

Content Warning:

The first paragraph of the statement below contains racist and dehumanizing language and beliefs of Thomas Huxley. Some people may find this material triggering or difficult to handle. The WWU Executive Board and Senate felt it was important to concisely explain, yet limit, the words of Huxley to hold the institution accountable for the harm that lauding *all* parts of Huxley's legacy has done to BIPOC communities.

If you need any support, here are some resources that may be helpful:

Counseling Center: <https://cwc.wwu.edu/>

Bias Response Team: <https://www.wwu.edu/sebrt>

Statement on Huxley Name Change

TO: Board of Trustees, Western Washington University

FROM: WWU Executive Board and Student Senate

DATE: November 23, 2021

SUBJECT: Board Response to Legacy Review Task Force Recommendation

Dear Members of the Board,

Concerning the unanimous recommendation made by the Legacy Review Task Force to remove T.H. Huxley's name from the College of the Environment, the WWU Student Government offers this statement of support.

The fact that Thomas Huxley was racist is irrefutable. He openly endorsed theories that are now classified as scientific racism such as "Huxley's Rule" which stated that Black people

were more similar to apes than they were to white people¹. One must also consider the unethical content and results of his debate with Richard Owen², and his anthropological works which consider whites superior to “lesser races”, “uncivilized” and “primitive” peoples (Brantlinger, 2003). Huxley also established a taxonomy of 11 different “stocks” or races. Only two of these stocks, the European Melanochroi and Xanthochroi, were considered by Huxley to be near equal races in terms of intelligence and physique, and making progress toward civilization and human achievement (Brantlinger, 2003; Huxley, 1870). However, Huxley did not attribute such descriptions to other races, and used especially harmful language in his category for Black people under the guise of using empiricist evidence and scientific language for his racial categorizations (Huxley, 1870). Huxley was an imperialist in the Enlightenment era of England who supported white supremacist beliefs, and believed that people of color, otherwise known to him as “barbarians” and “native savages,” were unfit to become “civilized” as members of society (Brantlinger, 2003). These claims have done irreparable damage to communities of color, established racism in the scientific community and its work, and fanned the flames of racism worldwide. They continue to hurt people of color within our university, with many students — particularly Black students — feeling degraded while attending an institution with a college named after such a prominent scientist that supported hurtful, racist sentiments. This alone provides enough justification to remove Huxley’s name from the College of the Environment, and is just one of several demands (number six of 19) from the university’s Black Student Organization to ensure inclusivity and respect to black students at our predominantly white institution (Black Student Organization, 2020).

¹ See the Rupke citation below and his [lecture](#) about Huxley from 18:50 onward or view the whole video for more information.

² See the Flannery citation below.

However, there are additional reasons for renaming the college. As recognized by the Legacy Review Task Force, not only does Huxley's glorification hurt people of color, but it also does significant damage to the reputation of Western Washington University. An institution which prides itself on inclusivity and acceptance cannot afford to be degraded by ideologies which entrench racism in a country built by racism and colonization. Removing Huxley's name from the College of the Environment will demonstrate that the University is receptive to the voices of students of color, committed to fostering inclusive learning environments, and committed to social justice in education. Given the fact that Thomas Huxley and his descendants never had any connection, financially or otherwise, to Western Washington University or Washington State and that there was no formal process to name the college after T.H. Huxley, the removal of the name from the college is a more than reasonable request to fulfill, while acknowledging valid alumni-related sentimental connection (WWU Legacy Review Task Force, 2021).

In addition to the reasons outlined above, the renaming of the College of the Environment (CoE) is supported by both faculty and students. Former College of the Environment senators Laura Wagner and Francis Neff held a virtual public forum on Jan. 25 to discuss the renaming of Huxley College. They were joined by the former AS Senate President Sargun Handa, who has supported the name change since 2019, and other Western students and faculty members. The senators of 2020-21 wanted the College of the Environment to have a name that respects people of all identities and backgrounds. Gene Meyers, an environmental studies professor who attended the forum, said, "This is the time to do it, if there ever was one" (Angulo, 2021). Then, on May 19, 21 CoE faculty members participated in writing an op-ed published in The Front backing the name change. The op-ed refuted those who wish to retain Huxley's legacy as a scientific hero,

and instead recognized him as an ethically flawed scientist of his era. Authors and signatories of this piece supported the idea of not naming the CoE after one specific person, in order to “better support our commitment to creating a more inclusive college culture” (Environmental Studies Faculty, et al., 2021). In addition, last spring all three candidates that ran to represent the student body of the College of the Environment supported the renaming of the college, proving that the Huxley name retention faction had virtually no support from the student body in the Student Senate elections. The Legacy Review Task Force demonstrated support also, sending its unanimous recommendation for the Huxley name change to President Sabah Randhawa on June 14 (WWU Legacy Review Taskforce, 2021).

However, we cannot write this letter without acknowledging the arguments of those who wish to keep the name. Some within the university argue that removing Huxley’s name to acknowledge his harmful legacy will overshadow the positive scientific contributions he made during his lifetime, and preserve the narratives of creationists who deny the biological theory of evolution. The AS Student Senate and Executive Board believe this argument lacks credibility. If one considers Darwin and the Theory of Evolution, historical evidence proves that Darwin’s work contributed to scientific racism (Rose, 2009). This demonstrates that Darwin held views which are rightfully regarded as indefensible and unscrupulous in modern society. The vast majority of people, scientists included, still respect Darwin’s Theory of Evolution and his other evolutionary science writings despite these views, while many still acknowledge the harmful impacts of Social Darwinism on the development of scientific racism (Rose, 2009). Therefore, we believe that the argument against removing the name for the above reasons is unfounded, if not in bad faith. Regardless, whatever positive contributions Huxley made to science cannot

undo the damage his ethnological work has done to people of color, and merits the removal of his name from the college.

Huxley's name is a detriment not only to the College of the Environment, but Western Washington University as a whole. To be fully in support of racial justice and people of color, we must fight back against the wishes of the few, some of whom were willing to undermine a process decided upon by the President and Board of Trustees, in order to maintain a status quo that negatively impacts students. Removing the name is a moral decision, and acts as a symbolic step for further efforts in the CoE to heal the racial divides and discrimination within our community. We humbly request that you, the Board of Trustees, remove Huxley's name from the College of the Environment, and rename it with a title that is respectful to all people regardless of race, ethnicity, class, gender, LGBTQ+ identity, and other identities.

Thank you,

WWU Executive Board and Student Senate

WWU Executive Board - Glory Busic, Mallory Schaeftbauer, Naira Gonzales, Ankur Handa, Jasmine Fast, Laura Wagner, Brenner Barclay

Student Senate - Jasleen Kaur, Anna Hedrick, Daniela Reyes, Cole Burk, Dylan Singh, Connor Johnson, Carmela Lu, Chris Adkins, Sofia Larrondo, Rahma Iqbal, Miriam Gold, Justin McGlone, Samia Quidwai, Cambria Keely, Kiernan Park-Egan, Taylor Provence

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