

Preliminary response to Caltech renaming report  
Michael Chwe and anonymous Latina alumna  
January 31, 2021

We welcome Caltech's decision to remove the names of Millikan and other leaders of the Human Betterment Foundation (HBF) from its campus. However, this is a very small step toward Caltech dismantling its legacy of support, by its leadership and as an institution, for white supremacy and mass forced sterilization. Here we offer our preliminary responses to the Caltech Committee on Naming and Recognition's Final Report, released on December 17, 2020, with the hope of participating together with all members of the Caltech community in a full discussion.

We find the report inadequate in six ways.

1. The renaming committee's report does not respond to criticisms of its own process, notably by Sarah Sam, a former member of the renaming committee and co-author of the Black Students and Engineers at Caltech (BSEC) petition, who was not acknowledged in the report at all except in an appendix.
2. The report does not acknowledge that Caltech is the direct institutional successor of the Human Betterment Foundation, even though Caltech publicly [announced](#) in 1947 that HBF trustees "agreed that the best interests of the Foundation would be served by transferring its activities to the California Institute of Technology." The report claims that Caltech distanced itself from HBF objectives, but the memo it cites does not support this claim, stating instead that it would "seem fitting" for Caltech's use of HBF assets to consider "past interests served by the Gosney fund." While the HBF assets were being liquidated, Caltech established an office for the HBF on its campus and directly employed an HBF member.
3. The report does not mention the full extent and impact of HBF activities, including its centrality in promoting forced sterilizations in California, which as a historical practice still lingers in forced sterilizations occurring throughout the 1970s, [to prisoners in California between 2005 and 2013](#), and by [ICE on Latin American women in 2020](#). The report does not mention the HBF's enthusiasm and involvement with Nazi Germany's forced sterilization efforts.
4. The report's discussion of Thomas Watson is incomplete.
5. The report, in language and argument, underplays the severity of actions and racist motivations, and includes errors of fact and incorrect quotations. For example, the report says that people were identified as "feeble-minded" using IQ tests without mentioning that IQ tests were developed with explicit racial intentions.
6. The report's discussion of remedies and ways forward is too limited, suggesting that Caltech is mainly concerned with following other universities' renaming efforts, rather than thinking carefully about its own actions. We suggest that remedies should include public apologies to all people who were victims of forced sterilization, in California and elsewhere, and public support for California bill AB 3052, which establishes a program to compensate victims of forced sterilization in California. We look forward to discussing remedies and ways forward with the entire community.

## **1. The report does not respond to criticisms of its own process**

Sarah Sam, Caltech graduate student in neurobiology and BSEC president, was appointed as a member of the Caltech renaming committee by Caltech President Thomas Rosenbaum on July 22, 2020, but [resigned](#) on September 28, 2020, stating “that several NTF members have failed to demonstrate a basic understanding of race, class, disability, and oppression. Because of the unwillingness to condemn irrefutable evidence of overt racism, I have lost faith that this committee will be able to complete its charges in a responsible way.” President Rosenbaum [responded](#) on October 1, 2020, in a way which Sarah Sam [called](#) “wildly insensitive” in ignoring the perspective of victims of forced sterilization. Ben Rosen, chair of the renaming committee, [responded](#) on October 6, 2020. Neither response addressed Sarah Sam’s substantive concerns.

The renaming committee met in private throughout, with no opportunity for public questions and comment except for an online survey, and invoked Caltech’s honor code in requiring confidentiality about its discussions, thereby exhibiting a severe lack of openness and transparency. Caltech Assistant Professor of History Maura D. Dykstra [stated](#): “Tackling the historical legacy and the political dimensions of something like eugenics can’t possibly be done in a committee setting.” Sarah Sam’s resignation was one of the very few ways the committee’s process could be subject to outside accountability. Therefore it is quite troubling that Sarah Sam’s concerns were wholly ignored in the committee report.

Sarah Sam, Daniel Mukasa, Caltech graduate student in materials science, and Jean Badroos, Caltech graduate student in biochemistry and molecular biophysics, created the BSEC petition that was the main impetus for the formation of Caltech’s renaming committee in the first place. However, the report credits Charles Xu, Caltech graduate student in physics, as creating the BSEC petition. This is a failure of proper attribution. The committee did not mention Sarah Sam’s name in the main body of the report, and her name appears in the report only in appendices (in a December 22, 2020 BSEC petition and in President Rosenbaum’s July 22, 2020 announcement naming members of the committee).

The renaming committee in its own practices erased the contributions of Caltech students of color, including one of its own members, and did not respond to their concerns.

## **2. The report does not acknowledge that Caltech is the direct institutional successor of the HBF**

Caltech is the direct institutional successor of the Human Betterment Foundation. The report does not acknowledge this fact. In 1947 in *Engineering and Science*, its own publication, Caltech publicly [announced](#) that HBF scientists “carried on an extensive study in the field of eugenic sterilization” and in 1942, “the Trustees of the Human Betterment Foundation agreed that the best interests of the Foundation would be served by transferring its activities to the California Institute of Technology,” with HBF assets given to Caltech. This announcement was Caltech’s most complete public statement of its relationship with the HBF, and the report does not cite or mention it, or any statements Caltech has made since then to distance itself from it.

In this statement, Caltech willingly accepts the HBF “activities” and calls HBF employees “scientists” in 1947, despite the report’s explanation (page 13) that “In the 1920s and 1930s, the tide in the scientific community began to turn against eugenics.”

On November 21, 1943, the Los Angeles Times [reported](#) that “the foundation’s research in the field of eugenics will be continued by the institute under the terms of an agreement signed by James R. Page, president of the Caltech board of trustees.”

Any claim that “Caltech itself was never involved in eugenics” (page 12) or “clearly distanced itself from the HBF’s program” (page 75) would have to acknowledge and confront these direct public statements made by Caltech itself in 1947 and 1943. The report does not. Of course “Caltech must publicly and unambiguously repudiate any shade of affiliation with eugenics” (page 7) but doing so requires acknowledging previous Caltech statements accepting eugenics. Of course Caltech should help the community “learn about the previously unacknowledged connections between the Human Betterment Foundation and the figures who helped build the modern Caltech” (page 33), but deeply connected with the HBF are not only the individual figures who helped build Caltech, but Caltech itself.

Caltech’s institutional connections with the HBF, its acceptance of the HBF’s activities and assets, were in fact quite openly acknowledged in 1947. What has been lacking is any revision of Caltech’s public stance on forced sterilization and eugenics. As far as we know, since 1947, the only statements by Caltech officials revising its position on eugenics were made in 2020 (President Rosenbaum’s [statement](#) on October 1 called the eugenics movement “morally reprehensible”) and 2021, in the renaming committee’s report. Notably, President Rosenbaum’s earlier July 22, 2020 [statement](#) announcing the renaming committee mentioned the HBF without passing any judgement upon it. If there have been any previous Caltech statements disavowing forced sterilization or eugenics, the report does not mention them.

In Appendix H (page 75), the report states “From the outset, the California Institute of Technology clearly distanced itself from the HBF’s program. It used the newly established funds to support basic research, mainly in genetics.” It includes a memo included in the minutes of the March 1945 Board of Trustees to support this claim. However, the memo does not support the claim. There is no distancing language at all. Instead, the memo includes the sentence “Because of past interests served by the Gosney fund [E.S. Gosney was the founder of the HBF], it would seem fitting if at the initiation of the plan, the fellowships be devoted to studies of heredity or related subjects.”

The report states (page 74) that while the HBF assets were being liquidated, Caltech “established a small office for the HBF within the Biological Laboratory and retained the services of Lois Castle (Gosney’s daughter) on a part-time basis.” In other words, Caltech directly employed a previous member of the HBF and granted the HBF physical space on campus.

The report on page 15 states that Millikan did not lead the HBF or “shape its policies,” but rather “lent his prestige—and by extension, Caltech’s—to the HBF, when he joined the HBF’s Board of Trustees.” This incorrectly diminishes Millikan’s responsibility for HBF activities. Millikan

could have publicly endorsed the HBF without becoming a trustee. A trustee of an organization is morally and legally responsible for the organization's activities. Also, of course Millikan and other trustees could have used their leadership position to stop the HBF's activities.

The HBF archives are housed at Caltech, and the historical documents that the report draws upon, such as the March 1945 Board of Trustees memo, the HBF pamphlet “Sterilization Today,” and the Board of Trustees agreement signed by James R. Page stipulating that “the foundation’s research in the field of eugenics will be continued by the institute,” would help us all better understand the Caltech-HBF relationship. We therefore ask for all of the historical documents cited in the report, and ideally the entire HBF archive, to be released online.

### **3. The report does not mention the full extent and impact of HBF activities**

The report states (page 5) that people were forcibly sterilized “[f]rom the early 1900s to the early 1970s, in various forms and parts of the country,” without mentioning the direct and particular harm of HBF activities on the people of California, and therefore the HBF’s particular culpability. Between 1909 and 1979, over [20,000 people](#), some still [living today](#), were forcibly sterilized in California, far more than in any other state, and more than one-third of the nationwide total. The Human Betterment Foundation was proud of this and [took credit](#). When E.S. Gosney, founder of the HBF, died in 1942, California Governor Culbert Olson [stated](#) that his death was a “blow to [the Department of Institutions], as it [was] to all friends of social progress. Mr. Gosney’s Foundation was an outstanding force in the advancement of the practice of sterilization of mental deviates.”

In the *Madrigal v. Quilligan* case, [ten Latina women](#) brought suit against doctors at LA County-U.S.C. Medical Center who had sterilized them without their consent between 1971 and 1974. Historian Alexandra Minna Stern [writes](#): “The sterilizations at County Hospital were not under the purview of the Department of Institutions, like the twenty thousand that occurred from 1909 into the 1960s, but they cannot be extracted from the history of sterilization in California, particularly because they occurred in Los Angeles, . . . home to several prominent groups, such as the Human Betterment Foundation, the California Division of the American Eugenics Society, and the AIFR [established by Paul Popenoe, HBF employee, in 1930], that were active into the 1950s and 1960s and that included as members several physicians affiliated with the University of Southern California hospitals.”

Between 2005 and 2013, 144 women were sterilized in California prisons, and according to the [California State Auditor](#), “39 inmates were sterilized following deficiencies in the informed consent process.” National Public Radio [reported](#) that “Former inmate Kimberly Jeffrey, 43, . . . resisted the pressure to get a tubal ligation done—pressure that she says came while she was under sedation and strapped to an operating table.”

In December 2020, more than 40 Latin American women [joined a legal petition](#) stating that they suffered from forced sterilization and other abuses while in ICE custody at Irwin County Detention Center in Georgia.

Forced sterilization did not end in the US in the 1970s. Forced sterilization did not occur only in the distant past. The HBF was a leading advocate for forced sterilization, and the report does not acknowledge that its historical legacy continues to this day.

The report also does not acknowledge that the Human Betterment Foundation took great pride in its influence on Nazi Germany's 1933 forced sterilization law, which resulted in the sterilization of roughly 400,000 people. In 1933–1934, the Human Betterment Foundation [mailed](#) its pamphlet “Human Sterilization” to Nazi administrators responsible for enforcing the law. Arthur Gütt and Herbert Linden, Nazi politicians advocating for sterilization, used the Human Betterment Foundation’s pamphlet to argue for the law. In 1934 in the [Journal of Heredity](#), Paul Popenoe, writing with the affiliation of the Human Betterment Foundation, discussed the German forced sterilization law in depth and quoted from Adolf Hitler’s book *Mein Kampf* liberally and without criticism.

C.M. Goethe, also an HBF trustee of the HBF, [wrote](#) to E.S. Gosney: “You will be interested to know that your work has played a powerful part in shaping the opinions of the group of intellectuals who are behind Hitler in this epoch-making program. Everywhere I sensed that their opinions have been tremendously stimulated by American thought, and particularly by the work of the Human Betterment Foundation. I want you, my dear friend, to carry this thought with you for the rest of your life, that you have really jolted into action a great government of 60,000,000 people.” In 1936 in the [American Sociological Review](#), Marie E. Kopp wrote, “The leaders in the German sterilization movement state repeatedly that their legislation was formulated only after careful study of the California experiment as reported by Mr. Gosney and Dr. Popenoe. It would have been impossible, they say, to undertake such a venture involving some one million people without drawing heavily on previous experience elsewhere.”

The report uses gender neutral words such as “victims,” but between 1930 and 1945, Latina women in California institutions were [much more likely](#) to be sterilized than Latino men or non-Latino men or women. On page 5, the report states that “the predominant victims of these policies were people of Mexican origin; people of Asian origin; Eastern and Southern European immigrants, including so-called Hebraics (Jews); and Blacks, but also significant numbers of the poor labeled ‘white trash.’” This does not include Native Americans. Shockingly, between 1970 and 1976, physicians sterilized an estimated [25 percent](#) of Native American women of childbearing age.

Finally, the report uses the term “eugenic sterilization,” a term the HBF also used, throughout but never makes completely clear that the HBF explicitly advocated for forced sterilization: coerced sterilization without the person's consent.

#### **4. The report’s discussion of Thomas Watson is incomplete**

The BSEC petition called for the renaming of the Thomas J. Watson, Sr. Laboratories of Applied Physics, because of Watson’s leadership of IBM and IBM’s connections to Nazi Germany, but the report called for further study before deciding whether to remove his name. The report in Appendix G includes notes by Caltech archivist Peter Sachs Collopy on Watson, but given that

the committee was charged with evaluating Watson as well, we believe that a more thorough examination should have been done. We are eager to learn and talk more about this. Monique Thomas, program coordinator for Caltech's Center for Inclusion and Diversity, on January 17, hosted Clyde Ford to [speak](#) about his experience as a black software engineer at IBM, which included a discussion of Watson's and IBM's technological relationships with Nazi Germany and South African apartheid.

## **5. The report underplays the severity of actions and racist motivations and includes factual inaccuracies and incorrect quotations**

Grant Venerable was the first black American to graduate from Caltech, and the report on page 20 discusses [how](#) Millikan “took to the Board of Trustees the issue of whether a ‘colored’ student should be permitted to live” in the student residences. The report quotes former Caltech professor of history Daniel J. Kevles: “This says nothing one way or the other about racial prejudice on Millikan’s part. . . . [H]is asking does not mean ipso facto that he opposed the allowance. For another, he may have wanted to say yes to the proposal but had been cautioned against doing so on grounds that at least some of the students or trustees would object. Whatever the case, he did offer the student admission to the houses.” This response reflects a very incomplete understanding of racism, which echoes Sarah Sam’s statement, mentioned earlier, that the renaming committee members lacked a basic understanding. Racism is not just about individually-held prejudices. Subjecting a person’s housing application to a different procedure (going to the trustees) solely because of their race, as occurred here, is a racist practice.

Another example of the report’s incomplete understanding of racism is that the report states (page 5) that the HBF wanted to forcibly sterilize people “whom eugenicists labeled as ‘feeble-minded’ or ‘unfit.’ Who was ‘feeble-minded’ or unfit was determined variously, sometimes through IQ tests.” This statement makes it seem that the HBF did not target people on the basis of race, but it neglects to mention the racial biases of IQ tests used at the time. In particular, the Stanford-Binet IQ test was developed by another member of the HBF, Lewis Terman, who used IQ tests to [argue](#) for “enormously significant racial differences in general intelligence” and the racial inferiority of Black, Indigenous, and Mexican-American communities. The use of IQ as a measure for eugenic sterilization does not mean that these forced sterilizations were not racially motivated.

The report shows a similar incomplete understanding on page 7 in its statement, “Eugenics, and the biases that fueled it as a movement, are morally deplorable.” Saying that eugenics was fueled by “biases” underplays the enormity of this crime against humanity and is akin to saying that the Holocaust was driven by “biases” against Jews, gypsies, and queer people. Advocating for the sterilization of a large fraction of an entire population is a conviction that is much more ghastly than “bias.” Racism is not merely about “bias” but is an entire social system of domination and exploitation.

Similarly, on page 19, the report says that Millikan “spoke of Black people in disparaging language,” but I believe that most people would say that Millikan used a racial slur. Disparaging language is often heard, for example in Yelp reviews of restaurants, but racial slurs are not.

On page 30, the document twice groups women along with “Black, Latinx, Native American, Pacific Islander, Alaska native, female, LGBTQI, and differently abled communities.” This language is not intersectional, as there are of course female, LGBTQ, and differently-abled members of Black, Latinx, Native American, Pacific Islander, and Alaska native communities. This language creates the impression that women are by default white and that the “female experience” at Caltech is the experience of white women. One consequence of this kind of error is that Caltech does not make intersectional data available on the enrollment of racially minoritized women students, which is crucial for Caltech to support and recruit Black, Latinx, and Indigenous women.

The report also contains errors of fact and incorrect citation of sources. On page 20, the report states that Millikan served as the minister of the Neighborhood Church in Pasadena (now known as the Neighborhood Unitarian Universalist Church). The [article](#) cited in support of this claim states that “In 1930, Millikan hired an old Chicago friend, Dr. Theodore Soares, to teach philosophy and Ethics at Caltech. He also served as the minister of the Neighborhood Church,” which is ambiguous as to whether Millikan or Soares served as the minister. However, the article later states, “When the minister of the Neighborhood Church announced his retirement in 1944, Millikan was asked to chair the search committee for a new minister. Once again, it was a joint appointment shared with the Caltech philosophy and ethics department.” Thus the article is stating that Soares, not Millikan, was the earlier minister.

Finally, on page 20, the report includes a quote that is cited (in footnote 19) as being from a letter from Millikan to his spouse Greta Millikan, but the quote is actually a quote of someone who quotes Millikan (the quote is similar to a passage in *Bloodlines: Recovering Hitler's Nuremberg Laws from Patton's Trophy to Public Memorial* by Anthony M. Platt and Cecilia Elizabeth O'Leary, 2005). This citation is incorrect.

## **6. The report's discussion of remedies and ways forward is too limited**

Caltech's decision to remove the names of Millikan and other HBF leaders is just the beginning, not the end, of much-needed dialogue and action. We are concerned that Caltech is concerned more with following the lead of other institutions' renaming decisions instead of carefully considering its own actions. The renaming committee's report discussion of remedies and ways forward is far too limited, especially since Caltech could have publicly come to terms with its relationship with the HBF decades ago.

As the institutional successor of the Human Betterment Foundation, Caltech should apologize for the HBF's activities. Caltech should apologize to the many thousands of people who were victims of forced sterilization, in California, in the United States, in Germany, and anywhere in the world that took inspiration from HBF advocacy. Caltech should apologize to all members of the Caltech community and the general public who have been dismayed and disheartened by

how many decades it has taken for Caltech to publicly distance itself from the HBF and its leaders, particularly people of color who have been even further alienated. The report notes that the Los Angeles Times in September 2020 apologized for its history of racism, and the need for Caltech to apologize is at least as great. The BSEC petition calls for Caltech to “Publicly denounce Caltech’s legacy of eugenics ideology and racism, and issue a formal apology to those it has harmed, including Sarah Sam and all Black and disabled members of our community.” This would be a good start.

Another particularly appropriate action for Caltech would be to publicly endorse California bill [AB 3052](#), which “would establish the Forced or Involuntary Sterilization Compensation Program, to be administered by the California Victim Compensation Board for the purpose of providing victim compensation to survivors of state-sponsored sterilization conducted pursuant to eugenics laws that existed in California between 1909 and 1979 and to survivors of coerced sterilizations of people in prisons after 1979.”

One particular recommendation of the report (page 33) is that Ruddock House be renamed to Rudd House. But “Rudd” has been the unofficial nickname for years and therefore this would not be a substantive renaming. By the way, some students who lived at Ruddock previously called themselves “grand dragons” until a group of Black and Latinx undergrads worked with house leadership to get rid of this term.

Finally, the BSEC petition, included in the report, mentions the need to provide data on the enrollment of under-represented minorities. Currently, there is no intersectional data available on the enrollment of racially minoritized women, which would help Caltech to begin an intersectional approach to support and recruit Black, Latinx, and Indigenous women. Similarly, Hispanic/Latinx students are reported as a single category, which includes Spaniards along with racially minoritized groups. It would also be good to disaggregate the Latinx category into Afro-Latinx and Indigenous Latinx.