

December 9, 2021

Ms. Tami Seavoy, Chair
NMU Board of Trustees

Dear Chairwoman Seavoy,

The family of Dr. Luther S. West has, within the past week, been informed that a committee formed by Interim President Kerri Schuiling has proposed to rename the West Science building, based on allegations that Dr. West was a “strong supporter” of the eugenics movement during his career.

We understand that the University has a goal of creating an inclusive and welcoming community for its diverse student population, and we laud those efforts. However, we ask that the Board of Trustees defer action regarding the West Science building until the review committee has reconsidered the available evidence considering the material failures addressed by this letter, and the family has had a fair opportunity for a more fulsome review and response. The entire process appears to have been tainted by the same gross failure to comprehend the course description itself: first by the University historian’s (Dr. Russell Magnaghi) inaccurate and inflammatory description of the course provided to the Board of Trustees in October 2021, then followed by the review committee’s failure to understand the changes made to the course by Dr. West.

The committee indicated it had searched far and wide yet failed to discover any evidence that Dr. West ever denounced eugenics. To the contrary, we offer Dr. West’s own words taken from the edits he made to the course description in 1939 – within his first year at Northern – which show that he was not a proponent of eugenics. Dr. West modified the description of the course to remove reference to the “eugenics movement”. Instead, the modified course description read “The latter portion of the course treats of the possible application of genetic principles in the improvement of the human race and aims to give the student a critical understanding of the modern movement for **eugenic reform**.”¹ (emphasis added)

Eugenic **reform** was critically different from the eugenics movement, as noted by Charles J. Epstein, MD:

“As this mainline eugenics was flourishing in Nazi Germany, its popularity in other countries was decreasing. It was replaced by a so-called ‘reform eugenics,’ **which did not include the Nazi approach and called into question the unscientific basis of much of the original eugenics and rejected the blatant racism and antifeminism that characterized it.**”² (emphasis added)

Dr. West’s own words demonstrate that he not only denounced support for the eugenics movement, but also wanted his students to think critically about the topic of reform eugenics, which combined a nature and nurture approach, with consideration of the voluntary use of prophylactics. Reform eugenics has been analogized to modern day genetic counseling. Failing to understand the meaning of Dr. West’s changes to the course description, is, in our opinion, a failure of review committee due diligence at the basest level.

Secondarily, I (Mark) asked President Schuiling what Dr. West meant by the word “race.” Her response was, “I don’t know,” which is another concerning lack of basic diligence by the review committee in carrying out their duties to bring accurate information to the Interim President. I believe the definition can easily be found in the course description penned by Dr. West in 1939. In 1939, Dr. West modified the course description to include, among other edits, “... of the **human race**... .”³ (emphasis added) Further evidence that Dr. West did not consider eugenics to be a matter between the races, is to be heard in Dr. West’s own words in the 1972 Hilton interview. When Miriam Hilton asked Dr. West whether eugenics was a black/white issue during his time at Battle Creek, Dr. West responded emphatically, “Oh, no.”⁴

Finally, during his time at Northern, Dr. West made opportunities for women and individuals of ethnic minority background

¹ Northern State Teachers College Bulletin. Vol. XXXIX, 57(May 1939) No. 2.

² Epstein, C. Is modern genetics the new eugenics?. *Genet Med* 5, 469–475 (2003)

³ Northern State Teachers College Bulletin. Vol. XXXIX, 57(May 1939) No. 2.

⁴ Luther West Interview (Aug. 1, 1972) (https://archives.nmu.edu/CUPS%20Transcripts/West_Luther.pdf)

to partner with him to carry out some of his important research.⁵ (See, *An annotated bibliography of Musca domestica linnaeus*, by Luther S. West and Oneita Beth Peters with the technical assistance of Jane Elizabeth Phillips. (1973).)

During our phone call with Interim President Schuiling, it became clear that aside from being employed by Battle Creek and teaching the “Genetics and Eugenics” course as one course in a broad selection of courses he taught, the NMU committee itself could not point to any words or actions of Dr. West that espoused his alleged belief in the inferiority of one race to another, nor that espoused any belief or support for any other of the darker aspects of the eugenics movement.

We do not dispute that Dr. West was employed by both Battle Creek College and Northern State Teachers College as head of their respective Biology departments. Nor do we dispute that his employment at both institutions required him to take over many science courses that were outside his field of specialization - parasitology. One such course covered classic genetics as well as a critical understanding of the eugenics **reform** movement, as noted above. The few papers we’ve seen appear focused on classic genetic heredity and/or eugenics (the nurture aspect), and his course descriptions include classical genetics as well as reformed eugenics.

In fact, in the few days we’ve had to respond to such allegations, we have not seen any textual evidence that indicates Dr. West, a parasitologist and head of the Biology department, strongly supported the eugenics movement as alleged. Nor have we seen any textual evidence that he harbored any beliefs about racial superiority/inferiority, nor supported forced sterilization, nor restrictions on immigration, nor anti-miscegenation legislation, nor any other aspect of the eugenics movement during his time at Northern that would be considered hurtful by the student body. Based on the changes to his course description, the writings we have seen, his use of women and Native American research partners on important studies, and the recollections of his last living child, Dr. David West, we do not believe that Dr. Luther West, believed in any aspect of eugenics that would conflict with the University’s goals for diversity and inclusion.

We believe that renaming a building should not be undertaken lightly. With reference to the evidence available to us at this time, Dr. West’s only transgression appears to be teaching a full battery of science courses that included the “normal school” topic of genetics and eugenics through a critical lens.

Given the review committee’s gross failure to comprehend the meaning of terms used in the revised course description, we believe that any recommendation for a name change is premature, as it would require the Interim President to make a recommendation, and the Board of Trustees to vote, on the basis of incorrect and incomplete information. Given this, plus the extremely short notice the family was provided to locate supporting information, review, and respond, we respectfully request that the Board of Trustees defer decision on this matter for a reasonable period pending (a) the committee’s review of the new understandings brought to light by this letter, and (b) the family’s receipt of additional information and adequate amount of time to review and provide a more fulsome statement in defense of Dr. West, if appropriate.

Thank you for your thoughtful consideration.

Sincerely,

/s/ Mark D. West and /s/ Lisa Woodson West, Esq.

⁵ An Annotated Bibliography of *Musca domestica* Linnaeus. Luther S. West, Oneita Beth Peters