

History Working Group Recommendations May 3, 2018

The History Working Group engaged in a semester-long process of research and learning about the history of Bryn Mawr and of listening to each other and to the many stakeholders of the College who engaged with us through letters, messages, and listening sessions. We did not start our work with trying to answer the question: “What shall we recommend?” We started with “What do we need to learn?”

We reviewed archival documents, considered the social and intellectual contexts of the College’s founding, learned about M. Carey Thomas and her vision for Bryn Mawr, listened to community members’ perceptions and experiences, and informed ourselves about how other colleges and universities have addressed their institutional histories of racism and exclusion.

We heard from many hundreds of alumnae, faculty, staff, and students through formal listening sessions, letters, emails, and informal conversations, which helped to inform and guide our work. The Bryn Mawr community is multi-generational, international, and diverse in life experience and social identities. We heard many points of view. We learned of the great variety of relationships people have to the College, how they have experienced their time at Bryn Mawr, and how M. Carey Thomas figures in their thinking about Bryn Mawr – and even themselves.

We began our work with questions: How and why were women’s colleges founded? How was Bryn Mawr distinctive? What was M. Carey Thomas’ intellectual direction? What were her goals and her vision for Bryn Mawr? How did her ideas about race and religion influence her thinking about the College? What were Thomas’ personal opinions and what did she advocate publicly as president of Bryn Mawr? How did Thomas’ belief in eugenics shape her leadership of the College? Was the racism and anti-Semitism of her time any different from the racism and anti-Semitism of our time? Was she typical of her time? How were views about race and religion institutionalized in the early years of the College? Where are the remnants of that today? What do students, faculty, staff, and alumnae/i know, and not know, about the College’s history? How do current and recent members of the College community experience the campus? How do we go forward as a community that values every member, while acknowledging histories of harm due to racism and anti-Semitism at the College? How do we ensure that we do not erase histories but tell a fuller story of our history? How can we use our history to make us a better College?

We hope that members of the Bryn Mawr College community will engage with these questions themselves and will explore the reading [list](#) that we’ve made available on the College website.

The Working Group’s discussions reflected our various perspectives, knowledge, experiences, and academic disciplines, and all of us experienced shifts in our thinking during the course of our study. We did, however, agree on the following recommendations. We hope our questions, consultations, and reflections on historical evidence will help Bryn Mawr become more fully the college it aspires to be.

Recommendations

- The College should embrace the full nature of its past, owning those elements that are praiseworthy as well as those worthy of scorn. We have heard from community members across the generations that they have valued learning about the history of the College through the Working Group's activities and have wished they had known it sooner.
- The College should provide both the materials and opportunities that will allow for fuller engagement with our past, including research funds, campus markers, historical displays in buildings, symposia, and other tools.
- The orientation of new faculty, staff, and students should include opportunities for learning and engagement with the history of the College. The institution needs to articulate, and give voice to our historical narrative through all of the means available to us: the media, admissions and promotional materials, presidential statements, convocation speeches, publications, and the markings of our campus' physical space.
- The College should bring to a close the use of "Thomas" in reference to the old library and Great Hall in daily business of the College. Building names carry the ideological weight of their namesakes. The renaming of the library in honor of M. Carey Thomas in 1935 memorialized alumnae regard for her at that time and their identification with her accomplishments. Our careful study and contextualization of Thomas and of Bryn Mawr's history in combination with our listening to many hundreds of members of this community have led us to understand that Thomas' name on our most iconic building has power. A college memorial should take into account the impact of it on the institutional mission. A college explicitly committed to inclusion should err on the side of creating campus spaces where all students, regardless of background, can learn, dream, achieve, and feel seen, heard and valued. We have learned that the daily use of the Thomas name on our most iconic building does not support that goal.
- The old library should continue to be preserved and acknowledged as a historic landmark and an active center of teaching, learning, and celebration. The Thomas name etched on the building should remain and a significant plaque or other museum-quality display should be installed to annotate the history of the building and inform the public about M. Carey Thomas. We acknowledge that for many alumnae/i and others, the building will always be "Thomas." The discontinued use of Thomas' name is emphatically not an act of erasure -- it is part of a necessary process of layering history upon history. Rather than a violent act taken against our history, it is in fact an act of confronting, preserving, and telling it. It represents what we the living want the College to be now and to represent to our students.

- In furthering the project of historical layering, the College should strive to elevate and amplify the voices of a wider range of individuals who have contributed to the history of the College. Working class men and women, people who were termed “menial labor,” should be acknowledged and recognized. This can be effected through signage, plaques affixed to campus buildings, oral histories, and publications and installations that make use of photographs and archival materials. We also recommend College investment in the “Black at Bryn Mawr” project and encourage the development of similar projects recognizing other groups who have helped to create Bryn Mawr over the decades.
- The College needs to continue the work of learning from past errors and endeavor to do the work of repair through programmatic investment and allocation of resources to ensure equity of access to opportunities and educational outcomes for all students.
- The College, historically, has acted on the belief that the presence of women role models contributes to the long-term success of our students. The College should continue and intensify efforts that have been undertaken in the past few years to attract, retain and support faculty and professional staff from under-represented groups.

We offer these recommendations for the consideration of the community and the Board of Trustees. We are grateful to President Cassidy for the opportunity to do this work and commend and support her commitment to building a diverse community of belonging.

Respectfully submitted,

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