

Buildings and Landmarks Committee: Findings and Recommendations of the Lincoln Statue Review Team

May 12, 2021

Executive Summary

The Buildings and Landmarks Committee reviewed the building names and landmarks on our campus for their reflection of our institution’s core values—Integrity, Diversity, Access, Responsibility, and Excellence.

The Committee recommended further examination of and change for the statue of Abraham Lincoln in the Centennial Student Union and formed the Lincoln Statue Research Team. This team discussed the need for more complete information about the origins of the statue, its current placement in the Centennial Student Union, and the complexities of Lincoln’s legacy especially regarding a broader interpretation of Dakota and Minnesota history.

The Lincoln Statue Research Team operated under two guiding questions that focused on whether our spaces reflect the University’s mission and who we serve, and how we could best serve our students. To reinforce our institutional commitments to teaching, reflection, and inclusion, the Team recommends that the statue be moved to the Memorial Library with an exhibit that focuses on its relevance to Minnesota and Dakota history.

Background

In September 2020, President Richard Davenport and Provost Matt Cecil charged the Buildings and Landmarks Committee with reviewing building names and landmarks at Minnesota State University, Mankato. From at least 2003, colleges and universities across the United States have been assessing their historical ties to slavery and racism, and proposing to rename buildings and remove monuments that fail to reflect the missions and values of their institutions.

The Buildings and Landmarks Committee, therefore, proposed to assess and evaluate building names and monuments in accordance with Minnesota State University, Mankato’s core values of integrity, diversity, access, responsibility, and excellence, and inclusion. Our University strives to challenge prejudicial and discriminatory behaviors and policies through education and understanding.

The committee consisted of an advisory team who developed guidelines for research, and a project team of skilled researchers who conducted historical research of persons whose names appear on buildings and landmarks on our campus. The committee was also charged with reporting its findings to the University President and Provost.¹

¹ Buildings and Landmarks Review Report, p. 1

Buildings and Landmarks Research Questions

Seven research questions guided and informed the review of campus buildings and landmarks.² Of those questions, these three were especially relevant for this report:

1. To what extent does the inclusion of new research perspectives, perspectives from historically marginalized groups, and changing societal values influence our understanding of the public legacy attached to the individual in question?³
2. Does sufficient evidence exist to demonstrate that the actions or viewpoints of the individual for whom a building, space, or place is named may be inconsistent with respecting the importance of all similarities and differences among human beings, or of fostering inclusiveness, understanding, acceptance and respect in a multicultural society?⁴
3. Did the namesake's principal legacy impact local circumstances unique to the state, region, and/or location of the University?

Committee Recommendations

1. Recommended action on immediate findings from research committee.
The Research Team researched and reviewed 23 buildings and identified no major concerns at this time. **One landmark was reviewed, the Abraham Lincoln Statue in the Centennial Student Union, and was identified as a major concern. Change is recommended.**
2. Representation of people of color and their accomplishments should be the top priority for the naming of any new buildings that are not philanthropically funded. The committee also recommends that acknowledgement of these individuals could be accomplished through the naming of signature rooms/locations on campus (such as the CSU Ballroom or Armstrong Lecture Halls) and/or statues or monuments. This process will help us acknowledge the individuals in a timelier fashion than waiting years before a new building is constructed.

Lincoln Statue Research Team Findings

Led by a diverse team of faculty, students, and staff, the Lincoln Statue research process began with the concerns generated by the Buildings and Landmarks Committee which include

1. Abraham Lincoln has a divided public legacy not only at Minnesota State University, Mankato, but also more broadly across our country and our history;
2. the current location of the statue in the Centennial Student Union and lack of interpretive

² These research questions are informed by examples of policies and procedures from other institutions, specifically Yale University, University of California, Berkeley, the University of Michigan, and Oregon State University. Please see the bibliography in the Buildings and Landmarks Review Report for citations.

³ See, for example, the discussion on "The Principle of Revision," in Terrance McDonald, "Committee Views on Possible Review of University Space Names, January 6, 2017," <https://president.umich.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2017/01/PACOUH-memo-on-naming-1-13-17.pdf>, (accessed May 12, 2021), p. 3.

⁴ Yale University, "Report of the Committee to Establish Principles on Renaming, November 21, 2016," https://president.yale.edu/sites/default/files/files/CEPR_FINAL_12-2-16.pdf, (accessed May 11, 2021), p. 22.

material do not sufficiently foster “inclusiveness, understanding, acceptance, and respect in a multicultural society” as outlined by System diversity and inclusion goals;

3. because of Lincoln’s order to execute 38 Dakota men in 1862, some Indigenous students and allies have regularly brought requests to the Student Senate and to administrators to remove the statue from the Centennial Student Union; and
4. Lincoln’s actions toward Dakota people in 1862 have significant impact in Mankato, our state, and our region, which requires a more complete representation of the history and Lincoln’s involvement in it, as well as his legacy.

As a teaching institution, Minnesota State Mankato prides itself on valuing “teachable moments,” and the Research Team put forward two guiding questions:

- Do our spaces reflect who we serve and what our mission is?
- What can we do for the good of the students?

Our institutional memory is fractured regarding the Lincoln statue as evidenced by the number of articles over the years in *The Reporter* and elsewhere about its “mysterious” or “unknown” origins. The transience of our faculty, staff, and students contributes to the lack of a sustained documented history of the statue, what it represents, and its relationship to our campus and our community. Yet it is a student legacy, a 1925 gift of graduating classes of Mankato State Teachers College. It was placed in the Lincoln Library in “Old Main,” and was eventually moved to the new Centennial Student Union in 1978, where it has remained in various locations over the years.

Research Team members discussed at length the need for clearer information about the origins of the statue, its current placement in the Centennial Student Union, and the complexities of Lincoln’s legacy especially regarding a broader interpretation of Dakota and Minnesota history.

Lincoln Statue Research Team Recommendations

The Research Team recommends these actions

1. Expand the narrative through **contextualization** of the statue
2. **Relocate** the statue to a publicly accessible space in the Memorial Library

Contextualization through an exhibit is absolutely required to answer the two guiding questions put forward by the Research Team and would serve our role as a teaching institution. We recommend that an interdisciplinary team of our faculty and students develop this exhibit as a student learning opportunity. The scope and design could focus on providing answers to recurring questions about why the statue is on our campus, and how Lincoln’s legacy impacts the histories of African Americans and Native Americans, as well as American history in general. We also recommend that this exhibit follow established museum studies protocols and be peer-reviewed before installation.

It is also clear that expanding the narrative of Mankato’s role in Dakota and Minnesota history is necessary. This narrative could address Dakota presence and history in our region before statehood, the treaties and US-Dakota War, and Lincoln’s order to execute 38 Dakota men. Lesser known and equally as relevant is the fate of the 265 condemned men who were not executed and were removed from Minnesota along with 1,500 women, children, and elderly Dakota people.

The Memorial Library has expressed interest in providing appropriate space to **relocate** the Lincoln statue as it would support their vision to “be pivotal to student success through our expertise in facilitating discovery, study, learning, and scholarship.”⁵ The Library would determine placement of the proposed exhibit which will also determine the scope and design. Research team members and advisors discussed the potential opportunities to bring their students to the library to learn and talk about the contextualization and reflect on the impact of Lincoln’s legacy in our region.

These recommendations are made with careful consideration of nurturing and maintaining a dialogue about this difficult and important history. The Research Team believes that were the Lincoln Statue completely removed, opportunities for continued learning and understanding would also be removed and this history forgotten.

The options presented here have no bearing on the name of the Lincoln Lounge.

Research Team Membership

Rhonda Dass, Professor of American Indigenous Studies
Chad McCutchen, Assistant Professor of History
Kenneth Reid, Director of African American Affairs
Gwen Westerman, Professor of English

Advisory Team:

Christopher Brown, Acting Dean of Arts and Humanities
Christopher Corley, Interim Dean of Library and Learning
Joniesha Hayes, Student Representative, Social Work ‘22
H. Matthew Loayza, Dean of Social and Behavioral Sciences
Michelle Reinhardt, Director of Stewardship and Foundation Relations

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⁵ <https://library.mnsu.edu/about/information/mission/>