

Tami M. Seavoy, Chair
NMU Board of Trustees

December 9, 2021

Dear Ms. Seavoy

Thank you for giving me this opportunity to address the NMU Board of Trustees. I am writing today to request that the Board endorse a period of further review before taking a position on the recent proposal to rename the Luther S. West Science Building for the following reasons.

Executive Summary

- The review process to this point has been a hurried one and has failed to carry out sufficient due diligence to ensure that all the information possibly relevant to making a balanced, unbiased decision on this proposal has been discovered;
- In a telephone conversation on Tuesday, Pres. Schuiling, Ms. Cindy Paavola and a member of the review committee admitted they didn't really know what Dr. West's personal perspective was regarding the eugenics movement.
- Notified only a week ago that this issue even exists, my children and I need time to prepare a defense and work with the review committee to ensure that having simply labeled him a eugenicist doesn't unjustifiably undermine his principal legacy of commitment and service to education at NMU.

Dr. West's Character, Beliefs and Actions

Speaking as his only surviving child, I know Luther West was not a racist (an opinion also supported by the content of an extensive interview conducted in 1972 by Mariam Hilton (wife of longtime Prof. of English and NMU, Earl Hilton). From my experience growing up in Marquette, throughout his years of teaching at NMU, and in the course of his volunteer work in the Marquette community as a member of the Board of St. Lukes Hospital (later Marquette General) and the Family Service Society, and as a pillar of the Methodist Church, I never heard directly or indirectly that he ever disparaged or discriminated against anyone on the basis of race, ethnic identity, religion, or social status. Instead, he worked to enhance access to social support for those in need, helped improve local healthcare, and over 27 years made substantial contributions to the development of NMU as an institution to provide a needed educational opportunity for residents of the U.P. and elsewhere, many of whom had very limited financial means. Internationally, his work on the control of malaria and sanitary practices to reduce the occurrence of fly borne infectious disease also has served to enhance the health of millions.

I currently know a number of people, including alumni of NMU, who knew Dr. West well and would be more than happy to provide the review committee with a character reference on his behalf.

The Review Process and Documents of Concern

The review committee was unable to find evidence that Dr. West ever published a paper or spoke in a public forum where he totally disavowed all aspects of the eugenics movement and expressed regret at ever having been associated with it. However, failure to prove a negative can never stand as sufficient evidence in favor of the opposite. Lacking such evidence the present investigation seems to have considered it sufficient to indict him by simply applying a label implying he must have been a racist with a prejudicial attitude toward people who weren't white, not of northern European origin, not highly intelligent, not well off, and not already highly accomplished.

That definitely was never Luther West's attitude. One indication, I think, is to be found in the description of **Course 307. Genetics and Eugenics** in the **Northern State Teachers College Bulletin for 1939-1940**. Prior to 1939, there had been a course at the college since 1917 entitled **Heredity and Eugenics** focused primarily on human inheritance. In his second year at Northern State Teachers College Dr. West changed the title of that course to **Genetics and Eugenics**, with the bulk of the subject matter focused on tenets of the science of genetics *per se*, and only a terminal portion given over to eugenics, adding a description deviating from that in the 1917 course description by stating in part "...aims to give the student a critical understanding of the modern movement for eugenic reform." (underlining mine). Of particular interest in this regard is a paper entitled **Is modern genetics the new eugenics?** (Epstein, CJ. *Genetics in Medicine*, 5:469-75 (2003)) which emphasizes that reform eugenics disavowed the negative attitude of discouraging reproduction by the "unfit" or the birth (abortion) of the unfit. While the field of human medical genetics has now rightly disparaged an earlier misplaced focus of trying to improve the overall genetic fitness of the human race, the practice of genetic counseling has retained an element of reform eugenics in trying to ensure the birth of well-born children.

Among the few documents I've had access to for only a few days, several are structured in ways that risk creating the impression Luther West might have supported the most evil applications to which the eugenic movement has been put. Some examples:

Emails sent by Dr. Schuiling on October 20 advising the general NMU community and local TV station WLUC TV of the University's decision to consider changing the name of the L. S. West Science Building unfortunately included the words, "very disturbing history." Such strong words could well suggest to a reader that President had already made up her mind concerning a conflict she's been asked to investigate

An in house document prepared by Dr. Russell M. Magnaghi entitled **Lost & Forgotten Courses** states in part, "Dr. Luther West was hired to teach eugenics in 1938. The idea was that scientifically and politically the human race could be 'improved' by eliminating defective members from society. This was horribly seen in Nazi Germany and

sterilization programs in the United States.” This is very misleading. Not only does it unjustly label Dr. West as supportive of Nazi type racism, but it falsely suggests he was hired in 1938 especially to teach eugenics when in fact he was hired to teach every course offered in the Biology curriculum, including one entitled Heredity and Eugenics.

An article entitled **NMU considers name change for West Science after eugenics involvement** published in a recent issue of the **NORTH WIND** states that Dr. West was a faculty member in the 1920s and 30s at Battle Creek College, an institution entirely funded by the Race Betterment Foundation, but fails to note though required by college policy to teach one course in eugenics, it was only one of multiple courses he was expected to teach as a one man Biology Dept. (a situation similar to what he was expected to do when hired by Northern State Teachers College in 1938). That information is then bracketed by text emphasizing the most evil applications of eugenics including laws allowing forced sterilization, nazi racial science, and the infamous Tuskegee syphilis study. These are words and phrases that are clearly triggers, eliciting strong negative emotions almost sure to induce in many readers a highly biased but unwarranted opinion of Dr. West’s character.

Summary

In summary, I earnestly request the NMU Board of Trustees to defer from making any decision about the renaming of the L.S. West Science Building at this time, and to endorse continued review of the issue with open bilateral communication between the committee and the members of the West family in order to ensure that a final decision can be defended as having been reached in a transparent and unbiased way. To do otherwise can only cast the process as having been an unethical indictment, trial, and conviction of Dr. Luther West based on inadequate due diligence and failure to provide the accused with a proper opportunity for defense. It surely would be unfortunate not only for his family, but could also impair the University’s ability to attract and retain donor support, if a premature negative decision was later shown to have been based on incomplete, biased information.

Thank you for considering this petition.

David J. West Ph.D., MPH, son of Dr. Luther S. West