



Historical Race Review Announces Library Name Change, Laments College's Past Racism

The report chronicled 140 years of Wheaton history regarding racial and ethnic minorities, and issued new institutional commitments.

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In light of the facts brought forth by the Historical Race Task Force report, the Record acknowledges the instances of racism in its own institutional history, and we repent of our historical predecessors' complicity in perpetuating racism in the campus culture.

After nearly two years of research, Wheaton College's Historical Race Task Force released its findings in a report emailed to all students, faculty and staff on Thursday, Sept. 14. The 122-page report (https://www.wheaton.edu/media/marcomm/Historical-Race-Task-Force-Review-Final-Report_FINAL.pdf) details the racial history of the college from 1860 to 2000, chronicling administration policies, campus attitudes and notable events. In the email, the Board of Trustees said that President Philip Ryken and the Senior Administrative Cabinet originally requested the review in May 2021, and the task force met for the first time in October 2021.

Pulling together primary sources from the college archives, personal interviews, and secondary historical sources, the 15-person task force chronicled the college's history with a focus on political, administrative and cultural integration of college members from racial minority backgrounds. The task force met twice a month, then weekly, to share progress and discuss its findings.



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Billy Graham Hall on Wheaton's campus, where the college's archives are partly stored. Photo by Isabelle Caldwell

Based on recommendations in the report, the college announced its commitment to respond with actions, including reviewing the naming policies for campus facilities, continuing dialogue with American Indian leaders who have indigenous claims to the college's land and changing the name of Buswell Library after years of student controversy. Ryken said that the library is now called the Library, effective immediately. He also said that the trustees do not have plans to give the Library a new name.

Wheaton is one of the first Christian colleges to conduct such a review as recent years have put it in the center of a cultural tussle over how to talk about race

(<https://www.chronicle.com/article/in-the-fight-over-wokeness-christian-colleges-feel-pressed-to-pick-a-side>). A handful of private and public universities, as well as Princeton Theological Seminary and Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, issued reports on their own racial history in 2018 and 2019, respectively.

In the introduction to the report, Wheaton's Board of Trustees apologized for the college's historical instances of racism.

“We repent of all forms of racism and favoritism in our institutional history, whether conscious

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or unconscious. We hope you read

(<https://thewheatonrecord.com>)

The History



The review begins with an acknowledgement of the tribal lands that the college owns, including the college's Black Hills Science Station in South Dakota and the HoneyRock Center in Wisconsin. Of particular concern to the task force was the Lakota tribe's claim to land that the college — among many other private and public entities — owned. This controversy culminated in a \$100 million reparation from the U.S. government, a payment, the task force noted, still deemed insufficient by the Lakota people. (The college still owns the Black Hills and HoneyRock campuses.)

The task force affirmed that the college had abolitionist roots, citing founder and first president Jonathan Blanchard's public denunciations of slavery and a relatively progressive admissions policy that accepted a small cohort of students of color in the 1860s. However, the review could not substantiate long-circulated claims that the college was a stop on the Underground Railroad. It also found a diminished commitment to anti-slavery and anti-discrimination efforts in the post-Civil War decades.

“For a century after the Civil War, Wheaton College seemingly lost interest in matters of racial justice and slowly conformed to the prevailing views of the surrounding culture,” the report said.

The task force wrote that Blanchard and his son and successor Charles Blanchard did not substantially promote racial integration at Wheaton after the abolition of slavery. The college's population of Black students dwindled throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, setting the stage for J. Oliver Buswell to inherit a “practically all-white” college in 1926.

The task force's research confirmed only one Black student, Clarence B. Morris, who enrolled during Buswell's 14-year presidency. Meanwhile, Black applicants like Rachel Boone (<https://thewheatonrecord.com/2022/05/01/wheatons-lost-legacy-of-black-alumni/>) sparked concern in the administration, forcing Buswell to balance pressures from segregationist and

Civil Rights perspectives. The task force found that the result was an anti-Black admission practice intended to protect the college from divided faculty, donor and trustee opinion, as well as negate the possibility of interracial dating.

“For a small Christian school where the social contacts are so close, it would be best to avoid coeducation of the races,” Buswell wrote in private, according to the report.

In light of Buswell’s legacy of racial discrimination, the trustees said they have instructed the administration to rename Wheaton College’s library. There was no mention of what a new name would be.

With few students of color on campus, many members of the college community were openly insensitive toward other races. The report mentioned racist jokes in the Record and instances of blackface at student functions.

The task force found that the college became more open to admitting ethnic minorities during World War II, highlighting acceptances of Japanese and Japanese American students. Under Executive Order 9066, any persons of Japanese heritage, citizen or otherwise, were sent to internment camps for the duration of the war. The War Relocation Authority, however, made an exception for students going to college. While colleges across the country refused to take in students of Japanese descent, Wheaton received many.

In 1951, the college hired its first faculty member of color. Mildred Young, a Chinese American woman, joined the classical languages department to teach Greek. But the 1950s and early 1960s were still marked by the administration’s concern over interracial dating.

Although a formal policy was never written, during the presidency of Hudson T. Armerding, interracial couples faced strict questioning when submitting a marriage application to the dean of men or the dean of women, a requirement if married students were to stay enrolled. Backlash to the marriage applications from students of color prompted Armerding to request a review of race relations at the college.

The resulting five-page report would have corrected many policies and “called on white evangelicals to repent of their racial discrimination. It offered a series of bold recommendations that, if implemented, would have made Wheaton College a leader among Christian institutions in its rejection of racial prejudice and pursuit of kingdom diversity.” The task force said it is unclear why that report was blocked from implementation, but there is evidence that it faced resistance from faculty.

In 1968, following the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., Armerding agreed to a request from local clergy to hold a memorial service in Edman Chapel. The task force noted that Armerding’s balance between pacifying angry college stakeholders and condemning King’s murderers was typical of the late 1960s.

By the 1970s, the college had implemented multiple strategies to boost enrollment among students of color and prepare them for life on campus. Results were mixed. The Board of Trustees announced the “Wheaton by 1985” initiative, aiming to increase minority students’ enrollment to six percent (up from three), and Nadine Smith was named the assistant to the dean of student minority affairs, charged with supporting minority students. She resigned less than three years later, saying she was “not being taken seriously.”

In 1988, the college founded the Office of Minority Affairs (now the Office of Multicultural Development), led by Rodney Sisco, and created its first ethnicity-specific student groups, including William Osborne Society, named for the college’s first Black graduate, and the groups that later became Koinonia and Unidad Cristiana. The college attempted to diversify faculty, though it had never employed more than two faculty of color at a time before the 1980s. The review noted that between 1993 and 1999, the college “added more faculty of color than had been added in the previous three decades combined.”

Campus Reactions

In a follow-up email, President Ryken invited students to a town hall on Friday, Sept. 15 to answer their questions about the report. There will be a series of events throughout the fall semester where the administration will take questions from the campus community, including alumni over homecoming weekend in October, as well as a student government-led town hall next week. Student Development also sent an email to students outlining five steps to “support reflection and discussion questions.”

Dale Wong, a trustee of the college and one of the co-chairs of the task force, said that as an

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Asian American, he was honored by the research that found Wheaton's welcome of

Japanese Americans during and after the war. He also recognized the "missteps" made by college leaders even in the later part of the twentieth century. He said he hopes readers of the report will see it as a self-examination.

"My hope and prayer is that the report will be received with open arms and loving hearts, that people will read the full report and understand what we're trying to say, which is to convey an honest understanding, and truthful reckoning of our past, which we believe is very, very important," said Wong.

Students walked into Edman Chapel on Friday morning to a chapel service dedicated to the report. Ryken, along with Chaplain Angulus Wilson and Chief Intercultural Engagement Officer Vanessa Quainoo, shared Scripture passages and guidance about how to react to the report. Unlike the regular chapel services, the service was not live streamed.

"In our journey toward unity, we shouldn't suppress our emotions and feelings, but bring them to God and community," said Wilson at chapel. He called the service a "family meeting."

The report's release has been received with mixed emotions by students as they parse through its pages. A sophomore who describes herself as mixed-Asian American called the report a "great step towards racial reconciliation" but said she was mindful of how policies in the report would have affected her parents, an interracial couple who met at Wheaton.

"To know that past presidents and leaders at this school believed that not only my parents should not get married, but also that I should not exist is heartbreaking to me," she said. She spoke to the Record on the condition of anonymity, to avoid misrepresenting her community.

Ryken believes that the review has something to offer to all students, staff and faculty, regardless of their racial background or experience at Wheaton.

"By taking a fresh and unprecedented look at Wheaton's history of race relations, the Historical Review has something to teach anyone who reads it—including people who are familiar with the College and its past," said Ryken in an email to the Record.

The release of the report caught many students off guard. While the administration had indicated that the report would be published by the end of September, the email from the president's office on Thursday afternoon was unexpected for some students. Isis Toldson, a

senior biblical and theological studies major, said students of color were already aware of some of the history that the task force report made public.

“For most of us of color that have been here for any substantial amount of time, the information in the document is not really shocking,” said Toldson, who is Black.

Toldson also said she was disappointed by the timing of the report's release, worried that it would overshadow Hispanic Heritage Month celebrations, which began the following day. Friday's report-centered chapel service displaced the chapel usually led by Unidad Cristiana, the Latino/a student union.

During Friday's chapel service, Chaplain Wilson said that Unidad's chapel service had been rescheduled for Oct. 6 and said he was grateful for the group's flexibility.

Toldson said she is optimistic that the report would affirm the experiences of students of color, paving the way for more honesty around race at Wheaton.

“I hope that students of color in particular can feel validated in their experience, to know that they're not crazy for feeling like the space can be hostile to them,” said Toldson of her vision for the student reaction to the report. “There's a reality that history does impact our present experiences.”

Noelle Worley, Anna Mares, Bella McDonald and Helen Huiskes contributed reporting.





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Noah Cassetto is a senior studying international relations and Spanish. Originally from Southern California, Noah enjoys serving at church, going to national parks, and some good French fries.

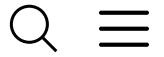
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