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## The symbolism of our building names

2 messages

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Fri, Jun 5, 2020 at 10:06 AM

To: president@caltech.edu, Vice Provost for Education &lt;vpe@caltech.edu&gt;

Cc: "Anandkumar, Animashree (Anima)" &lt;anima@caltech.edu&gt;, "Vissapragada, Shreyas" &lt;svissapr@caltech.edu&gt;

Dear President Rosenbaum and Professor Weinstein,

Inspired by your call to action -- that we have "much work [to do] to create the diverse and inclusive environment we all desire" at Caltech -- we would like to bring to your attention a concrete action regarding a difficult era of our Institute's history that students must encounter whenever they visit the library or grab a bite to eat for lunch. We believe this action will help make Caltech a more welcoming environment for all.

The painful era of Caltech's history to which we refer is chronicled in 59 boxes of the Special Collections in the Caltech Archives: the Human Betterment Foundation [1]. From 1928 to 1942, this foundation advocated for forced sterilization of socially and mentally "unfit" populations, which in practice disproportionately targeted Black and Brown communities, Jewish communities, those who were disabled or deemed mentally unwell, and certainly those at the intersections of these identities [2]. Upon the death of founder E. S. Gosney and the dissolution of this bastion of American eugenics, the assets of the Human Betterment Foundation were transferred to Caltech to establish the Gosney Research Fund, "the income from which [was] devoted in perpetuity to the promotion of research into the biological bases of human qualities. [3]" In other words, the funds were meant to further the projects of eugenics and white supremacy at our Institute.

There is a reason our Institute was entrusted with the Gosney funds: Caltech was ready to carry out these projects. Our first president Robert A. Millikan, for whom our library is named, was among the first board members of the Human Betterment Foundation [4]. Harry Chandler, for whom our dining hall is named, was also a board member [4], as was Albert Ruddock (namesake of the undergraduate house) [4]. To our knowledge, the Gosney Research Fund no longer exists, but the legacy of the Human Betterment Foundation still echoes across campus in brass lettering.

In recent years Caltech has renewed its focus on building a diverse student body and a commitment to mental wellness. This is unquestionably a good thing. But the names on these buildings -- Millikan Library, Chandler Dining Hall, Ruddock House -- remind us that Caltech was built in opposition to these values. As they currently exist, these spaces are antithetical to the idea that, as Professor Weinstein rightly states in her email, "diversity and inclusion are essential to the scientific enterprise." What does it mean to recruit a diverse coalition of students and faculty if the buildings in which they study, in which they eat, in which they live, are perpetual reminders of a time when they were unwelcome at the Institute?

There is a solution: re-name the buildings. We ask that Caltech simply remove the few brass letters that encode years of suffering, and add new ones celebrating our stated commitment to diversity and inclusion. (Of course, procedurally, this is an oversimplification. But we argue that it is Caltech's moral obligation, considering the history detailed above, to contend with the complications.)

Maybe our community can soon study at Venerable Library, named for Grant Venerable '32 (BS), the first Black student to graduate from Caltech [5]. Venerable notably applied to live in a Caltech student house, but "Robert Millikan took this to the Board of Trustees, because he was concerned about whether a colored student should be permitted to live there. [5]"

Maybe our community can soon dine at LuValle Dining Hall, named for James LuValle '40 (PhD), the first Black man to earn a PhD from Caltech [6]. In addition to his academic accomplishments, Dr. LuValle notably won a bronze medal at the 1936 Olympics in Berlin, Germany [6], a direct refutation of the Nazi regime for which Harry Chandler published a defense in his Los Angeles Times [7].

We are actively in conversation with the undergraduates at Ruddock House. Maybe there, too, our community will see a welcome change.

In the coming months, as we plan our return to campus from the pandemic, we have the chance to return to a new Caltech -- a better Caltech. We strongly believe that by re-naming these buildings we can move our Institute towards that brighter future.

Sincerely, Shreyas Vissapragada and Dawna Bagherian

- [1] [Collection: ES Gosney Papers And Records Of The Human Betterment Foundation](#)
- [2] [Sterilization for human betterment; a summary of results of 6,000 operations in California, 1909-1929.](#)
- [3] [The Gosney Research Fund](#)
- [4] [How Proponents of Forced Sterilization Convinced Everyday Californians to Support Their Cause](#)
- [5] [Book Fund Honors First Black Student](#)
- [6] [The History of Caltech's Underrepresented Students](#)
- [7] [Instituting Eugenics in California](#)

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**Anandkumar, Animashree (Anima)** <anima@caltech.edu>

Sat, Jun 6, 2020 at 5:55 PM

To: "Bagherian, Dawna P." <dawna@caltech.edu>, "president@caltech.edu" <president@caltech.edu>, Vice Provost for Education <vpe@caltech.edu>

Cc: "Vissapragada, Shreyas" <svissapr@caltech.edu>

Thank you Dawna for bringing this to our attention. I completely agree that names are powerful symbols. We cannot get rid of the legacies of racism and sexism, unless we get rid of names of people that promoted them.

I can say from my own personal experiences that name changes can bring about a powerful social change and pave a more inclusive path ahead. A few years ago, I pushed for the change of AI conference NIPS (which infact was started right here at Caltech), whose acronym was used to make sexist jokes at the conferences. I was personally subject to this kind of behavior and I know this stopped many young women from attending such toxic events.

Fighting for the name change was an uphill battle because a lot of people were highly dismissive of the impact it would have. And they didn't want to let go of the tradition. NIPS is a name they cherished, and they just were not ready to give that up, even if it meant creating a more welcoming atmosphere.

I created a petition on [change.org](#) and it garnered immense support. All the media attention also put pressure on the committee. They realized that they could not just sweep it under the rug. More importantly, the vicious trolling that I and other women faced online was eye opening to many of the senior researcher. They didn't realize what we were battling every day when we attended these events. So, it brought about immense awareness to the community.

At the end of it we reached a compromise of renaming it as NeurIPS. But more importantly were the discussions that followed on how to create a better environment. We now have a diversity and inclusion committee. We have a variety of affinity groups : women in ML, black in AI, latinx in AI, queer in AI and disability in AI. They hold poster sessions that are open for everyone to attend. Last NeurIPS, the opening talk was led by Prof. Celeste Kidd who is named as one of the Times Up survivor and she got a standing ovation after talking about the #meToo movement. This would have been unimaginable just a years ago, given how terrible the environment was.

So, in summary, I believe that we can leapfrog and create sweeping social changes by doing seemingly minor things like changing names.

I hope we can use this opportunity to create a new beginning and rid us of our shameful past.

I look forward to hear from you!

Regards

Anima.

12/20/2020

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