



The Wofford College Board of Trustees responds to JEDI recommendations



The college community spent 2020-21 studying its past, present and future.

Background

For nine months, the Wofford College community has participated in a process to review and reflect on our college's past, present and future. This began when students and alumni who are Black, Indigenous and People of Color (BIPOC) started sharing a different Wofford experience, one that did not always live up to the high standards of our founding principles, mission and core values. Wofford College is not afraid of self-reflection, critical thinking and tough conversations, so the Justice, Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (JEDI) task force was formed to lead our research, listening and discussion. The group of 16 on the JEDI task force then worked with a team of student researchers and consultants to benchmark other colleges and universities, research Wofford's history and compile feedback from Wofford students, alumni, faculty and staff. This group presented their final report to President Nayef Samhat and the Wofford College Board of Trustees at the Board's May 2021 meeting, and trustees and the college's administration began reviewing and considering the 30 recommendations presented by the group. Throughout this time, trustees and the college's administration also

heard from dozens of other individuals in response to the process. At the direction of the Board, President Samhat and the administration began an in-depth review and study of all recommendations. This review included an assessment of the college's current status and progress for each recommendation as well as potential next steps. The Board of Trustees gathered in August 2021 to consider and discuss the administration's review and responses to the recommendations. The following message from the Board considers ALL of the research, data from the surveys and listening sessions, emails, calls and letters. The Board kept the college's mission and core values at the center of their discussions. They also stayed true to their strategic and fiduciary responsibilities, committing to make decisions that will ensure that Wofford College thrives far beyond the lives of those who love and support the college today.

BOARD OF TRUSTEES MESSAGE TO THE WOFFORD COLLEGE COMMUNITY

Expressing gratitude

Our first order of business is to express our gratitude to the students, faculty, staff, alumni and alumni trustees on the **JEDI task force** who have given generously of their time to listen, learn and have hard conversations about student experiences at our college and in the world. The **30 recommendations of the JEDI task force** are about student success, and we began our meeting by expressing appreciation for the impact of student leaders and others for speaking out and participating in this process. The student experience today and in the future is our foundational concern.

Honoring the academic program

Almost half of the JEDI recommendations focused on the academic program, and discussion of the administration's progress and next steps in this area started, appropriately, with a reading of the college's **MISSION and CORE VALUES**.

The Board of Trustees knows and has evidence from past experience in business, community engagement and throughout the college's history that building a student body that brings different experiences and perspectives to our community will strengthen the academic program and enrich our college community. The Board wholeheartedly affirms the administration and endorses their efforts in this area.

Many of the recommendations and plans for action in terms of academic excellence are about access and increasing pathways and financial support for students with demonstrated financial need so that they can say yes to internships, research experiences, study abroad, leadership roles and community-based learning. Others are about advising and ensuring that student-faculty/staff mentoring relationships remain a hallmark of the Wofford experience. Again, the Board appreciates the recent \$150 million gift to the endowment from Jerry Richardson '59, which will allow, over time, for the college to provide many of these opportunities to students with demonstrated financial need, increasing access and opportunity.

To be clear, this is about doing more of the good things we are already doing and doing them even better because of what we have learned from student leaders and the JEDI process. Academic rigor at Wofford College remains a priority, as does our affiliation with the United Methodist Church and the denomination's foundational commitment to education for all. At Wofford College, teaching and learning about multiple perspectives has always been a part of who we are. Again, there is no need to shelter Wofford students from challenging conversations about issues that have shaped our world today and that will be a part of their future long after they graduate. Wofford College continues that tradition both in and out of the classroom, and the Board rejects any claims that Wofford College is now, or will ever,

“indoctrinate” students into any one narrow line of thought or dilute the quality and rigor of our academic program. This is simply not true.

Supporting the student experience

As the demographics change for students who will be entering high school over the next decade and beyond, Wofford College continues to work to strategically place itself in a position to recruit and support top students best equipped to achieve success at Wofford. The administration’s work regarding the student experience revolves around this reality, and the Board affirms and endorses the administration’s ongoing efforts to make Wofford more accessible and welcoming for all students who seek a rigorous academic experience.

We are eager to see the progress over time of the college’s new strategic enrollment plan, which builds on current successes in the areas of academic excellence, selectivity and diversity. We support Campus Union’s establishment of a diversity, equity and inclusion committee and recognize the need to acknowledge faculty and staff work in this area as well. We also support assessment and improvement in the general education curriculum and first-year experience, as well as in the retention and support of returning students.

The JEDI report made several recommendations to add staff, and the Board believes that the administration’s assessment of programs and needs is essential before the consideration of additional staff.

Accepting and expanding Recommendation 1

We must tell the truth, and we must ensure that student success is at the core of all that we are and all that we do. Our campus must be a safe and welcoming place for all, and every policy and every opportunity must be designed in ways that open doors and create possibilities. For that reason, the Board believes that considering Recommendation 1, the only recommendation fully within the purview of the Board — to “Adopt a new naming system for current and future residence halls” — cannot be separated from Recommendation 4 (“Establish a history and memory committee tasked with the development and implementation of projects”) and Recommendation 5 (“Create a position of campus historian or historian of the college”).

We must know our history and find ways — within the best United Methodist traditions — not only to celebrate our successes and the good we have contributed to the world, but also to recognize the wrongs of the past and turn toward the future stronger and more resolute in our desire to do good.

Already, we have joined several national groups that will support our efforts to learn more about our college’s early years. A college historian would play a vital role in researching and telling the college’s story in ways that both educate and build on the progress that has led to the Wofford College we know today. In addition, the college historian could teach courses on the college’s history and work with student leaders who are interested in delving more deeply into the college’s past.

When combined with Recommendations 4 and 5, the Board accepts and expands on Recommendation 1 and will form an ad hoc committee to examine in greater detail the college’s history and the names of all buildings that are named *honorifically* (without donor funding). The committee will then propose to the Board a plan for illuminating a more accurate and full history of the college as well as recommendations for using the names of buildings to emphasize Wofford’s common history and community.

The Board acknowledges the pain caused by the past and by buildings named honorifically for the college’s first three presidents, all of whom owned enslaved people. Although we are not changing the names of these three residence halls, there is an expectation that the work of this committee will begin this fall and end with the presentation of a plan to better

document our complete history and the committee's recommendation of a possible future naming policy for review by the conclusion of the academic year.

The JEDI report gave compelling options regarding building names, suggesting ways for residence halls and other buildings to emphasize Wofford's common history while fostering community. However, the Board must also recognize the inconsistency of changing the names of Carlisle, Shipp and Wightman halls without changing the name of the college, which was founded with a bequest from the will of the Rev. Benjamin Wofford, a United Methodist minister who also owned enslaved people. The Board prefers to be consistent, and we feel that this explanation, excerpted from an early JEDI working group report, helps to do so: "Historical investigation requires contextualization and objective analysis of available evidence. Most Americans find slave ownership morally repugnant in 2021; most white South Carolinians in the 1850s did not. The available records offer minimal insight." In agreement, the Board does not recommend that residence halls be renamed solely because the college's first three presidents owned enslaved people. To do so would be to "demand of them a moral vision that would have been uncommon for their age."

An authentic history will define both their positive impact on the college and their participation in the institution of slavery. We recognize that this is not just important for current students, but also for prospective students to understand that Wofford College is wrestling with its past and is committed to ensuring that their experience on campus will be one of honesty.

The Board would like to make clear that current buildings that bear the names of individuals who have made transformative financial gifts to the college will not be considered in this policy. Wofford College needs physical spaces, programs, professorships and scholarships to carry out its mission. Buildings and named and endowed funds designated for these purposes fuel student success, and the college both welcomes and appreciates these investments in the student experience.

In conclusion

The Wofford College Board of Trustees is committed to the college's mission and core values, and the administration's response to the recommendations of the JEDI committee align with those.

Again, the Board affirms the dedication and commitment of President Samhat and the administration and has great confidence in their ability to work with students, alumni, faculty, staff and community partners to address JEDI recommendations, considering budgetary implications and prioritizing improvements that will enrich the student experience.

Consistency, transparency and communications are essential to our college's success in this area. To this end, the administration has developed an action plan and a webpage ([Wofford.edu/strategicvision](https://www.wofford.edu/strategicvision)), on which updates will be posted. Please refer to that site and consider ways that you, too, can contribute to student success at Wofford College.

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