

BSEC President Sarah Sam resigns from renaming task force, citing "gross failure"

Michael Chwe (he/him) <michael@chwe.net>

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To: michael <michael@chwe.net>

 1 attachments (121 KB)

NTF_resignation.pdf;

Dear signatories of our petition to Remove Millikan's Name from Caltech,

In response to a petition by the Black Scientists and Engineers at Caltech and our own petition, Caltech President Tom Rosenbaum on July 22 announced a task force to consider renaming buildings at Caltech. I presented to this task force on August 6.

Today, Sarah Sam, President of the Black Scientists and Engineers at Caltech and the only Black student on the task force, resigned. Ms. Sam writes: "Because of the unwillingness to condemn irrefutable evidence of overt racism, I have lost faith that this committee will be able to complete its charges in a responsible way." Ms. Sam's resignation, and her testimony that "the membership of this committee neither has the background nor is willing to address institutional racism at Caltech" and that "several committee members are eugenics apologists" places the moral legitimacy of the task force in jeopardy. Ms. Sam's resignation letter is enclosed as a pdf file and as plain text below.

The organization Caltech for Black Lives is asking us to refuse to recognize the validity and authority of a committee whose proceedings to date have been baldly racist.

Many of us had hoped that this renaming committee would initiate a process of learning and reconciliation, in which the community could better understand Caltech's past and move forward. Instead, we have, in Ms. Sam's words, a gross failure.

Please express your opinion to President Rosenbaum at tfr@caltech.edu and president@caltech.edu. Thank you as always for your support.

Best,
Michael

September 28, 2020

Dear Dr. Rosen,

I am writing to inform you of my resignation from the Naming Task Force (NTF), effective immediately. This committee was formed as a direct response to the petitions written by the Black Scientists and Engineers of Caltech (BSEC) and Professor Michael Chwe; each has been signed by over 1000 Caltech community members as a result of tireless grassroots organizing. As BSEC President, I joined the NTF to represent the concerns of my organization and our petition signatories, but it has become clear that the membership of this committee neither has the background nor is willing to address institutional racism at Caltech.

During the two months in which I have served on the NTF, several committee members have continuously undermined BSEC's role in the committee's formation. Our petition and that of Prof. Chwe explicitly state that racist, eugenic ideologies and Human Betterment Foundation (HBF) involvement of Millikan, Chandler, Ruddock, and Watson are the crux of Caltech's renaming

movement. Despite this background, multiple NTF members have asserted that the history of eugenics and the HBF were not critical to contextualizing the community survey, and that HBF practices were classist but not racist. I later learned that not all NTF members had even read the BSEC petition. Two committee members even suggested that the 1000+ signatories on each petition were unaware of what they were signing, or simply wanted this committee to be formed rather than wanting the buildings renamed.

Many of our meetings have centered around the question, “to what extent is eugenics wrong/racist?” These elementary discussions have prevented the committee from reckoning with and dismantling Caltech's legacy of white supremacy. Disturbingly, the extent of Millikan's HBF involvement was the focal point of the first several discussions, rather than case reports of compulsory sterilization victims documented and archived by the HBF itself. Such reports were introduced by the speaker during the 6th official meeting, but the presentation ran long and these reports were not discussed.

During several discussions, at least one NTF member and one speaker have rationalized the practice of compulsory sterilization as an artifact of limited scientific understanding during the early 20th century. I was shocked by the implication that uncertainty surrounding the heritability of “feeble-mindedness” could justify sterilizing people without their consent. One committee member explicitly supported the recent sterilization of a prepubescent child, citing no justification other than the child being “feeble-minded.” This anecdote confirmed to me what was already apparent: that several committee members are eugenics apologists. This attitude is especially harmful, given that the US government continues to practice eugenics to this day; particularly in prisons and immigrant detention centers, and against Black Lives Matter protesters.

At least four committee members and one speaker denied the pertinence of racism or racial inequity to the issue of building renaming, the HBF, and eugenics itself. The committee read archival documents written by Millikan himself, including a letter during his 1951 trip to Mississippi, stating that: “More than half the population in the state is made up of negroes—a very serious situation. For it means that under universal suffrage they could control the state now, an unthinkable disaster in the view of the sort of people they are now.”

Because this quote is from an archived letter to Millikan's wife, Millikan's belief that Black people are unfit to hold political office or even vote was written off by NTF members as a “private view.” I feel this characterization of his racist views ignores the impact they have had on Caltech's legacy. I later told the committee that I could no longer engage in recruiting racially-minoritized, prospective students, given Caltech's memorialization of blatant racists like Millikan. Two white committee members responded with stories of their own oppression, which they equated to mine. They went on to suggest that my choice to disengage from recruitment-related, voluntary activities was hyperbolic or that I was insufficiently committed to Caltech. These interactions crystallized for me that several NTF members have failed to demonstrate a basic understanding of race, class, disability, and oppression. Because of the unwillingness to condemn irrefutable evidence of overt racism, I have lost faith that this committee will be able to complete its charges in a responsible way.

Following BSEC's petition in which I publicly announced the shortcomings of several offices of student services, I and other minoritized students on campus have been inundated with requests to provide voluntary consultation services to address the very disadvantages to which we have been subjected at Caltech. I am exhausted. I have been unable to make satisfactory progress toward my degree. I have been vocal about racial issues on campus since my first year, and I am almost always expected to be involved in fixing these issues on top of my responsibilities as a graduate student. I do not have the resources, compensation, or even qualifications to perform all of the work that is clearly expected of me by this committee and by much of the Caltech Community. These experiences have made my continuing participation in the Naming Task Force untenable.

The Naming Task Force has set great store by the Honor Code, and has invoked the Honor Code to require confidentiality regarding the committee's proceedings. The Honor Code states: "No member of the Caltech community shall take unfair advantage of any other member of the Caltech community." Unfortunately, I feel that my continued silence on this issue would actually constitute a violation of the Honor Code on the part of the committee, who would use my name and standing as a Black student leader to provide credibility to its proceedings. I owe it to my fellow students and to all marginalized people at Caltech to speak out about what I see as a gross failure on the part of the Institute to address the issue of renaming with this particular committee.

Regards,
Sarah Sam
Neurobiology PhD Candidate
President of the Black Scientists and Engineers of Caltech