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In Sticking With Woodrow Wilson, Princeton Seeks to Contextualize His Legacy

By *Corinne Ruff* | APRIL 05, 2016

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Mel Evans, AP Images

Visitors walk through an exhibit titled "In the Nation's Service? Woodrow Wilson Revisited" at Princeton's Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs. The university announced on Monday that it would not remove the former president's name from the school, but also acknowledged a need to describe his controversial legacy in a more balanced and historically accurate way. It will also undertake diversity initiatives to "achieve meaningful changes in campus climate and culture."

International Affairs to elaborate on Wilson's legacy — as president of Princeton and, later, as president of the United States — and the diversification of campus art and iconography to honor "those who helped make Princeton a more inclusive place."

Princeton University has decided not to strip Woodrow Wilson's name from the university's public-policy school and a residential college, defying student protesters who objected to what they called a celebration of the racist legacy of the university's 13th president.

In making the decision, announced on Monday, the university's Board of Trustees adopted a special committee's report on the issue. Along with the recommendation that Wilson's name stay on the campus, the trustees endorsed four initiatives to "achieve meaningful changes in campus climate and culture." Among them: a recommendation to install an educational marker outside the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and

Before putting together the final report, the committee sought input from scholars and the public. It received 636 public comments and nine reports from scholars of American history. But after reading the final report, some of the scholars didn't find a lot to like.

Nathan D.B. Connolly, an associate professor of history at the Johns Hopkins University, said he was disappointed. The report shows "no acknowledgment of the harmful consequences of Wilson's intellectual work," he said in an interview. The university's stress on "diversity" and "inclusion" amounted to little more than buzzwords, he said, and suggested the initiatives would not be enough to create a better cultural climate on the campus.

"There is no discussion of what Princeton's role was of shaping inequality around the world," Mr. Connolly said about the university's report, adding that Wilson's legacy wasn't discussed as much as was Wilson the man. "Recognizing his legacy is not to say he made unfortunate decisions," he said, "but that his particular brand of curricular reform and governance, his particular brand of foreign relations created a century of negative consequences for people of color."

Mr. Connolly suggested that the university install a series of monuments that acknowledge both "the good and the bad that can be done in Princeton's name." For example, he suggested there be a recognition of the American occupation of Haiti, begun in 1915 under Wilson as U.S. president, as well as the demotion or firing of African-American civil servants under his administration.

Eric S. Yellin, an associate professor of history and American studies at the University of Richmond, also sent a report to the committee. He said he wasn't surprised by the university report's vague description of how Princeton will present the legacy of Wilson and what events it will choose to acknowledge. In order to truly create an inclusive campus, he said, Princeton needs to understand the key difference between venerating and remembering.

"I hope what is in that big claim is that they will recognize to venerate Wilson is to deny history and fail to grapple with not just his complexity, but the fact that there were victims of his point of view and his power," he said.

A 'Racist Legacy'

The special committee was created in November after student protesters demanded that the president of the university, Christopher L. Eisgruber, consider the "racist legacy" of Wilson on the campus.

In an interview with *The Chronicle* in November, Destiny Crockett, a Princeton junior and member of the Black Justice League, said the group had sought public acknowledgment of that legacy. "We know changing a name doesn't dismantle racism," she said. "But Woodrow Wilson has been lionized on this campus, and having his name on the public-policy school isn't OK."

In an online statement posted on Monday, President Eisgruber called the report "thorough and perceptive." He added: "While I continue to admire Wilson's many genuine accomplishments, I recognize the need to describe him in a way that is more balanced, and more faithful to history, than this university and I have previously done."

A university spokeswoman, Min Pullan, said trustees would monitor how the initiatives are carried out through a new committee.

The efforts, while well intentioned, are going to take time, and lots of it, said W. Fitzhugh Brundage, a history professor at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Mr. Brundage, whose institution is also struggling to come to terms with connections to racism in its history, said it could take decades to adequately diversify the iconography of a campus.

The Chapel Hill campus features several pieces of Confederate iconography — epitomized by a statue of a Confederate soldier known as "Silent Sam." A stone's throw away from that marker stands another statue, the Unsung Founders Memorial, which was erected in 2005 to honor "the men and women of color — enslaved and free — who helped build Carolina." While the memorial wasn't meant as a direct rebuttal to "Silent Sam," Mr. Brundage said, that's how many view it today.

But this is only one monument, he said. How many are enough to say a campus is inclusive? And how will the university sustain such a commitment as a priority over time?

Those questions are particularly difficult for Princeton, said Mr. Brundage, given Woodrow Wilson's pervasive presence at the university. "He is so conspicuously incorporated into the identity of the university," he said, "that this is a challenge."

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