15 Must-Ask Questions

Before Addressing a Racist Symbol on Campus

In response to intensifying public pressure to grapple with historical ties to racial harm, colleges and universities are racing to release public statements, remove statues and change building names, and reaffirm their commitment to advancing equity. However, these symbolic gestures are not enough. Before your institution renames, removes, or contextualizes a visible symbol of racial oppression, **answer these 15 critical questions to ensure your work sustains and achieves strategic and transformative outcomes.**

Connection to Long-Term Strategy

1 Has institutional leadership articulated how addressing our racial history connects to the institution's mission, strategy, and goals?

2 Has institutional leadership defined a specific scope and desired outcomes for this work?

3 Has institutional leadership outlined ownership, roles, and responsibilities for long-term reckoning with legacies of racism?

▶ **Why Does This Matter?**

Absent a clear rationale and strategy for undertaking this work, institutions often spin in a reactive rather than forward-looking space, and visibility and momentum fade with time or turnover.

Articulating a specific scope, ownership, and desired outcomes builds a shared vision for continued progress and connects these efforts to ongoing equity goals.

Risk Assessment & Stakeholder Buy-In

4 Has institutional leadership examined all the risks associated with confronting our racial history?

5 Is institutional leadership prepared to manage pushback from resistant stakeholders?

6 Is our campus community equipped to engage in uncomfortable dialogue about racial harm and healing?

▶ **Why Does This Matter?**

Concerns about impact on donor relations and the potential for increased activism, tension with the local community, and negative media attention often prevent institutions from making meaningful progress.

Strategically assessing and preparing for risks better equips institutional leaders to manage their campus through change.

Historical Narrative & Collective Memory

7 Has my institution detailed our specific historical connections to racial oppression?

8 Has my institution surfaced the enduring impacts of our racial legacy?

9 Has my institution planned for widespread and sustained engagement with the details of our racial legacy?

▶ **Why Does This Matter?**

Historic harms caused by the institution and the impact of those harms are often undocumented and unknown, and uncovering and documenting harms can be perceived as being difficult or time-consuming.

Investigating an institution's specific connections to racism and oppression is important to building credibility, creating understanding, and informing actions going forward.

Relationships with Harmed Communities

10 Has institutional leadership identified the communities harmed by our racial legacy and assessed the state of relationships with these communities?

11 Does institutional leadership understand the needs, wants, and experiences of these harmed communities?

12 Has my institution created mechanisms for ongoing partnership and collaboration with harmed communities?

▶ **Why Does This Matter?**

Institutions often have limited relationships with harmed communities and are unaware of their lived experiences and priorities when taking on this work.

Putting the perspectives of harmed communities at the center and building mechanisms for ongoing collaboration is critical to ensuring that efforts lead meaningful and impactful change.

Transformative Action & Justice

13 Does my institution have a shared understanding of different ways to address legacies of racism?

14 Has institutional leadership prioritized short- and long-term actions to address legacies of racism?

15 Does institutional leadership have a plan to implement, fund, and evaluate initiatives that address legacies of racism?

▶ **Why Does This Matter?**

There is a lack of consensus about how to best address historical legacies of racism. As a result, quick-fix and largely symbolic solutions are often prioritized but do not lead to deeper, systemic changes.

Understanding the implications of different potential solutions and creating clear guidelines for prioritization, implementation, and evaluation will enable you to work toward long-term transformation.

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Learn how to manage risk and get buy-in for addressing your institution's historical legacy.

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