

'Burden of the history': UC Berkeley removes Boalt Hall's name

Daily Californian: University of California - Berkeley

January 30, 2020 Thursday

University Wire

Copyright 2020 UWIRE via U-Wire All Rights Reserved

Section: NEWS; Pg. 1

Length: 848 words

Body

As of early Thursday morning, the campus has revoked Boalt Hall's name and the wing of the UC Berkeley School of Law building's name pin lettering has been removed.

The building will be referred to as "the Law Building," following protocol when buildings housing a specific department are unnamed. The campus' Building Name Review Committee, convened by Chancellor Carol Christ, and Berkeley Law's Committee on the Use of the Boalt Name both had open forums for community input, which substantially called for the removal of the Boalt name.

"It's something that many places are facing across the country, as we become multicultural," said Berkeley Law lecturer Charles Cannon, who chaired the law school's committee. "It's a very hard problem when you start weighing it - the history or the burden of the history. ... If you take the time to read his speech, especially for modern students around the world, it's a pretty offensive document. ... You can see how that would become pretty reprehensible to many people."

Boalt Hall's namesake, John Boalt, was a San Francisco lawyer whose main legacy is a speech called "The Chinese Question," wherein Boalt not only argues for anti-Asian immigration policies, but also reflects his own racist beliefs against Native Americans and Black people. Cannon pointed toward Boalt's self-publishing of the speech as a "critical moment" because it reflected Boalt's legacy.

After the law school's committee released its recommendations and Berkeley Law Dean Erwin Chemerinsky announced his support of removing the hall's name in the fall of 2018, general student opinion was positive, albeit mixed. Christ then formed a campuswide committee, which gathered public feedback through a wide variety of means before presenting its recommendations to Christ in the fall of 2019.

The recommendation to change Boalt Hall's name came from Berkeley Law lecturer Charles Reichmann when he published an op-ed in the San Francisco Chronicle arguing for its removal.

Tangibly, the building's name will be changed on maps and websites in the coming months, and the law school's committee recommended removing all unofficial mentions of the Boalt name, according to Cannon. He also said the law school's committee is working on a permanent exhibit explaining the Boalt name's context, which should be open in a few months.

Berkeley Law doctoral student Alex Mabanta also highlighted the importance of student and alumni activism in achieving the building wing's name removal. Nearly every organization related to Berkeley Law that had the name

'Burden of the history': UC Berkeley removes Boalt Hall's name

"Boalt" swiftly rebranded after Chemerinsky's announcement, according to Mabanta, who was a member of the chancellor's Building Name Review Committee.

"Two years ago, Berkeley Law School's student community almost immediately rallied around no longer being associated with John Boalt," Mabanta said. "As a community, we are closing that chapter (and) we are moving very fast into ... the next chapter of the Berkeley Law School community."

Another factor that worked into the decision to revoke the building's name was that John Boalt had no connection to the campus community, according to Mabanta, who said the committee has been unable to find any legacy from him other than his racist writings.

For years, students have been rallying for the renaming of many buildings. In 2015, the Black Student Union, or BSU, called LeConte Hall and Barrows Hall to be renamed because of both namesakes' connections to the Confederacy.

The chancellor's committee voted unanimously to recommend removing the Boalt name, after which Christ approved the recommendation and sent it to UC President Janet Napolitano. Last week, Napolitano accepted the recommendations, said Michael Emerson Dirda, also a member of the chancellor's committee.

"Building names are really important signals for the community," Dirda said. "We hope that, with the Boalt name removed, we can indicate to Chinese and Chinese American students and scholars, as well as others, that Berkeley is a place that welcomes and celebrates people of all backgrounds."

Within this decision, however, is no new name recommendation, Dirda said, considering that the committee's only charge was to decide on the removal.

As of right now, Dirda said the committee has not received any other proposals, and added that the committee has a "robust process" and welcomes submissions to review campus building names.

"This renaming of Boalt will create the possibility of not just the (Berkeley Law community)," Mabanta said. "But others in the UC community to say 'Where are we in expanding belonging and inclusion? And do we stand against racism?' "

Sakura Cannestra is the managing editor. Contact her at and follow her on Twitter at @SakuCannestra.

Alex Mabanta, Barrows Hall, Berkeley Law, Black Student Union, Boalt Hall, Building Name Review Committee, Carol Christ, Charles Cannon, Charles Reichmann, Committee on the Use of the Boalt Name, Confederate States of America, Erwin Chemerinsky, Janet Napolitano, John Boalt, LeConte Hall, Michael Emerson Dirda, San Francisco Chronicle, The Law Building

Load-Date: April 16, 2020