

University Naming as Governance: Institutional Continuity, Policy Variation, and Organizational Change

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Abstract

The intensity of debates around university naming practices has increased as these institutions address their historical connections to slavery, segregation, settler colonialism, scientific racism, and exclusion. However, having a documented naming policy does not guarantee continuous, transparent, or significant review processes. This theory-building comparative document analysis explores naming governance at fifteen American universities. The study employs a preregistered-style audit trail and directed qualitative content analysis to examine policies, board actions, committee reports, and official statements, coding eleven dimensions across formal rule structures, processes, and outcomes. Findings illustrate a pattern of policy decoupling: although historical criteria, evidence standards, and review committees are often formalized, their activation typically requires petitions, controversies, or leadership discretion. Within the sample, only one institution employs a routine review on the trigger/periodic-review/appeal dimension. The Routine Stewardship Model explains this asymmetry by examining how activation, procedures, and outcomes are coupled. It offers a framework to differentiate between policy adoption and institutionalized practice and identifies practical design elements—such as recurring review triggers, role separation, public rationales, and mandatory decisions—that may enhance accountability in naming governance, reducing crisis dependence.

Keywords: university renaming, naming governance, higher education governance, institutional theory, policy decoupling, organizational routines

1. Introduction

1.1 Understanding Naming Governance and Policy Disparities

Naming governance involves the formal and informal systems a university uses to authorize, review, retain, contextualize, remove, or replace commemorative names and symbols on campus. As a component of higher-education governance, it distributes decision-making power among boards, executives, faculty members, students, alumni, historians, and impacted communities, defining rules, evidence, and accountability mechanisms for institutional decisions. This governance model aligns with scholarly definitions that view higher-education governance as multilevel institutional decision-making involving various authorities and stakeholders (Shin and Jones, 2022). Policy decoupling involves a gap between formal policy and actual organizational practice, or between implemented practices and the outcomes they are expected to produce. In naming contexts, a university might establish rigorous criteria but fail to reassess a disputed name without external pressure or might go through a removal process without linking it to historical education, replacement principles, or measurable institutional commitments.

1.2 Current Context and Research Challenges

The process of naming is neither neutral nor simply administrative. Honorific names assigned to buildings, schools, residence halls, statues, and digital spaces communicate an institution's values regarding merit, memory, legitimacy, and belonging. Critical toponymy views these commemorative names as political inscriptions that perpetuate certain historical narratives within everyday landscapes (Rose-Redwood et al., 2010). On campuses, these signals influence how students and faculty understand concepts of recognition, membership, and exclusion (Strayhorn, 2012). The topic remains active beyond merely addressing past issues. In 2024, Princeton's Board of Trustees responded to a petition regarding the John Witherspoon statue by retaining it while requiring additional historical context (Princeton University, 2024). Similarly, during the same year, Columbia activists symbolically labeled Hamilton Hall as "Hind's Hall," demonstrating how naming continues to serve as a contested site for community claims about memory, legitimacy, and institutional accountability (CBS News New York, 2024). These examples indicate that disputes encompass not only whether a name changes, but also who has the authority to initiate a review, what evidence is deemed relevant, whether contextualization suffices, and how decisions are justified.

Despite more universities adopting written naming policies, many evaluations still begin only in response to

protests, media scrutiny, leadership changes, or other focusing events. This study examines: (a) Which aspects of university naming governance have become formally institutionalized? (b) Where do formal policies diverge from routine activation, transparent execution, or substantive follow-up? and (c) What features differentiate episodic, transitional, and routinized naming governance? It posits that institutionalization requires distinct couplings in activation, procedures, and outcomes.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Symbolic Representation: Naming, Identity, and Institutional Repair

Commemorative landscapes are interwoven with power dynamics, memory, and identity. They signify who is deemed honorable and which histories a university endorses; name removal involves renegotiating the institutional narrative rather than erasing it from daily campus life (Alderman and Inwood, 2013; Rose-Redwood et al., 2010). Research on campus climate and belonging indicates that institutional histories and environments influence how students perceive social integration and significance (Hurtado et al., 1999; Gopalan and Brady, 2020). This study does not argue that renaming impacts belonging or persistence; instead, it considers naming a symbolic form of governance whose legitimacy relies on its connection to educational and structural actions.

Recent scholarship has shifted the discussion from isolated controversies to comparative policy analysis. Rose-Redwood et al. (2024) examine Canadian and U.S. university naming policies, documenting the growing number of disputes and advocating for representative committees, thorough consultations, and comprehensive campus audits. Their research establishes the policy framework and the importance of the broader “namespace.” This study complements it by investigating why seemingly robust policies often remain inactive, reactionary, or poorly connected to their intended outcomes.

2.2 Theoretical Frameworks

Institutional theory offers a main explanatory framework. Universities operate in environments that reward legitimate formal structures, allowing for the adoption of policies that signify responsiveness without guaranteeing consistent implementation (Meyer and Rowan, 1977). Bromley and Powell’s (2012) distinction between policy-practice and means-ends decoupling is particularly helpful: the former concerns whether formal naming rules are enacted, while the latter considers whether decisions align with the educational, representational, or equity goals they are intended to support.

Three additional perspectives enrich the analysis. First, focusing-event research explains how protests, scandals, media spotlight, or public reckoning can raise long-standing issues without contributing to sustained capacity (Birkland, 1998). Second, organizational-routines theory differentiates between written, ostensive rules and repeated actions by identifiable actors at regular intervals; a steady review cycle, committee, evidence repository, and feedback loop can transform a policy into a repeatable routine (Feldman and Pentland, 2003). Third, shared-governance and stakeholder perspectives highlight the importance of authority distribution and participation: naming decisions gain credibility when expertise, representation, recommendation, final approval, and public justification are interconnected rather than improvised. These perspectives collectively suggest that a university could have sophisticated criteria but still experience episodic naming governance if its temporal triggers, roles, and downstream commitments are underdeveloped.

3. Method

3.1 Study Design and Justification

This research employs a theory-building comparative document analysis via directed qualitative content analysis. Its purpose is not to assess causal effects or rank universities, but rather to identify patterns within formal rules and recorded governance actions. Document analysis is suitable because naming governance is established publicly through policies, committee mandates, trustee actions, reports, and official statements. These documents capture the formal allocation of authority, declared evidence standards, review procedures, and announced outcomes in ways interviews alone cannot replicate; they also enable cross-case comparisons of publicly accountable institutional commitments (Bowen, 2009; Hsieh and Shannon, 2005). However, public documents cannot detail all informal deliberations or enactment steps.

3.2 Corpus Selection and Data Retrieval

The corpus includes publicly available primary documents from fifteen U.S. universities: University of Virginia, Virginia Tech, University of Richmond, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Oregon State University, Yale University, Princeton University, Georgetown University, Duke University, University of Minnesota, University of Michigan, Clemson University, William & Mary, University of Texas at Austin, and Brown University. Cases were eligible if they met at least one of two criteria: (1) they had a publicly posted policy or ongoing framework for naming or renaming; or (2) there was a documented process for renaming, denaming, contextualization, or statutory review supported by official primary documents. The sample is purposive and informative, not

representative of all U.S. higher-education institutions.

Documents were located via institution-specific searches of board, policy, presidential, history, archives, and communications websites using terms such as naming, renaming, denaming, memorial, building, statue, policy, committee, and history. For each case, the governing policy where available, the main decision document, and supplementary official communications were saved. The Supplemental Appendix lists the key sources. Documents were retrieved, dated, archived by URL, and screened for institutional authorship, direct relevance, and substantive detail. Secondary reporting was used selectively to identify or contextualize primary materials, not as the primary evidence for coding.

3.3 Analytical Process

Analysis proceeded in six phases: (1) I created a case inventory and source log, (2) extracted relevant text on scope, triggers, evidence, authority, participation, transparency, contextualization, replacement, and follow-through, (3) applied an initial 11-dimension codebook informed by institutional theory, policy decoupling, focusing events, routines, critical toponymy, and governance scholarship, (4) assigned each dimension an ideal-typical state—episodic, transitional, or routinized—accompanied by a rationale linked to sources, (5) compared within-case profiles and cross-case patterns, examining negative and mixed cases, and (6) recoded the corpus after refining the codebook and verified each matrix cell against the evidence log. These ideal types serve as analytic classifications, not quantitative scores.

Trustworthiness was ensured through source triangulation where multiple official resources were available, an audit trail of search and selection, code-recode validation, peer debriefing, and explicit attention to nonapplicable dimensions. The absence of a second coder precludes claims of inter-coder reliability. To strengthen the dependability of these interpretive classifications, three safeguards were applied. First, every classification was anchored to the written definitions in Table 1 rather than to an overall impression of an institution, so that each state reflects documented features of a policy or decision record. Second, each matrix cell was linked to a source-specific rationale in the evidence log, allowing any classification to be traced to the passage on which it rests and re-examined by other researchers. Third, the central empirical claim—the activation gap on D2—rests on a comparatively low-inference criterion: whether an official document specifies a standing periodic review, a time-limited honorary term, or a formal appeal path. Classifications on more interpretive dimensions, such as committee composition (D6) and structural follow-through (D11), should be read as provisional analytic judgments rather than established measurements (Tracy, 2020). The University of Texas at Austin’s statutory case is treated as a bounded variant, with any unavailable naming-policy dimensions coded as not applicable rather than absent.

Table 1. Routine Stewardship Model: Definitions by Dimension

#	Dimension	Episodic	Transitional	Routinized	Analytic Component
1	Scope Eligibility	& Buildings only / undefined	Some asset types listed	Explicit scope	multi-asset Rule Architecture
2	Trigger, Review & Appeal	Crisis-only	Request-triggered with criteria	Periodic review, request path, formal appeal	Activation
3	Evidentiary Standard	Ad hoc moral judgment	Reputation plus some evidence	Scholarly historical evidence required	Rule Architecture
4	Principal-Legacy Test	Absent	Implicit	Explicit written legacy-inconsistency criteria	Rule Architecture
5	Decision Authority	Undefined / ad hoc	Defined body	Defined, propose/approve separation	with Procedure
6	Committee Composition	Narrow administrative	/ Some stakeholder inclusion	Inclusive expertise and stakeholder representation	Procedure
7	Community Engagement	Minimal / none	Solicited comment	Structured and documented engagement	Procedure

#	Dimension	Episodic	Transitional	Routinized	Analytic Component
8	Transparency Reporting	/ Closed	Partial reporting	Public rationale and accessible records	Procedure
9	Contextualization / Education	Removal-only	Plaque added	Interpretation, curriculum, archives, programming	Outcomes
10	Replacement Options	/ No replacement guidance	Replacement ad hoc	Explicit options and belonging rationale	Outcomes
11	Structural Follow-Through	Symbolism-only	Some paired action	Paired commitments and accountability metrics	Outcomes

Note. These are ideal types intended for comparative analysis, not performance ratings.

4. Findings

4.1 Imbalanced Institutionalization

The findings reveal imbalanced institutionalization across cases. Formal rule structures and procedural legitimacy tend to be more robust than activation and outcome coupling. Institutions often define historical evidence, values-based criteria, committees, and ultimate decision-making authority. They vary significantly in whether reviews occur without crises, whether replacement options are guided by explicit principles, and whether symbolic actions entail educational or structural consequences.

Table 2. Cross-Institutional Coding Matrix

Institution	D1	D2	D3	D4	D5	D6	D7	D8	D9	D10	D11
University of Virginia	R	T	R	T	R	T	T	T	R	R	R
Virginia Tech	R	T	T	T	R	T	T	T	T	R	E
University of Richmond	R	T	R	R	R	R	R	R	R	T	E
UNC Chapel Hill	T	E	T	T	T	E	T	T	R	T	E
Oregon State University	T	T	R	T	T	T	R	R	R	T	E
Yale University	T	T	R	R	R	T	T	R	R	R	E
Princeton University	R	T	R	R	R	R	R	R	R	T	R
Georgetown University	T	E	R	T	R	T	R	R	R	R	R
Duke University	T	T	R	T	R	R	T	R	R	T	E
University of Minnesota	R	R	R	T	R	R	T	R	R	R	T
University of Michigan	T	T	R	T	R	T	T	T	R	T	E
Clemson University	T	E	E	T	T	E	T	T	R	T	E
William & Mary	T	E	R	R	R	T	T	R	R	R	E
University of Texas at Austin	—	—	—	—	—	—	T	T	R	T	—
Brown University	R	T	T	T	R	R	R	R	R	R	R

Note. D1–D11 correspond to Table 1. E = episodic; T = transitional; R = routinized; — = not applicable. The matrix is retained from the source-linked coding audit trail; classifications are ideal-typical analytic judgments rather than performance scores.

The activation gap is the clearest cross-case pattern. Of the 15 cases, nine are transitional on D2 (request-triggered

reviews with criteria), four are episodic (crisis-only), one is routinized (including standing periodic reviews, a request path, and an appeal process), and one is not applicable due to its focus on statuary. Only one of the 14 applicable cases (7.1%) corresponds to the study's routinized D2 designation. This result should be interpreted as an occurrence count within a purposive corpus and not as an overall estimate of the incidence of periodic review across U.S. higher education.

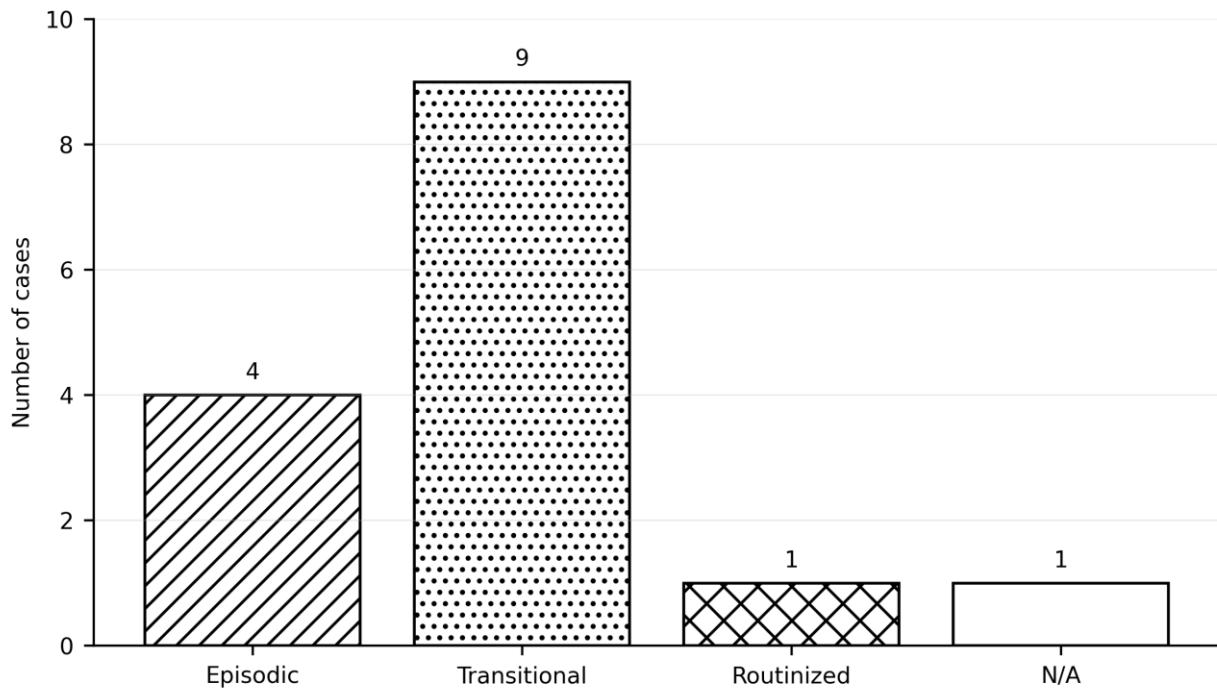


Figure 1. Classification of Activation Coupling in the 15-Case Corpus

Source: author coding matrix. N/A denotes the University of Texas at Austin statuary context.

4.2 Mechanisms of Coupling

Activation coupling pertains to whether an institution defines when reviews happen, who can initiate them, and whether ongoing audit or appeal processes are available. The corpus indicates that sophisticated standards alone do not trigger reviews: most cases remain dependent on petitions, controversies, or leadership decision-making. Minnesota is notable for its policy's temporal mechanism through a 75-year honorary naming term and retention review. This finding underscores the view that the primary governance gap is temporal, not just a matter of missing policy language.

Procedural coupling is most robust when historical evidence, representative participation, recommendations, final authority, and public reporting form an integrated sequence. UVA, Virginia Tech, Princeton, and Brown exemplify formal separations between investigation or recommendation and final approval. Richmond, Oregon State, Princeton, Georgetown, and Minnesota show instances of documented engagement or reporting. It remains important to differentiate procedural strength from routine activation: a transparent committee process still may only convene in response to controversies.

Outcome coupling is unevenly realized. Several universities connect decisions to contextualization or historical education; examples include UNC's commitment to curating campus history, Oregon State's interpretive materials, and Yale's emphasis on preventing erasure. Replacement names range from positive recognition of historically marginalized communities to neutral designations. However, structural follow-through is the least consistently documented. Institutions like UVA, Princeton, Georgetown, and Brown provide public evidence of accompanying programs or commitments, whereas many others lack enough public information to assess broader accountability following naming decisions.

4.3 Practical Recommendations

Administrators can apply four recommendations from these findings. First, incorporate periodic triggers into policies, such as scheduled audits, time-limited honorary names, or queued reviews, while maintaining an

accessible petition route. Second, delineate role separation: an independent review body should conduct investigations and offer recommendations, while a designated board or executive should make decisions and issue justifications publicly. Third, mandate the creation of a public decision record that specifies evidence, participation, alternatives explored, approvals, and the rationale for retention, contextualization, removal, or replacement. Fourth, provide an outcome memorandum for each final decision indicating whether and how contextualization, archival preservation, curriculum development, replacement naming, resources, and accountability metrics will ensue. These recommendations are derived from cross-case patterns in the corpus rather than from systematic evaluation of their implementation or effects. They are therefore offered as design propositions to be tested, not as validated best practices.

4.3.1 Contextual Conditions for Implementation

How these design features operate is likely to depend on institutional context. Public institutions are often subject to state statutes, system-level policies, or governing-board structures that limit how naming reviews are initiated and who may approve them, whereas private institutions typically have greater procedural latitude but face different pressures from donors, alumni, and founding or religious traditions. A periodic trigger that is feasible at a flagship research university may need to be adapted where a state legislature or system office holds final authority; in such settings, a scheduled review might produce recommendations for the authorized body rather than final decisions.

Resource capacity also matters. The cases in this corpus are primarily research universities with archives, professional historians, and dedicated communications staff. Institutions with fewer resources, including many regional comprehensive universities and community colleges, may be unable to sustain a standing committee or a campus-wide audit. Scaled versions of the recommendations may be more realistic: aligning naming reviews with existing cycles such as strategic planning, facilities master planning, or accreditation self-studies; prioritizing the most prominent or contested names first; and partnering with faculty, libraries, or regional historical organizations to conduct the historical research.

Finally, the recommendations may interact with competing stakeholder interests. Periodic review can raise concerns among donors whose gifts carry naming rights, among alumni who regard names as part of institutional identity, and among governing boards wary of recurring controversy. At the same time, students, faculty, and descendant communities may regard scheduled reviews as too slow or too procedural, consistent with the critical toponymic concern discussed below. Stating review provisions explicitly in gift agreements, publishing criteria in advance, and pairing every decision—whether retention, contextualization, or removal—with a commitment to preserve and teach the relevant history can help institutions balance these interests. Removing a name should not erase the history behind it; the outcome memorandum is one mechanism for ensuring that this history remains documented and taught. Whether these features reduce crisis dependence or strengthen perceived legitimacy remains an empirical question for future research.

5. Discussion

The findings differentiate formalization from institutionalization. While written standards and committees can confer legitimacy and improve audit capability, they do not establish routine governance absent a reliable means to activate and utilize those structures. The Routine Stewardship Model thus emphasizes three analytic links: activation coupling ties criteria to time and initiation; procedural coupling connects evidence and participation to authority and public justification; and outcome coupling links decisions to educational goals, representation, and accountability.

Alternative interpretations are possible. An advocate for institutional autonomy might view discretionary activation as crucial for preventing bureaucratic overreach or donor conflicts, rather than as a deficiency. A deliberative-democratic perspective might prefer ad hoc, case-sensitive engagement over rigid schedules. Meanwhile, a critical toponymic view might argue that formal procedures tend to domesticate or delay calls for redress. These perspectives enrich rather than negate the model's proposition: the assertion is not that every institution should yield identical outcomes, but that policies should transparently convey how reviews are initiated, whose knowledge is prioritized, who decides, and what follows.

The evidence has notable limitations. It is drawn from publicly available, English-language documents from a purposive selection of U.S. universities, primarily research institutions with extensive administrative capacity. It does not access confidential deliberations, informal influences, implementation quality, donor agreements, state-law constraints, or undisclosed equity initiatives. The coding is interpretive and carried out by one researcher; it should not be misconstrued as a causal ranking of institutions or proof that any governance feature enhances campus climate or belonging. Because classifications were assigned by a single coder, the matrix should be read as a set of transparent, source-linked analytic judgments that other researchers can audit and re-code, rather than as an independently validated measurement. The practical recommendations share a related limitation: they reflect

patterns across documented cases, not evaluated interventions, and their effects are likely to vary with institutional context, resources, and stakeholder interests.

6. Conclusion

This study contributes to understanding university governance by illustrating why adopting a naming policy does not equate to routine stewardship. Its first conceptual contribution identifies three observable relationships—activation, procedure, and outcome—translating policy decoupling into an analytic framework. Its second empirical contribution reveals that although fifteen cases have more developed formal criteria and procedural elements, they lack in recurring activation and verified structural follow-through. Its third practical contribution offers design features for institutions to reduce crisis-reliance and enhance public accountability, framed as testable propositions whose effects will depend on institutional context, resources, and stakeholder interests. Future research should test this model using longitudinal event histories, independent dual coding, interviews, meeting records, implementation data, and systematic evaluations of the recommended design features, facilitating comparisons across public, private, community-college, tribal, religiously affiliated, and international institutions. Additionally, examining the legal and political factors that enable or restrict periodic reviews and assessing whether more routinized governance affects decision timing, perceived legitimacy, historical learning, trust, or lasting equity commitments can further refine when naming governance transitions into a reproducible institutional practice rather than an episodic reaction to public pressure.

Ethics Statement

The study analyzed only publicly available institutional documents and did not involve human participants, identifiable private information, or interaction with individuals. The analysis therefore addresses institutional texts and public governance records rather than human-subject data.

Data Availability Statement

The documents analyzed in this study are publicly available through the institutional sources identified in the references and Supplemental Appendix A. The comparative coding matrix is reproduced in Table 2. Source-linked coding rationales and analytic notes should be retained by the author as part of the research audit trail and may be made available to editors or qualified researchers where appropriate.

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The author reports no potential conflict of interest. The author is a descendant of people enslaved by the Barringer family, the family of Paul Brandon Barringer, on its plantation in Cabarrus County, North Carolina. This ancestral connection did not influence the research design, source selection, analysis, or conclusions. The author reports no other potential conflict of interest concerning the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

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Appendix A. Primary-Source Audit Trail

This appendix identifies the principal cases and primary institutional documents used to support the comparative analysis. The reference list provides public source locations. The audit trail is intended to make case selection and coding provenance transparent; it does not imply that every publicly available document generated by each institution was included.

Table A1. Primary-Source Audit Trail

Institution	Key case(s)	Primary policy/documentary basis
University of Virginia	Curry School → School of Education and Human Development; Withers-Brown → Brown Hall (2020)	Policy EXT-004; Board renaming and landscape recommendations
Virginia Tech	Barringer Hall and Lee Hall names removed (2020)	Policy 12005; Council on Virginia Tech History report on Barringer and Barringer Hall
University of Richmond	Six building names removed; T.C. Williams School of Law → University of Richmond School of Law (2022)	Board naming principles and messages
UNC Chapel Hill	Saunders Hall → Carolina Hall (2015); Aycock, Carr, Daniels, and Ruffin names removed (2020)	Board actions; moratorium lift; 2020 removal decisions
Oregon State University	Avery Lodge and Benton Hall/Annex renamed; Arnold and Gill retained (2017)	President Ray building-names decision statement
Yale University	Calhoun College → Grace Hopper College (2017)	Committee to Establish Principles on Renaming report; presidential decision
Princeton University	Woodrow Wilson School → Princeton School of Public and International Affairs; Wilson College → First College (2020); Witherspoon statue review (2024)	Renaming principles report; trustee decision materials
Georgetown University	Mulledy Hall → Isaac Hawkins Hall; McSherry Hall → Anne Marie Becraft Hall (2017)	Renaming announcement; Slavery, Memory, and Reconciliation commitments
Duke University	Carr Building name removed; reverted to Classroom Building (2018)	Memory and History case materials
University of Minnesota	Board declined four renamings; later adopted namings and renamings policy (2019–2025)	Board of Regents policy; 2019 resolutions
University of Michigan	Alexander Winchell House name rescinded (2018)	President's Advisory Committee on University History memo; Regents action
Clemson University	Calhoun Honors → Clemson Honors; Tillman Hall restoration requested (2020)	Trustee action; resolution on Clemson history
William & Mary	Trinkle Hall → Unity Hall; Maury Hall → York River Hall (2020)	Board resolution HC-2; working group report
University of Texas at Austin	Jefferson Davis and other Confederate statues relocated (2015, 2017)	University Confederate memorials documentation

Institution	Key case(s)	Primary policy/documentary basis
Brown University	Slavery Memorial (2014); Center for Study of Slavery and Justice renamed for Ruth J. Simmons (2023)	Slavery and Justice report; naming policy; memorial materials; Simmons renaming

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