

Working Group on Principles of Commemoration and Renaming

Final Report

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I. Mandate and Process

In December 2017, Provost and Vice-Principal (Academic) Christopher Manfredi asked Professor Anja Geitmann, dean of the Faculty of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences and vice-principal, Macdonald Campus, and Professor Robert Leckey, dean of the Faculty of Law, to co-chair a Working Group on Principles of Commemoration and Renaming (the “Working Group”). The Working Group’s full mandate appears as Appendix I to this report. The heart of the mandate reads as follows:

The Working Group on Principles of Commemoration and Renaming is tasked with undertaking an examination of McGill’s relationship (past and current) with underrepresented groups, in the context of a broad-reaching reflection of our institutional history, with a view to recommending a set of principles by which the University may be guided in its decision-making with respect to any future commemorative or renaming initiative. The working group will take cues from Universities that have already undertaken similar exercises (such as Yale University and Dalhousie University).

The mandate instructed the Working Group to consult widely across the McGill community, including alumni, as well as with representative communities across Montreal. A final report and recommendations were to reach the provost and vice-principal (academic) by 6 December 2018.

With a view to balancing representation and workability, Provost Manfredi in February 2018 finalized membership at 14 individuals from faculty, administrative staff, undergraduate and graduate students from the downtown and Macdonald campuses, as well as alumni. Student representatives were selected after an open call for expressions of interest. The list of members appears as [Appendix II](#).

The Working Group's research assistant compiled a memorandum summarizing relevant approaches taken by peer universities, including Yale University and Dalhousie University.

The Working Group devised a consultation plan in two main steps, upstream and downstream of the preparation of a draft report. Upstream, it issued calls for written submissions and for expressions of interest in presenting at a session of hearings held on 29 March 2018. The Working Group sent invitations to students, alumni, and community groups, requesting their participation in hearings on 29 March 2018. Several students and alumni groups confirmed their presence. At those hearings, the Working Group heard from seven individuals representing five student or alumni groups at its hearings. It received twelve written submissions. In the interests of broad consultation, it continued accepting submissions after the initial deadline. The Working Group regretted that the invited community groups, mostly representing the interests of racialized or Indigenous communities off campus, did not follow up on its invitations. During the summer, it continued consultations, meeting with Indigenous members of the McGill community. Downstream, after circulation of its draft report, the Working Group held Town Halls on the downtown and Macdonald campuses on [12 and 26 September 2018](#), respectively. [Appendix III](#) lists all submissions received and all groups or individuals that presented to the Working Group.

II. Context

At the outset, the Working Group reviewed McGill's mission statement and principles.

MISSION

The mission of McGill University is the advancement of learning and the creation and dissemination of knowledge, by offering the best possible education, by carrying out research and scholarly activities judged to be excellent by the highest international standards, and by providing service to society.

PRINCIPLES

In fulfilling its mission, McGill University embraces the principles of academic freedom, integrity, responsibility, equity, and inclusiveness.

McGill provides service to society not only by researching and teaching, but also by leading by example. A commitment to leading by example informs McGill's recent commitments and actions in relation to sustainability. Logically, such a commitment should also inform its approach to commemoration and renaming. McGill strives to play a distinctive role in society as a leader and exemplar of moral progress.

The Working Group's efforts unfolded against a context in which a number of institutions have been pressed to rename buildings or awards that bear the names of historical figures whose legacies are at odds with contemporary moral, ethical, and political standards. Institutions around the globe have

mandated administrative entities to establish principles on commemoration and renaming, including [Amherst College](#), [Stanford University](#), [University of Michigan](#), [University of Oregon](#), and [Yale University](#). Other institutions have created bodies to guide a governing board in resolving a particular controversy around naming or commemoration, such as [Brown University](#), [Georgetown University](#), [Harvard University](#), [Princeton University](#), and the [University of North Carolina](#). In the case of Brown, the connection to the slave trade has led to calls to rename the institution.

At McGill, the name of the men's varsity sports teams, the Redmen, has drawn critical attention over decades. Most recently, in June 2017, the [final report](#) of the Provost's Task Force on Indigenous Studies and Indigenous Education recommended a consultation process that would lead to a renaming of those teams. There has been increasing discussion, including in the media, about James McGill's history as a slave-owner. Moreover, some members of the McGill community question the appropriateness of continuing to honour Stephen Leacock with a building in his name, given his political and social views.

Ours is not the first exercise examining matters relating to McGill's relationship with groups underrepresented within the university. In the 1960s and 1970s, McGill responded to calls that it recognize its location in a province of which French is the majority language (and, under provincial law, the official language). McGill addressed criticisms that it represented the viewpoint of a privileged elite with insufficient regard to its surrounding communities. More recently, our work follows the [final report](#) of the Principal's Task Force on Diversity, Excellence and Community Engagement (2011), the [report](#) of the Ad Hoc Working Group on Systemic Discrimination (2016), the [final report](#) of the Principal's Task Force on Respect and Inclusion in Campus Life (2018), as well as the report of the Provost's Task Force just mentioned. Indeed, several participants in our consultations shared a sense of fatigue and cynicism, given the number of consultative exercises and a perceived shortage of consequential follow-up action. Some suggested that this sense might have depressed the rate of participation in our consultations. Specifically, some of our interlocutors expressed bewilderment and dismay that the 2017 recommendation to launch a process with a view to renaming the men's varsity teams had led not to action in that direction, but to a further consultative process at a higher level of abstraction. While some fatigue and cynicism on the part of individuals and groups seeking full entry into large, slow-moving institutions may be unavoidable, we regard the levels of these sentiments as worrisome. It is incumbent on McGill to act.

III. Proposed Principles

We regard the following principles as consistent with McGill's Mission and Principles. Indeed, they flow from them. The principles follow in five sections. The principles in Section A include general notions that came to guide the Working Group's deliberations. We intend them to condition the application of the more concretely action-oriented principles that follow in the succeeding sections.

Before we proceed, a word about terminology may be helpful. In what follows, we often refer to a "practice or state of affairs." While cumbersome, this expression allows us to address simultaneously the broad range of matters we have identified as coming within our mandate. One example of a "practice" is naming a building or a scholarship. Another is commissioning and displaying a portrait. At least in theory, a practice flows from an official decision, began at a particular moment, and could cease at another moment. Admittedly, the historical evidence for these elements of a practice may be more readily available in some cases than in others. By "state of affairs," we refer to a diffuse accumulation of

facts, actions, and inactions. States of affairs may include the following: “No building on the McGill campuses is named after a racialized person”; “McGill does not openly acknowledge that its namesake, James McGill, owned slaves”; “The McGill Web site celebrates the trail blazing of white female graduates, but not of Indigenous or racialized graduates.” In contrast with a practice, a state of affairs likely does not result from an identifiable decision or begin at a particular moment. It is possible that altering or ending a series of actions will require sustained interventions of multiple kinds.

A. Orientation

The names and images on McGill’s campuses matter. Place names contribute to shaping our society. They have the power to shift our thinking and our ways of seeing and understanding where we have been, where we are, and with whom we are here. Place names have the power to continue excluding communities that are underrepresented due to systemic barriers or to advance those communities’ inclusion. McGill sends messages through the way it names things and the choices about whose images it displays. Names allow some members of the McGill community to see themselves and to feel at home on the campuses. Members of groups historically included and represented at McGill may be largely unconscious of these processes. Conversely, the presence of some names and the collective absence of others may make it harder for other members of the McGill community to see themselves and to feel at home on the campuses.

The commemoration and naming practices manifest on the campuses may cause harm in different ways. A practice or name that is offensive, or that over time has become offensive, may produce harm. So, if it is widespread and severe enough, may silence on a particular harmful legacy or a group’s relative invisibility.

Names and images provide an opportunity to educate. They memorialize some stories and not others. There is always a process of selection in what gets remembered and honoured and what gets forgotten. McGill has the power, however, to intervene in that process. As an educational institution, McGill has the opportunity to educate through the narrative of its history. Uncovering stories long left untold can be powerful and revelatory.

We should make our histories more inclusive, rather than erasing history. Submissions and presentations told the Working Group repeatedly about problems arising from silence, invisibility, and erasure. Some problems relate to positive contributions made by communities whom McGill’s official iconography and self-representation neglect to include or honour. Others relate to problematic aspects of individuals whom McGill honours. Participants in our consultations insisted that McGill must address and confront its historical legacies of wrong towards historically subordinated groups, rather than hiding from them.

The question of appropriate acknowledgement emerged as logically prior to the question of renaming. That is, the remedy to problematic silence and invisibility may be not a name change, but a breaking of that silence and an end to the invisibility. In effect, in a number of the examples raised to the Working Group, the path for constructive action involves complicating prevailing narratives and providing greater context, rather than simply removing a name. As an individual said to the Working Group: “Let us cease to glorify what is not glorious, but let us not forget either.” In another’s words, “Embrace history, warts and all: don’t erase it.” Renaming is a consequential gesture that has the potential to erase history. It is not the first option when a name has become problematic. Indeed, it may be possible to rehabilitate a

formerly problematic name if the new interpretation or its significance becomes sufficiently public, durable, and impactful. Such rehabilitation may be difficult, especially where a formerly problematic name has high visibility outside McGill.

At the same time, properly made, name changes may be not an erasure of history, but an acknowledgement of lessons from history and restorative gesture towards reconciliation. In special cases, renaming may be the sole satisfactory measure. In some cases, renaming alone may be insufficient to address the legacy of harm generated by the name. For example, the Working Group heard of the replacement of the former sports team names including a racial slur against Indigenous women (“Squaws” or “Super Squaws”) without meaningful acknowledgement of the harm caused. In some cases, as a participant told us, “Just changing the name is not enough.”

The Working Group believes that the moral courage demonstrated in grappling with McGill’s history may increase the respect and appreciation towards it on the part of some alumni and other stakeholders.

Language and contexts may change over time. We propose an analysis more nuanced than judging historical figures by today’s standards. We acknowledge that historical figures operated in a social and political context different from ours. Similarly, we operate in a social and political context different from the ones in which future generations will judge our actions.

When commemoration of individuals is called into question, it is important, first, to attempt to assess the individuals’ acts and views by the standards of their time and, as the case may be, by the standards of the time when McGill started honouring them. The case for altering the commemoration of an individual will be stronger if the individual’s acts and views were objectionable in the past, at their historical moment or when McGill began that commemoration.

Yet the inquiry does not end with the history. McGill’s current aspirations, needs, and responsibilities to those who make up its communities may be vastly different from those that defined McGill in the past. The widely received meaning or significance of a word may change over time. Alterations to names, imagery, and practices on the part of peer institutions may provide evidence of such change in broader society. So may the prevailing interpretation of an individual’s principal legacy, by which we mean the major accomplishments for which we might remember that individual. The context in which McGill operates may also change. Consequently, a name or other commemorative practice, however benign its origins or the intent of those who adopted it, may become an obstacle to the pursuit of McGill’s mission.

Feelings matter. Participants in our consultations expressed a variety of strong feelings. While it may be more comfortable purporting to stick to facts, we regard acknowledging and grappling with feelings as relevant in this context, even unavoidable. Some participants expressed to the Working Group a strong sense of alienation, even of trauma, that they attributed to the absence or invisibility of people such as themselves in McGill’s material and immaterial environment. A racialized individual who has worked at the university for many years reported never feeling “at home” at McGill. An Indigenous varsity athlete told us that seeing the Redmen jerseys in the gym felt like a dagger and that being called a Redman makes him sick. Other participants expressed a strong sense of pride in McGill or the unit within the university with which they connect more closely. For example, current and past athletes who presented to the Working Group conveyed a sense of pride in the Redmen and the teams’ records and traditions.

They connected their sense of pride not only to the teams' history and accomplishments, but to the name.

The Working Group suggests that McGill, in acknowledging that feelings and perception matter, blend subjective and objective approaches. McGill cannot reasonably act in response to an individual's idiosyncratic reading. Feelings will merit greater weight in decision making when they are demonstrably shared and relatively enduring, rather than fleeting. What constitutes critical mass will differ from case to case, as a matter of judgment. In the Working Group's view, it is unrealistic and unreasonable to require scientific proof of feelings – be they of pride or alienation vis-à-vis the status quo – for such feelings to factor into decision making.

As it advances its mission, particularly as it embraces the principles of equity and inclusiveness, McGill needs to be aware that the experiences of historically excluded or otherwise marginalized groups may foreseeably lead them to understand meaning or significance differently than might groups who have long operated as "insiders." According weight to the voices of such groups is important, especially since McGill's decision-making structures may not traditionally have done so and such groups may not have been present in significant numbers within the McGill community or its leadership circles at the time decisions were made. It was reported to the Working Group that the perception of McGill's legacy towards Indigenous peoples led communities to steer Indigenous students towards other universities. Feelings expressed on the part of historically excluded or otherwise marginalized groups do not trump the feelings expressed by others. It would be wrong, however, to allow the feelings of pride and connection expressed by historically included groups to determine decision making at the expense of enlarging the McGill community and the constituencies that might feel included within it.

Maintaining the status quo is a choice with potential consequences. It is natural to scrutinize a proposed change for its costs and benefits. The Working Group took seriously the idea that keeping things as they are is not costless. Depending on the case, doing so may cause reputational harm, continue to harm underrepresented groups, and otherwise impede pursuit of the mission. In short, once members of the McGill community have credibly called a practice or situation into question, a full consideration of the issue cannot focus solely on the proposed change, but must also assess the consequences of maintaining the status quo.

Determinations on these matters may be contentious and imperfect. McGill's past and current relationship with underrepresented groups, in the context of a broad-reaching reflection of our institutional history, is complicated. A posture of humility is necessary. While McGill prides itself on a tradition of excellence, these issues may not have a single "right answer." Moreover, it is unrealistic to aspire to achieving consensus. Bringing McGill's commemoration and naming practices into line with contemporary social, political, and ethical standards will be challenging and, in some cases, controversial. McGill needs to show leadership and moral courage by acting in a principled fashion, even – and especially – in the face of disagreement. It must also be transparent in its processes and decision making, so that stakeholders now and in the future may appropriately assess them.

Commemoration and renaming are part of a broader picture. The Working Group heard affirmations that commemoration and renaming will be empty gestures if not accompanied by substantive change to McGill's administration and culture. Limited by its mandate, the Working Group cannot address the full

range of changes that may be necessary as McGill pursues its mission in the light of its principles. The Working Group regards its work not as the end of the road, but as a step on a longer journey.

B. McGill's Face and Space

For nearly two centuries, McGill has been naming assets such as buildings and otherwise honouring individuals for their contributions to society, to McGill, or both. Over those centuries, groups did not all enjoy equal access to resources and privilege, nor do they today. A consequence is that the names and images of McGill's campuses – including sculptures and painted portraits – may form, collectively, a museum of privilege. A number of participants in our consultations spoke of the McGill environment as embodying not only white privilege, but also white supremacy. The *New Oxford American Dictionary* defines the latter as “the belief that white people are superior to those of all other races, especially the black race, and should therefore dominate society.” One participant suggested that the university's histories and the “deeply racialized marking and marking of its space” privilege white bodies as the “natural inhabitants of McGill's academic and social landscape.” More specifically, for this participant, McGill's “geographies, landscaping, adornment, and commemoration practices” constitute a white male subject as “the ideal person who is served by and belongs at McGill.”

To be sure, the images and names of McGill's campuses can never exhaustively represent the university's history or its current community. Nevertheless, McGill should prioritize creating a campus environment that promotes a full and nuanced view of its history and context. To do so, it should draw on credible scholarship and the ongoing input of multiple stakeholders. Tools at McGill's disposal include signage, library and museum displays, teaching, public outreach, and online resources. Avoiding historical erasure and distortion should guide decision-making at all points.

The Working Group's written and oral submissions pointed to the perceived silence around Indigenous peoples and racialized peoples, including James McGill's slaveholding, as particularly problematic. Some members of the McGill community perceive the campuses as spaces in which the experiences of people like themselves are invisible or erased. The Working Group repeatedly heard the language of emotional and psychological pain, even trauma, in connection with the experience of presence for some in an institution that in their view was established thanks to wealth generated through processes of capitalist imperialism and colonialism and that does not acknowledge these origins. Specifically, **McGill has an immediate responsibility to address glaring silences or omissions regarding Indigenous persons and Black Canadians.** Such a duty aligns with McGill's principles of equity and inclusiveness. We cannot change the past, but we can change the present and the future – as well as how we talk about and contextualize the past. Actions in response to this duty promise to have real, everyday outcomes on McGill's marginalized constituents.

In the face of the occasional tendency to combine claims under an umbrella of equity and inclusion, the Working Group is persuaded of the need for action specific to these two groups. There are general reasons and a shared specific reason for attention to these groups. Regarding Indigenous peoples, the general reason is that the longstanding effective absence of Indigenous peoples from the McGill community – as students, professors, and other staff – reflects this country's practices towards Indigenous peoples. The [final report](#) of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (2015) describes such practices as cultural genocide and crystallizes the role of universities in contributing to repairing the damaged relationships between Canada and its Indigenous peoples. As a university operative for nearly 200 years, McGill has a substantial role to play. Including Indigenous peoples and

celebrating their accomplishments meaningfully within the university requires changing its physical and symbolic landscapes. Regarding Black Canadians, the general reason is that a publicly funded university should serve its surrounding communities, among whom Black Canadians are underrepresented within McGill relative to their population in Montreal.

The more specific reason for attention to Indigenous peoples and Black Canadians comes from the history of James McGill, whose gift of £10,000 led to the university's establishment. James McGill accrued some of his wealth by knowingly trading in slave-produced plantation crops from slave majority sites in the Anglo-Caribbean and he was a slave owner of black and Indigenous people. In a Canadian context of pervasive collective amnesia regarding our colonial histories and specifically our slaving histories, there is an opportunity for McGill to educate and to increase awareness.

On these issues, as on others, a robust response by the university will combine attention to the physical spaces of campus and to intangible symbolism and representations. To alter the physical spaces, the university might commission a monument to acknowledge enslaved people in Canada and the British Caribbean. A monument might anchor a commemorative public space saluting black McGill constituents. Plaques or other commemorative devices on McGill's campuses might similarly acknowledge the university's historical ties to trans-Atlantic slavery. Less tangibly but nevertheless highly visibly, McGill might feature prominently on its Web site a critical history of its founding and of its founder, highlighting James McGill's colonial context and the links between his wealth and slave owning in Montreal and in the West Indies. The Web site might celebrate the achievements within McGill's history of black people, Indigenous people, and other people of colour, as it already does for the ["blazing trails" of women](#). Recruitment scholarships for Indigenous students and black students born within Canada would signal openness and a desire to include groups historically underrepresented. The Working Group heard the suggestion that McGill establish a Department of African Canadian Studies.

Subsequent sections of this report set out the Working Group's recommended approaches for treating calls to change McGill's commemoration practices or to rename something. Those approaches presuppose that an individual or group will submit a request or otherwise trigger the process. McGill has been put on notice that the presence of Indigenous peoples and racialized peoples, including their history within the university, is unjustifiably slight. It would be inappropriate to burden individuals within these groups with the responsibility of launching a process on this point or of demonstrating their underrepresentation in the images and names of McGill's campuses. It is up to McGill to take action and to embody a fuller, richer history of McGill in its campuses.

McGill should diversify the communities represented in the names on our campuses, celebrating a wider range of contributions to McGill and to the world. For example, one participant observed that our internal James McGill Professorships and William Dawson Scholarships, established in 2000, honour significant figures in McGill's history who are already substantially celebrated. Unlike many other cases, this naming does not execute a commitment made by the university in consideration of a donation. It was suggested that there was an opportunity to rename these awards, recognizing other contributors to McGill's history.

When naming new assets, McGill should make effort to recognize marginalized and underrepresented individuals and groups, within the parameters of McGill's [Policy Relating to the Naming of University Assets](#).

C. Change to Commemoration

McGill should alter its commemoration or naming practices where the harm outweighs the good. No equation leads to such a determination. It is a matter of ethical and political judgment, weighing disparate factors. The exercise is difficult because it is foreseeable that some members of the McGill community will experience a practice or state of affairs as good while others will experience it as harmful. The following questions should guide the examination of particular cases.

1. Understanding the Status Quo

- What was the practice or state of affairs' original meaning and significance? What were the intentions in setting it up? What is its justification?
- Is the practice or state of affairs an important source of pride, loyalty, connection, and community building among McGillians?
- Where something is named after a person, is the principal legacy of the person so honoured fundamentally at odds with McGill's mission and principles?
- Where applicable, how significant was the namesake's contributions to McGill?
- What meaning and significance has the practice or state of affairs acquired over time?

2. The Case for Change

- What harm is associated with the practice or state of affairs in question?
 - How severe is the harm, including how widely is it known, within local and broader contexts, and what evidence is there of negative impact?
 - Does the practice or state of affairs impede McGill in carrying out its mission and honouring its principles? For example, does the practice or state of affairs have a negative impact on members of the McGill community or on their sense of belonging to McGill? Does it harm McGill's reputation locally or elsewhere? Does the practice or state of affairs have a negative impact on individuals outside the McGill community? Does the practice or state of affairs reduce McGill's capacity to follow its principles of equity and inclusiveness by broadening membership in the McGill community? What evidence is there that relevant feelings are shared and relatively enduring?
 - Does the practice or state of affairs prolong or intensify past exclusion or other wrongs or harms?

3. Options and Consequences

- What are possible changes to the practice or state of affairs? Is renaming an appropriate solution? How does it compare with others?
- Are there ways to educate and promote reflection by contextualizing the practice or state of affairs?
- What would McGill give up by keeping the practice or state of affairs?
- What would McGill give up by altering the practice or state of affairs?
- Where applicable, have peer institutions that share or have shared the practice or state of affairs indicated by their actions that it no longer aligns with their values?

D. Renaming

Renaming is not the first option when a name has become problematic. Rehabilitating a name may be possible, but in some cases, renaming may be the sole satisfactory measure. Used judiciously, renaming may acknowledge lessons from history and gesture towards reconciliation.

The Working Group regards calls for renaming a building or other object as a subset of calls for a change to commemorative practices. When a name is not that of an individual, the question of the namesake's contributions to McGill and principal legacy do not apply.

E. Process

The Working Group proposes that McGill's process in addressing matters of commemoration and renaming needs to be credible, effective, and transparent.

Credibility requires independence, integrity, and scholarly rigour in reviewing calls for change. It appeared advisable to the Working Group to separate the functions of receiving and reviewing calls for change and of making final decisions on them. More specifically, reviewing calls for change might involve the following: fact-finding, consultations, moral deliberation on the question of whether an established practice or name offends contemporary ethical and political standards, identification of possible outcomes, risk assessment of possible outcomes, and formulation of a recommendation. **We suggest that the principle of independence and integrity calls for a standing committee at arm's length from the Office of the Provost and Vice-Principal (Academic), the Office of the Principal and Vice-Chancellor, and the board of governors.** Such independence would echo Call to Action 20 from the Provost's Task Force.

This committee would receive calls for change, consider them, and make a recommendation regarding them. To carry out such a mandate with integrity, the committee would need to include a diverse membership, including representatives from historically excluded and marginalized groups. Membership might include representatives from student groups serving such groups. The committee should include professors from McGill with credentials in areas relevant to the committee's work, such as historians and art historians. In addition, the committee should include other representatives of the McGill community. The committee would need to be appropriately resourced, notably having the possibility of securing outside expertise where necessary. It would need to take proactive steps to ensure that it hears from marginalized constituents, who may be the most vulnerable, affected by colonial histories, and deterred from participation by the university's normalized whiteness.

While the final decision maker will unavoidably consider a range of factors, including moral and consequential ones, the at-arm's-length body should examine the ethical and moral question raised by the practice or name distinctly from an evaluation of the costs of a change.

Depending on the issue, the provost and vice-principal (academic) or the board of governors would receive the recommendation and decide whether to follow it.

As a standing committee at arm's length from the university administration, this committee would enjoy the perception of more independence than does an ad hoc committee struck by the principal and vice-chancellor in virtue of Section 7.4 of the [Policy Relating to the Naming of University Assets](#).

Effectiveness entails responsiveness and speed. Once the committee has gone through its process, a decision should follow quickly. After a decision, action should follow promptly. The Working Group

heard repeatedly that a perceived lack of action, including delays, has undermined the university's efforts in relation to inclusion. Accordingly, the committee should establish and follow clear timelines.

Transparency demands that, to the greatest extent possible, processes and decision-making rationales be publicly available. So should the methods used and information gathered through research. Such transparency will serve three purposes: it will enable appropriate evaluation by present and future stakeholders; it will dispel a sense of exclusion or secrecy on questions that are necessarily emotional and contentious; and it will offer an educational opportunity regarding McGill's past and present.