

Dear Higher Education

LETTERS FROM THE SOCIAL JUSTICE MOUNTAIN

How a Name Can Change

BOB LEONARD

Dear Higher Education,

I was surprised when I was asked to chair the Council on Virginia Tech History. I'm a theatre maker, albeit deeply committed to community engagement and partnering across difference, and I had no idea how my name might have surfaced in the upper reaches of the provost's office for this kind of assignment. When I learned the purpose of the Council was to gather personal stories from a fully inclusive range of people who had ever been a part of Virginia Tech since its beginnings, however, I jumped on the opportunity. The Council was formed to prepare for the celebration of Virginia Tech's 150th Anniversary, its Sesquicentennial, in 2022, and it seemed like an exciting and most worthwhile endeavor to locate that celebration around personal stories and not simply the recounting of the institutional journey. That was nearly five years before the official Sesquicentennial. There were many more surprises to come.

The Council was made up of about 25 members. There were university level administrators from the Office of Inclusion and Diversity, University Libraries, Facilities, Alumni Relations, and University Relations. There were faculty from several disciplines including History, of course, but also Sociology, English, Appalachian Studies, Biomedical Engineering, Public and International Affairs, and Performing Arts. Student representation was from undergraduate as well as graduate programs. We were a lively bunch, with a broad range of interests in the project – some with strong inclination to celebrate, some wondering what this might really be about, some wondering if they actually were or even wanted to be a “Hokie” despite all the normal social pressure to live up to the school mascot's enthusiastic pride. Over the course of a semester's worth of regular meetings, the Council lit on 6 projects that would research, design, and implement a variety of “products” to be launched during the Sesquicentennial year. These projects were quite ambitious, each peopled with enthusiastic teams of faculty, staff, and graduate and undergraduate students from even more widely diverse disciplines – Landscape Architecture, Rhetoric, Computer Science, Dance, Engineering, Visual Arts, Architecture, Biology, Religion and Culture, Science Education, Simulation and Gaming, Political Science, and on.

I learned that the president of Virginia Tech had, some years earlier, encouraged and provided funding for the English department's creation of a story-gathering team under the leadership of a faculty member passionately committed to the value and practice of story as an essential element of community building. The president was interested in reaching out to alumni and former faculty and staff in order to strengthen former Hokies participation in university fund raising campaigns. By the time the Council was formed, this team, called VT Stories, already holding a rich cache of stories as well as effective field-tested practices, was prepared and ready to become a key asset for the Council's strategies, along with several historians long committed to deep research unearthing multiple perspectives and unique experiences through tales and stories from times long gone. We were amply prepared to supply the Council's production projects with stories and experiences from a multitude of perspectives about, and relationships with the university.

We were plenty busy. After the first semester's commitment to visioning the project, the Council itself shifted to a more supervisory function, meeting roughly once a semester to hear and advise on progress, while daily

work shifted to the individual project teams. To keep the overall project focused and on track, we formed an Executive group, made up of the chair of the Council, the Vice President for Strategic Affairs and Diversity, an expert historian of Virginia Tech history, a staff person from the Office of Strategic Affairs, and a Graduate Assistant assigned to the Council. This group met regularly, at least every two or three weeks, more as needed. The Council chair met with each project leaders, as needed, and periodically called a gathering of project leaders to gain from cross-project learning exchange and problem solving.

As we advanced, the research deepened. The projects moved through research phases to recruiting practical engagement with multiple resources on and off campus. The project teams demonstrated preliminary draft production elements for invited review. The Council was hearing stories from recent alumni with tales of transition from college to career; quarry workers who for generations have excavated and carved the limestone (known affectionately as Hokie Stone) used across so much of the campus; stories from retired faculty, staff, and alumni who lived through the campus havoc of the Vietnam War era; stories from those alumni, retired faculty and staff who had been pioneers in moving the university from a Southern white male military, agricultural and engineering school – led in the institution’s early decades by former Confederate officers – step by difficult step to a more and more open institution, however slowly, through the first admission of women students, Asian students, Jews on the faculty, African American students, the first public recognition that there were gay students at Tech. The months of the Council’s work became years. The COVID 19 pandemic overtook us. The brutal slaying of one Black person after another by police and neighborhood watch volunteers became a near din.

In early June 2020, our president called on the Council to address and respond to the issue of renaming a dorm that had been named after an 1896 alumnus and long-time, highly regarded engineering faculty member who had, among other things, constructed a system that regulated all the clocks on campus, helping to keep order in class times. That same faculty member, when a student at Tech, had been publicly touted in the 1896 year-book as a leader – “the father of terror” – of a campus group called the K.K.K.

Now I had heard of this matter of renaming the dorm. In fact, the issue of this particular dorm had been a campus concern for more than 20 years. The issue had been raised and considered by numerous people on and off campus. On more than one occasion it had been taken up by Virginia Tech leadership, only to drift off to an obscure death in the far reaches of bureaucratic non-action. But I had not been told that the Council was in place with the purpose to take up the issue, review the situation and offer a resolution for action to the administration.

In 2018 during that first semester of the Council’s life, I did hear, in a kind of quiet “inside information” frame offered as private advice, that the administration had wanted to create an ad hoc committee to be in place should the renaming matter reemerge. I heard that those who were asked to serve on that committee had quietly declined, on the grounds that the recommendations of previous such committees had been ignored, shunted or otherwise disregarded. I heard, further, that there was a possible, though unspoken line between the abandoned effort for an ad hoc committee and the creation the Council as a possible forum, beneath the ostensible purpose of the Sesquicentennial, to be in place for this call, should the occasion arise. But nothing was said about this directly to me or to the Council at the original formation of the group. I was curious about this as I received quiet “heads up” advice but left it as something for later, when/if it should ever actually arrive as an official agenda.

Then in 2020 the issue did, indeed, reemerge from its cycle of obscurity. This time in the form of a public, on-line petition with national participation that helped fuel on-campus actions for change. There were thousands of signatures: current students, alumni, concerned citizens from around the country, oldsters nearly worn out by raising their name only to have been forgotten, young people who had just realized the implications of naming a dorm that houses engineering students after an otherwise long forgotten engineering professor who had also been an advocate for the Klan. The intensity of the petition - its notable numbers and its clarity of purpose –

joined the national turmoil surrounding the killings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery, and brought the matter to a boil on campus. The president framed his call to the Council as a response to campus demonstrations and rallies by students, faculty, staff, and alumni supporting the Black Lives Matter movement and calling for the question of renaming to be taken up again.

The Council was, in fact, well positioned and fully prepared to answer the call. With two years of research and story gathering under our belt, we had access to and familiarity with an inclusive range of facts, experiences and perspectives from the university's earliest beginnings through the many changes that had occurred in Virginia Tech's evolution to the 21st century. We understood the exceptional value of matching the expertise of skilled and talented scholars with the expertise of lived experience. As a deliberative body, the Council had established a reliable level of trust and openness within its membership through the process of having worked through multiple agendas with complex and contentious topics. We shared a vision of how our history not only leads to our future, knowing our history prepares us to help shape our future. We were organized and fully functional, able to meet the demands of this urgent agenda.

We met three times in June and early July. We were asked to consider and recommend whether renaming should happen and, if so, to recommend a new name. With ample research, all in hand and commonly shared, on the 20-year history of the issue, including individual stories of the impact of the dorm's name on the students assigned to live in the dorm, as well as credible research on the facts of the dorm's original namesake, we were able to reach unanimous agreement in a single meeting that, in this case, it should. Further, because of the research accomplished and stories gathered, we had immediate and reliable access to exceptionally fitting alternative names to consider. As the president observed in expressing his thanks for the Council's work, our recommendations were based on "input from existing groups, commissions, faculty, staff, students, and alumni within the university community," openly establishing the authority of our recommendations on a highly informed and fully transparent process.

Among the several names of people the Council considered, one African American couple rose the top. Janie and William Hoge had opened their Blacksburg home to the first African American students admitted to Virginia Tech in the 1950s. These six African American men enrolled as engineering students at Tech between 1953 and 1959 were not allowed to live on campus. The Hoge's welcomed them, supported them, and made it possible for them to gain the education they sought. In doing so, they became major contributors to the pioneering efforts of these students, leading the way for Virginia Tech not only to include but to welcome African Americans and all people of color. At the same time, the Hoge's gracious hospitality brought these young men into the embrace of the African American communities of Blacksburg together with the friendships, comfort, enjoyment, and the ordinary avenues of belonging that comes with community. It seemed particularly apt for the dorm that now houses two "living learning" communities in Engineering, the very area of study these pioneering students sought, to honor the exceptional actions and contributions of Janie and William Hoge.

During our deliberations considering the case of this one dorm, the Council recognized that a second bore the name of a historic personage, briefly the president of then Virginia Agricultural and Mechanical College and Polytechnic Institute (now Virginia Tech), who was recognized in the early 20th century as a national advocate for the practices of eugenics and white supremacy. On the basis of the Council's on-going review, the Council recommended removing the namesake of this second residency hall and that it be renamed to honor the first Black student at Tech permitted to live on campus – James Leslie Whitehurst Jr, who graduated from Virginia Tech in 1963. Not only did this young Tech alumnus go on to become a fighter pilot with the U.S. Air Force in Vietnam, a major in the Air Force Reserve in Virginia, a member of the Air National Guard, and an attorney leading a private practice in Richmond, Virginia, Mr. Whitehurst became the first African American to be appointed to the Virginia Tech Board of Visitors, serving from 1970 to 1974.

The Council's recommendations went first to the university's Commemorative Tributes Committee, where its careful research and deliberative reasoning successfully withstood any challenges. Following that review, the recommendations met the approval of the president, who forwarded his recommendation for both actions to the Virginia Tech Board of Visitors who voted final approval on Thursday, August 13, 2020.

The surprises that came to the Council over the four-year build up to our Sesquicentennial in 2022 were eye-opening in the large scale of national perspectives as well as the immediate scale of individuals' personal experiences. A stand-out example for me are the research findings on the source of funding for land grant universities across the nation. I must admit that, before this assignment, I personally knew next to nothing about the actual history of the land grant institution and, if asked, would have harbored the uninformed and wholly erroneous guess that the founding grant for land came from federal land within the state of the intended new institution. In fact, the Morrill Acts were funded entirely by the sale of federal land west of the Mississippi, land procured in part through the Jefferson administration's Louisiana Purchase from the French, but ultimately obtained from Native American tribes through occasional treaties, Indian Land Cessions, and simple seizure. The sale of this land to fund land grant institutions was of large numbers of small parcels spread across huge expanses. Recent research reveals the sale of which bundle of parcels funded which institution, allowing the Council to publish a map connecting the originating sources in counties across several western states with the Blacksburg campus.

Similarly, although on reflection an obvious and practically unavoidable reality, it was equally mind-expanding to learn that the first five presidents of Virginia Tech were former officers in the Confederate Army, as were many, if not most of the teaching faculty over the first decades of the institution's history. There are many buildings on campus named after our institution's early leaders. There are those that might consider whether all such should be reviewed for renaming, unless we understand the importance of not simply recognizing but honoring our actual history where honor is due as opposed to trying to hide or dismiss its actuality. Why then did the Council elect to recommend renaming of these two dormitories? The Council drew on a comprehensive understanding supported by extensive research findings and gathered personal experiences that can only be gained over considerable time to evaluate the merits of these specific cases. This kind of standing could not be accomplished effectively by ad hoc committees considerably more subject to the whims of the social moment. Further, the Council's originating charge to publish its findings in a variety of broad public forums puts these histories into public conversation, allowing for particular choices to be grounded in the broad body politic, rather than the act of temporary administrative units. In preparing for its Sesquicentennial, Virginia Tech may have stumbled (or insightfully designed) its way into recognizing the importance of an on-going public conversation about our history supported by the expertise of both academic scholarship and broadly inclusive personal experience.

*With care and gratitude,
Bob Leonard
Professor of Theatre*

About the author

Robert H. (Bob) Leonard is a theatre maker, writer, teacher and arts organizer at Virginia Tech, Blacksburg, VA, where he is the primary advisor for the MFA program in Applied Theatre and Public Dialogue (formerly the Directing and Public Dialogue program).