

Princeton students demand removal of Woodrow Wilson's name from buildings

by **Ellen Brait**
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Students at Princeton University have called for the removal of Woodrow Wilson's name from the School of Public and International Affairs, the latest development in a growing trend across American campuses as students home in on historical figures and their past intolerance.

The Black Justice League, an African American civil rights group at Princeton, orchestrated a walkout by approximately 200 students and staged a sit-in last week at the office of the university president, Christopher L. Eisgruber.

Ozioma Obi-Onuoha, a senior studying politics at Princeton and a member of the Black Justice League, said she initially joined the group to help with "shedding light on how structural racism exists and operates on campus".

"This university is charged to educate students," Obi-Onuoha said. "And without having these standards, without ensuring that all students are treated with the same amount of respect and humanity, and without showing robust commitment to elevating the contributions, histories and experiences of black folks and other people of color, Princeton (and many other universities) are failing to thoroughly educate students."

The Black Justice League presented a list of demands, which included renaming the public policy school and residential college, mandatory training for staff and faculty on cultural competency, the inclusion of classes on the history of marginalized people in distribution requirements, and "a cultural space on campus dedicated specifically to black students". They also asked that the university "publicly acknowledge the racist legacy of Woodrow Wilson".

A counterpetition on Change.org – titled Protect Plurality, Historical Perspective and Academic Speech at Princeton – argued that "any steps to purge this campus of its

Wilsonian legacy creates a dangerous precedent and slippery slope that will be cited by future students who seek to purge the past of those who fail to live up to modern standards of morality”.

Wilson was US president from 1913 to 1921 and led the country during the first world war. He also oversaw the resegregation of multiple agencies of the federal government and was a vocal advocate for the Ku Klux Klan.

Protesters have seized on the fact that he did not admit any black students to Princeton during his tenure as president of the school – despite Harvard and Yale having admitted them decades prior – and wrote: “The whole temper and tradition of the place are such that no Negro has ever applied.”

“We wanted to draw attention not only to the fact that he was, even for that time, extremely racist, but that his racist legacy is never acknowledged explicitly and publicly on campus, although he is touted and applauded for his contributions,” Obi-Onuoha said. “Additionally, we don’t believe that removing his name is a form of erasure, because we’re also asking for his history to be acknowledged permanently by the university, in its entirety.”

Eisgruber agreed to start discussions with trustees about the students’ demands a day after the protests last week. He also said he would push for the removal of a mural of the former president from the residential college’s dining room.

The protest held by Princeton students is the most recent in a string of similar occurrences at college campuses across the United States. On 14 November, the current president of Georgetown University announced that the school is renaming two buildings on campus because their namesakes, former presidents of the school, helped pay off campus debt in the 1830s by organizing the sale of Jesuit-owned slaves.

Thomas Jefferson next?

Statues of Thomas Jefferson, the third president of the United States, have also been targeted at the University of Missouri at Columbia and the College of William and Mary, according to Inside Higher Ed. The statues have been covered with yellow sticky notes, calling Jefferson a “rapist”, “racist” and “slave owner”. No group has stepped forward and claimed responsibility for the notes at William and Mary but the school is not treating the incident as vandalism.

“A university setting is the very place where civil conversations about difficult and important issues should occur,” a spokesperson told Inside Higher Ed.

“Nondestructive sticky notes are a form of expression compatible with our tradition of free expression.”

The University of Missouri saw its Jefferson statue receive attention following rising tensions last month after black students cited incidents of racial harassment and cultural issues on campus. A debate arose about the prominence of the Jefferson statue on campus, with those asking for the statue to be removed placing notes on its surface and creating a change.org petition. A counter-protest resulted, in which students draped the statue in an American flag and posted the hashtag #StandWithJefferson on Twitter.

“I personally think that the conversations that have ignited at universities were inevitable,” Obi-Onuoha said. “As a student at a predominantly white institution, feeling as though I have to convince people of discrimination and fight to be seen as human is tiring and frustrating. At a certain point, students will respond to this feeling, especially when they’re affirmed by archival history, and even more so when they feel as though institutions don’t (or won’t) respond fast enough to reasonable change.”