Characteristics</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name(s)</td>
<td>Full name of the person or people considered building namesakes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Era</td>
<td>The historical era and century in which the namesake(s) lived</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
An initial, critical step in my SCUP Fellows project research was to bring the database up to date to ensure that it included all naming issues that arose between the time I completed the master’s project and the time research for the SCUP Fellows project began. I expected this work to take the first half of my SCUP Fellows year and anticipated that I would dedicate the rest of the year to understanding how various functional areas within colleges and universities see and address naming debates.

However, unforeseen challenges in the form of the COVID-19 pandemic and the mass protest for Black Lives Matter after the murder of George Floyd shifted the project plan. The resulting new wave of naming debates that emerged extended the data collection process considerably. The next section of this report describes the trends that arose from the final dataset used for this SCUP Fellowship project.
FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS

The act of renaming or de-naming campus buildings may seem to be increasingly common across higher education at all types of institutions and across the globe, but in the absence of a comprehensive resource that catalogs the trends and commonalities between institutions’ independent decisions, it is difficult to know what the landscape for renaming and de-naming in higher education truly looks like from a bird’s-eye view.

This section of the report seeks to address the lack of comprehensive summaries by presenting a selection of key trends that arose in my research. This study includes 73 four-year colleges and universities in the United States that collectively undertook a total of 131 decisions about renaming or de-naming a building between 2014 and 2021.

Which institutions have faced decisions to rename or de-name buildings on campus?

Within the sample set studied for this project, 61 percent of the institutions were public, and 45 percent (n=33) were classified as very high research activity (“R1”) institutions, although all institution types as defined by the Carnegie Classification system were represented.

Figure 2. US 4-Year Colleges that Undertook Naming Decisions, 2014–2021
The vast majority (73 percent) of institutions that undertook a naming decision during the study period were located on the East Coast. Because many of the high-profile names that have been removed from campus buildings in recent years were those that honored slaveholders, Confederate soldiers, and/or those who championed segregation, it might be natural to assume that the majority of contested names would be located in the Southeast. In fact, 49 percent of the institutions in this study were located somewhere else.

Although it may come as a surprise to some, it has become increasingly clear that naming issues are not solely an issue that arises in a single region or state within the United States. Indeed, as the scope of what names might become contested namesakes has expanded beyond slaveholders, Confederate soldiers, and segregationists—to include a broader swath of individuals whose actions and viewpoints are now seen to be in conflict with institutional missions, administrative efforts to improve equity, inclusion, and belonging, and the well-being of increasingly diverse campus populations—the number of institutions that might choose to remove or alter a contested name is also expanding.

Which buildings are most commonly renamed or de-named?

There are several ways to think about the types of buildings that are most commonly considered for renaming or de-naming; two important characteristics that were focus areas for this project were age (when a building was constructed or dedicated) and function (what an institution considers to be a building’s primary role on campus).

Building Age. Building age and, when applicable, dedication dates are important characteristics for a study on naming because these data provide insight into when in an institution’s history (and in US history), a given name was selected. The buildings included in this project span generations; the oldest was built in 1792 and the most recent were completed in 2016.

The majority of these buildings were built between 1910 and 1969, a period in US history that spans the era of Jim Crow—when local and state laws were instituted to reinforce racial segregation in the post-Civil War period—to the start of the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s. This period also marks—and perhaps, not surprisingly—the decades where the “Lost Cause” narrative, which manifested,
in part, through the construction of Confederate monuments and memorials, was arguably at its greatest strength.

Figure 3. Construction and Dedication Dates of Buildings with Contested Names, 2014–2021

86% of contested buildings were either built or dedicated during this period.

**Primary Function.** Examining naming decisions by a building’s primary function is a way to take stock of which building types have most commonly been the subject of a naming debate and which ultimately retain a contested name. Of the 125 buildings accounted for in this project, 34 percent were primarily academic buildings, 30 percent were residence halls, and 18 percent were primarily administrative buildings.

Figure 4. Primary Function of Buildings with Contested Names, 2014–2021
Many factors contribute to the significant representation of academic, administrative, and residential buildings, not the least of which is their ubiquity. Even without conducting a nationwide census of campus buildings, it is likely safe to assume that every college and university campus has at least one building that functions primarily as an academic and/or administrative space and that each residential campus has at least one building that functions as a residence hall.

These building types are also frequently and heavily used. A member of a college or university community might take note of or raise concerns about the name that adorns a rarely used space. But a name likely takes on more salience when it appears on the lintel of the academic building in which members of the community regularly work or study, or the residence hall, which for many is a “home away from home” that students return to each night.

A final practical assumption that likely explains the distribution of building types is that academic, administrative, and residential buildings are probably the types of buildings most commonly named through institutional processes or donations.

Comparing the naming decisions made in the initial wave of naming debates in 2014–2019 to the second wave that began in late Spring 2020 shows the continued importance of these three building types but also reflects a clear change in the frequency of renaming. Whereas the names of residence hall buildings were more often the targets of possible renaming during “Wave 1,” it was academic buildings that were more likely to be renamed during “Wave 2.”

Because each building’s story is unique, there are many possible reasons that could explain why more academic buildings were the subject of naming decisions after 2020 than were up for discussion between 2014–2019. Among the possible explanations are the outsized importance of residence halls to the campus community, which made these buildings the more likely to be addressed quickly; the larger total number of academic buildings across higher education, which would ultimately mean they would account for the largest number of naming decisions; and the fact that these buildings may be more or less likely to be named through different mechanisms (e.g., bestowed as an honorific vs. endowed by a donor), which could mean that some building types are easier to change than others.
Who are the namesakes who are most likely to be contested?

The individuals whose names adorn campus buildings often have important and notable ties to their respective institutions as founders, administrators, coaches, faculty and staff members, and/or board members. They could be graduates of the institution where their namesake building resides, influential donors to that institution, or prominent politicians in the institution’s city, state, or region. Many individuals also have multiple affiliations that can further complicate a discussion about whether to retain or change a building’s name.

While there is a story behind each individual building name studied as part of this research project and its relevance to each campus, there are also some noticeable trends in the group of building names that were up for discussion in four-year colleges and universities in the US during this project’s study period.

Figure 5. Building Namesakes by Institutional Tie(s), 2014–2021

The word cloud presented as Figure 5 shows the various institutional ties logged in the dataset used for this project. The larger the text, the more frequently the namesake in question had a particular relationship (i.e., “president” or “graduate,” etc.) to their institution.
Although the vast majority of contested building names honor individuals who lived in the 19th and early 20th centuries, including those with ties to slavery, the Confederacy, white supremacist organizations, and efforts to enforce segregation, there are also building namesakes from the 18th century and even one who died less than 20 years ago. While “racist and prejudicial views and actions” might broadly summarize the rationale for why each of the studied namesakes was considered eligible for renaming, the specific reasons and offenses, as well as the communities they targeted or marginalized, vary and cannot be appropriately summarized in this brief report.

What happens when a contested building name is identified?

While each institution will ultimately forge its own path, this research project revealed that institutions’ decisions typically fall into at least one of the following three categories: retain the contested namesake, rename it, or contextualize it.

Decision-making responsibility tends to reside with boards, but many other people and many other factors play a role in the eventual outcome.

Institutions may formally engage campus leaders and campus-based governing groups or standing committees, or establish, as many campuses did, a specific committee to focus on naming issues in general—or the specific case under examination in a given moment. These focused naming committees serve as an important mechanism for educating and fact gathering as well as for engaging the institution’s community in shared governance and deliberation.

Activism and protest also play an important role in advancing an institution toward decision-making. Particularly in the first wave of naming demonstrations (2015-2019), student-generated lists of demands often included calls for renaming campus buildings, raising these issues to the forefront of discussions of how to improve campus racial climate.

There are also structural and political realities that impact an institution’s choice about whether to retain, rename, or contextualize. Donor restrictions and the importance of respecting donor intent are chief among them. So, too (particularly for public institutions in the Southeastern states), are state legislatures and state historical commissions, which regulate and can ultimately restrict an institution’s ability to address a contested name.
In a tactical sense, the act of renaming—even once an institution has decided to take that path—can be a complicated one that raises concerns about historical erasure and institutional legacy while introducing new tasks such as identifying a suitable replacement name and going about the business of removing signage, changing physical and web-based maps, and deciding how best to handle engravings that permanently associate the old namesake with the building even after its name changes.

Many of the institutions studied as part of this project that chose to rename opted for an interim approach that involved replacing the contested name first with a temporary name in order to give the campus community time to decide on a replacement. Some of these temporary names were generic in nature (e.g., “Residence Hall One” or the building’s campus street address) while others were more symbolic (e.g., “First College” or “Freedom Hall”).

When new names are selected, often with the support of a committee, the trend has been to use this new naming opportunity as a chance to commemorate “firsts” for the institution. In most cases, these “firsts” are early or prominent Black, Brown, Indigenous, and/or Asian graduates, faculty, or staff members of the institution. In several other cases, contested buildings have been renamed with words from the language of the Indigenous community on whose land the institution now sits.

The act of contextualization may happen alone or be done in parallel with a decision to rename or retain a contested building name. The goal of this approach is to ensure that any visitors to, or users of, a given building are aware of its history and the holistic and comprehensive legacy of its namesake(s). Most institutions accomplish this work through plaques on site and web pages that serve as dynamic archives of the deliberation and decision process. Increasingly, though, institutions are incorporating public art both in plazas outside of the buildings that have experienced a name change and inside through media such as sculpture, digital displays, and stained glass.

**How has the approach to controversial namesakes changed over time?**

As has been mentioned throughout this report, this SCUP Fellows Project incorporates data from 2014–2021. The first period, 2014–2019 (“Wave 1”), can be best characterized by student-led demonstrations and the issuance of demands that began at University of Missouri and quickly swept the nation. The second
period, 2020–present (“Wave 2”), is distinguished by the series of killings of unarmed Black and Brown individuals, including George Floyd, who was murdered in Minneapolis, Minnesota, in May 2020.

In the data, these two waves are differentiated most by looking at the number of contested building names that were retained or removed. As is evident in the two graphs presented as Figure 6, during the first wave, 61 percent of decisions about contested building names were to rename them. The remaining 39 percent were predominantly decisions to retain an existing name with a small number of institutions that had decisions “pending” review and deliberation by committees or internal and external boards.

By contrast, less than 5 percent of the total decisions made in 2020 and since were to retain a contested name. The decisions made during this period include new naming issues but also the resolution of several “pending” cases and at least one reversal from “retain” in “Wave 1” to “rename” in “Wave 2.”

Figure 6. Two Views of Naming Decisions Over Time, 2014–2021

In “Wave 1,” about 61% of decisions were to rename a contested name.

In “Wave 2,” less than 5% of decisions were to retain a contested name.
What this evidence suggests is that there was a fundamental shift in behavior among institutions about how contested building names were addressed pre- and post-2020. The sheer number of buildings that were renamed in 2020 alone is certainly reflective of the significance of the moment. But perhaps it also suggests that institutions had been quietly working toward decisions that were able to be quickly announced, or that by “Wave 2”, institutions had roadmaps and peer examples to follow. This would have allowed them to make decisions more swiftly and decisively than was possible during the first Wave of student demonstrations.

**WHAT LESSONS FROM YOUR RESEARCH WILL HELP OTHER PLANNERS AND BENEFIT THEM IN THEIR WORK?**

**An Integrated Approach to Naming**

SCUP describes integrated planning as “a sustainable approach to planning that builds relationships, aligns the organization, and emphasizes preparedness for change” that “engages all sectors of the academy—academic affairs, student affairs, business and finance, campus planning, IT, communications, development” and all internal and external stakeholders.³
When it comes to naming on campus, it could be said that this type of work is already a model of integrated planning because it typically requires the engagement of internal and external constituencies. Consider, for example, all of the functional areas and stakeholders that must engage in some aspect of the cultivation of a gift, or the construction and naming of a new or newly-renovated building.

At the same time, the work of renaming and de-naming buildings for reasons that relate to mission, diversity, equity, and inclusion is just beginning to come into focus and so, too, is the best practice for managing renaming or de-naming when such issues arise.

Although many institutions have naming policies on the books that govern how and when and what can be named, few—if any—were fully prepared for the work required of renaming and de-naming campus buildings when the time came. Beyond policies and procedures, institutions faced other challenges such as protests and demonstrations, petitions and open letters, gift restrictions, and even heritage laws that prevent changing historic names.

With these constraints in mind, there are some considerations related to naming on campus that those who work in and with institutions of higher education should keep in mind.

1. **Understand the context by conducting a broad examination of institutional history and the campus-built environment** to identify potential challenges and uncover building histories before they become flashpoints.

2. **Proactively plan, by establishing or updating relevant policies and procedures, whether those policies and procedures** exist at the institution level or at the unit-level to ensure alignment and avoid conflict when assessing and addressing contested namesakes.

3. **Engage the community, by fostering collaboration** with a broad set of stakeholders, working across functional areas (e.g., planning and facilities, advancement/development, student affairs, library and institutional archives, etc.) and community groups (e.g., faculty, staff, students, alumni, and community members).
4. **Prepare for the unexpected by understanding the current sociopolitical climate** and anticipating shifts that might impact perspectives on what is or could be contested.

5. **Consider all options, including renaming, de-naming, contextualizing, and the development of new commemorations** to ensure the ultimate solution is tailored to the specific circumstances.

6. **Be nimble, open to reconsideration, and transparent** with the campus community, alumni, and the public about the process the institution is taking, who is and will be involved, the expected timeline, the decisions undertaken, and, ultimately, the outcomes of those decisions.
LAST WORDS

HOW DID YOUR SCUP COACHES SUPPORT YOU IN YOUR PROJECT?

My SCUP Coaches were incredible resources and thought partners throughout the course of my SCUP project, and each brought to the table a depth of expertise that improved my approach to the work, and shaped this project’s outcomes. I am so appreciative of their time, commitment, and wise counsel, and this project is better because of their involvement.

It is hard to fully capture in a few words all of the ways in which each coach contributed to this project, but, to state it briefly, I am especially grateful to Jonathan Holloway for sharing his perspectives as a historian of US history and as a university leader who has navigated the difficult and challenging work of addressing institutional legacies as they manifest through names and spaces at three different institutions; to David Neumann for contributing his extensive experience in campus planning across a range of institutions and institution types (including several institutions in this study) alongside lessons learned from having addressed the unique and complex issues associated with naming, commemoration, and preservation on a historic campus; and to Michelle Packer for sharing her deep knowledge of development and advancement in higher education and the ways in which the types of naming issues discussed in this project both relate to and complicate the important work of institutional advancement.

Although not formally a project coach, I would be remiss if I didn’t also take a moment to acknowledge and express my sincere appreciation to Kathy Benton, my SCUP staff liaison, who served as a critical and valued coach, cheerleader, thought partner, and friend throughout this entire experience.
ERIN’S SCUP COACHES

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President, University Professor and Distinguished Professor
Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey


David J. Neuman
Principal, Neu Campus Planning

David Neuman is the founder and principal of Neu Campus Planning, Inc. His firm consults with a wide variety of institutional and corporate clients, ranging from leading preparatory schools and universities to large health care providers and non-government organizations. Previously, he served as the chief planning officer...
Michelle Packer
Chief Development Officer and Assistant Dean, Undergraduate Studies
University of Maryland, College Park

Michelle is responsible for advancing the mission of UMD and the Office of Undergraduate Studies by building relationships, inspiring philanthropy and engaging others with the university. Prior to UMD, she spent nearly 15 years in fundraising at the University of Virginia where she led a team and helped to expand endowment funding to historic levels for need-based scholarships, the first such effort in the university’s history.

_SCUP fellow coaches are volunteers who are experienced in an area of higher education or thought leadership that is aligned with the ultimate goals of the SCUP Fellow Research Project. They bring fresh perspectives and insights over the course of the fellowship year. We thank Erin Johnson’s three SCUP coaches for their generosity of time and perspective._

**HOW DID THE SCUP FELLOWS EXPERIENCE IMPACT YOU PERSONALLY?**

Despite the unexpected— and at times, seemingly unrelenting— challenges of recent years, I know I will always consider the SCUP Fellows experience to be an important one for me personally and professionally.

As a relatively young professional who had only recently graduated from a master’s program, the SCUP Fellows experience was a great way to get connected to and involved in a professional organization that fits my diverse interests and aspirations. This experience also forced me to think about my research in new ways.
as I sought to ensure that the project would be relevant to the SCUP community. I hope I have succeeded in producing something that truly will prove to be a useful contribution to the SCUP knowledge base, and a valuable resource for those looking to learn more about naming issues on campus.

In addition to what I have gained through the research experience, I am also glad to have had an opportunity to connect with so many professionals with shared interests. Learning from and with my SCUP coaching team, connecting with the SCUP members who reached out at events to discuss this project and offer support, and engaging with the two other 2020–2021 SCUP Fellows in my cohort, Shannon Dowling and Royce Robertson, are highlights of this SCUP Fellows year. Having the chance to meet regularly with Shannon and Royce and getting an insider’s view of their projects as they developed over our time together was itself a learning experience for which I am grateful, and I’m appreciative to SCUP Fund contributors for making our SCUP Fellows experience possible.
ENDNOTES

