

# Proposed Principles and Procedures for Renaming Buildings and Other Features at Stanford University

## Introduction

Stanford University is committed to maintaining high standards of integrity and robust academic freedom, and to providing a welcoming and inclusive environment for all members of the Stanford community—principally students, faculty, staff, alumni, and trustees.<sup>1</sup> Consistent with its commitment to the search for truth, the University benefits from examining even its own long-established values and traditions.

With this in mind, Stanford will consider renaming features of the university, such as buildings, streets, monuments, endowed positions, and prizes, when there is strong evidence that retaining the name is inconsistent with the University's integrity or is harmful to its research and teaching missions and inclusiveness.

Renaming a feature because of the morally repugnant behavior of the person after whom the feature has been named represents a sufficiently serious expression of condemnation and change to the University's original decision that it should be undertaken only where warranted by all the circumstances.

- The university's intellectual mission requires that it acknowledge and assess the complexity of human actions before it reaches judgments. Historical evidence is typically complex and often ambiguous. Too-ready renaming, especially when passions are high, may oversimplify, revise, or erase history.
- Because of its commitment to academic freedom, the University must take care that neither renaming nor retaining a name inhibits research or otherwise restricts free and open inquiry.
- Today's decisions about naming and renaming may become controversial in the future. Thus, today's decision makers should give the same respect to previous decision makers that they would like their decisions to be accorded in the future.
- Any person after whom a University feature has been named may have a history that some members of our diverse community will find objectionable. The proper investigation of requests for renaming, and the possible responses (including physical alterations and mitigation efforts) require considerable time and effort, and should not be undertaken lightly.

The procedures and principles set out in this document are intended to provide guidance to those making requests for renaming and to the President and Board of Trustees when considering renaming.

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<sup>1</sup> Stanford's Founding Grant prescribes the nature of the university as including "studies and exercises directed to the cultivation and enlargement of the mind," "its object, to qualify its students for personal success and direct usefulness in life," and "its purposes, [among others] to promote the public welfare by exercising an influence in behalf of humanity and civilization." <http://govcr.stanford.edu/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/founding-grant.pdf>

## **Initiating the Process of Reconsidering the Name of a Feature**

Having a clear process for addressing questions of renaming is important. Improvised procedures are not only likely to provoke controversy over whether requests are treated consistently, but will make consideration of requests less efficient. The process should take into account the distinctive character of the University as an institution of higher education devoted to the advancement of knowledge and to the creation of an inclusive and responsible community.

The President of the University may begin the process of reconsidering the name on a building or other feature at his or her own initiative or in response to a request submitted by members of the Stanford community. The request should describe:

- the specific behavior(s) or course(s) of conduct by the person after whom a feature is named that violate the University's mission and core principles;
- the sources and strength of the evidence of that behavior;
- the nature, depth, and extent of the harm that the continued use of the name may inflict on the University's integrity, mission, and communities; and
- how renaming comports with the principles described in this document.

Upon receipt of the request, the President may make further inquiries of its submitters and, in his or her discretion, submit the petition to a committee appointed by the President to investigate the claims and report back to the President.

Beginning with the request and continuing through the process that follows, the University and its members should adhere to the standards of inquiry and discourse appropriate for an institution of higher education. They should invite comments from all interested members of the Stanford community (including the honoree or his or her heirs) and treat the process as an opportunity for community-wide learning even as they address past wrongdoing. Where helpful, those applying these principles to a particular case should take advantage of the knowledge and methodologies of the social sciences, humanities, law, and other disciplines, and they should take care that the inquiry itself not exacerbate the harms that are being considered.

## **Factors to be Considered**

### ***The harm caused by retaining the name***

The critical question is whether the honoree's behavior compromises the university's mission, including both its commitment to intellectual integrity and its commitment to diversity and inclusion of all members of the Stanford community. This is a question of fact whose answer should not be casually assumed. Among other things, it will depend on the nature of the conduct at issue, the prominence and role of the named feature in daily life at the University, and the degree to which retention of the name interferes with the ability of University community members to teach, learn, work, and live in the community.

### *The potential harms of renaming*

- The committee must take care that renaming not establish a University orthodoxy with respect to particular opinions or otherwise inhibit free inquiry.
- The names of certain University features may have a positive value for students, faculty, staff, or alumni, who may find renaming disrespectful of their views.

### *The relevant factors and how they should be weighed*

1. *The centrality of the person’s offensive behavior to his or her life as a whole.* The case for renaming is strongest where the honoree’s offensive behavior is inextricably connected with his/her public persona.<sup>2</sup> The case for renaming is weaker where the honoree’s offensive behavior, though publicly known, is not a central or inextricable part of his/her public persona<sup>3</sup>—especially when the honoree’s behavior was conventional at the time of the behavior or the naming, and when, despite the objectionable behavior, other aspects of the person’s life and work are especially praiseworthy.
2. *Relation to the University history.* The case for renaming is weaker when the honoree has had an important role in the University’s history, and stronger when the honoree is a person without a significant connection to the university. (The concern about “erasing” the university’s history—or any history, for that matter—is diminished to the extent that the relationship between Stanford’s history and the honoree is incidental to begin with.)
3. *Harmful impact of the honoree’s behavior.* The case for renaming is strongest when the morally repugnant behavior of an honoree for whom a feature is named has a significant negative effect on the core University missions of pursuing knowledge and receiving an education. Thus, the case for renaming is strong to the extent that retaining a name creates an environment that impairs the ability of students, faculty, or staff of a particular gender, sexual orientation, race, religion, national origin, or other characteristic protected by federal law or University policy, to participate fully and effectively in the missions of

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<sup>2</sup> This was Yale’s conclusion based on John Calhoun’s public advocacy of slavery. See *Yale Committee to Establish Principles on Renaming*, <https://president.yale.edu/advisory-groups/presidents-committees/committee-establish-principles-renaming-0>

<sup>3</sup> Although reasonable people might differ, this was Princeton’s conclusion with respect to Woodrow Wilson: “The challenge presented by Wilson’s legacy is that some of his views and actions clearly contradict the values we hold today about fair treatment for all individuals, and our aspirations for Princeton to be a diverse, inclusive, and welcoming community. On the other hand, many of his views and actions – as faculty member and president of this University, as governor of New Jersey and a two-term President of the United States, and as an international leader whose name and legacy are still revered in many parts of the world – speak directly to our values and aspirations for our school of public and international affairs and for the first of our residential colleges.” *Report of the Trustee Committee on Woodrow Wilson’s Legacy at Princeton*, <https://www.princeton.edu/vpsec/trustees/Wilson-Committee-Report-Final.pdf>

the University. The case is also strong to the extent that the morally repugnant behavior is connected to academic fraud or misconduct.

In assessing the negative effects, the salience of the named feature for members of the Stanford community should be considered: The case for renaming is stronger where the name is prominent and encountered in a personal or intimate setting (e.g., a student residence) and generally is weaker where the feature is a relatively impersonal public place. As a result, when several features are named after the same individual, the impact may be more harmful for some features than for others.

4. *Community identification with the feature.* The case for renaming is weaker where the feature is part of a valuable positive tradition or identification shared by a substantial number of Stanford community members, including alumni.
5. *Strength and clarity of the historical evidence.* The case for renaming is strongest when evidence of the honoree's wrongful behavior is clear and unambiguous, and is weakest when the evidence is scant or ambiguous.
6. *The University's prior consideration of the issues.* The case for renaming is stronger when the honoree's offensive conduct came to light after the naming, or where the issue was not the subject of prior deliberation. The case for renaming is weaker when the University addressed the behavior at the time of the naming and nonetheless decided to honor the person, or when the University has already considered and rejected a prior request for renaming. (The original decision deserves some degree of respect if the decision makers considered the competing interests, but not if they made the decision in ignorance of relevant facts,<sup>4</sup> or if they did not address the honoree's questionable behavior at the time of the naming.)
7. *Possibilities for mitigation.* In considering whether to retain or eliminate a name, the University should take into account whether the harm can be mitigated and historical knowledge preserved by recognizing and addressing the individual's wrongful behavior. When a feature is renamed or when the name is retained but the committee considers it a close question, the University should consider describing the history in a prominent way—at the feature, where practicable, or in some other suitable location.

### **Application of the Principles to Particular Cases**

A committee considering a particular renaming case should submit a written opinion to the President applying these principles to the facts of the case. It is inevitable that the principles will be elaborated or even modified in the course of their application over time. The President may, at any time, reconvene a committee to reconsider the principles.

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<sup>4</sup> For example, if at the time of the initial naming, the University was unaware that the honoree had engaged in a course of sexually abusive behavior.