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Bayleigh Dawkins

[bbdawkins@myapps.muw.edu](mailto:bbdawkins@myapps.muw.edu)

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# The Attempted Name Changes of MUW after Coeducation

Bayleigh Dawkins

Mississippi University for Women

Mississippi University for Women (MUW) is a small, regional university located in east central Mississippi. Since its founding in 1884, MUW has operated as a public institution and transitioned to coeducation in 1982 after enrolling only women for its first 98 years. While its name has changed several times since its founding, there has been no name change since men were admitted to the university. MUW continues as an institution focused on “maintaining its historic commitment to academic and leadership development for women.” The late twentieth century has seen much change for other women-serving schools and colleges. Most have adjusted to changing gender standards and norms by opening their campuses to men. This process has been more often than not accompanied by a name change, as was the case for Vassar, Randolph-Macon, and Wheaton Colleges. However, MUW is one of only two public universities that has opened its doors to men without changing its name. This study reveals that the conversation around changing a university’s name centers primarily on the issue of its mission, interpreted by stakeholders and other factors, not on the name itself. In this way, the name steals the spotlight, but the real question is how and to what degree the university continues to keep women as the mission’s focus.

The history of MUW starts in the mid 1850s, when Sallie E. Reneau began campaigning for a state-supported college for women. She survived to see the college receive legislative approval and funding on March 12, 1884.<sup>1</sup> When established, the state legislature named the college the “Mississippi Industrial Institute and College for the Education of White Girls of the State of Mississippi” which was then shortened to the “Mississippi Industrial Institute and College” (II&C).<sup>2</sup> Initially, the purpose of the college was to provide an education in the arts and sciences, but it also trained women in skills deemed practical for women at the time, such as kindergarten instruction, telegraphy, stenography, photography, drawing, painting, designing, needlework, bookkeeping, and “fitting girls for the practical industries of the age.”<sup>3</sup> During the first years of the University, the issue of name change was not a predominate topic; it was first broached with President Henry Whitfield. Whitfield proposed the name change due to the radical change in industrial studies and his expansion of the school’s collegiate nature.<sup>4</sup> On February 12, 1920, Mississippi legislature voted to change the name of II&C to “Mississippi State College for Women” (MSCW). A second name change occurred on March 15, 1974, when the state legislature granted the Mississippi State College for Women official university status. MSCW then became Mississippi University for Women (MUW).<sup>5</sup> During the two name changes following the establishment of the university, the mission remained very similar to the original

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<sup>1</sup> Bridget Smith Pieschel and Stephen Robert Pieschel. *Loyal Daughters: One Hundred Years at Mississippi University for Women, 1884-1984*. (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1984), 8.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Bridget Smith Pieschel and Stephen Robert Pieschel. *Loyal Daughters: One Hundred Years at Mississippi University for Women, 1884-1984*. (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1984), 67.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. 127.

mission of II&C. The institution remained dedicated to the mission of education for the women of Mississippi, and the name changes reflected the types of educational programs that were offered.

The single-sex focus and mission was not threatened by racial integration, which happened in 1966.<sup>6</sup> This integration was accomplished without any question or challenge to the mission of the school because “the founding principles of fairness and sensitivity to the needs of each student” included both black and white students, which at the time were all still women.<sup>7</sup> Another aspect that kept the mission intact during this process was the school’s attempt to include black women on campus in social, political, and academic life, which even included the establishment of a black social club on campus.<sup>8</sup> However, by 1982, the school faced a legal challenge due to its women-only mission.

Joe Hogan, a man, attempted to enroll in the nursing program at MUW. The university denied Joe Hogan admission to the School of Nursing, and he sued on the basis of equal rights, claiming that because the university was funded with public money, he had a right to attend MUW regardless of his gender. The State of Mississippi’s justification for the women-only mission was that “it compensates for discrimination against women and, therefore, constitutes educational affirmative action.”<sup>9</sup> The case worked its way to the U.S. Supreme Court, which in its decision ordered the School of Nursing at Mississippi University for Women to admit male applicants.<sup>10</sup> The court held the position that MUW “denying otherwise qualified males (such as the respondent) the right to enroll for credit in its School of Nursing violate[d] the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment.”<sup>11</sup> This decision was not unanimous and did come with dissenting opinions. The dissenting opinion of Justice Lewis Powell claimed that “The Court’s opinion bows deeply to conformity.”<sup>12</sup> Justice Powell continued to make an argument against this decision by claiming that the respondent was not “significantly disadvantaged by MUW’s all-female tradition” and that his “single asserted harm: that he must *travel* to attend the state-supported nursing schools that concededly are available to him” was invalid. Therefore, Justice Powell believed that the respondent was not significantly disadvantaged by MUW’s all-female tradition.<sup>13</sup> He went on to cite arguments from the Carnegie Commission on Higher Education listing the benefits of single-sex universities.<sup>14</sup> The Supreme Court decision resulted in the Board of Trustees directing MUW to open all academic programs to male applicants. However, the board of trustees stipulated after their direction to accept male applicants that MUW’s original and historic mission must remain the same. This mission was “providing educational opportunities and encouragement for women.”<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 135.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 136.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> “MISSISSIPPI UNIVERSITY FOR WOMEN, et al., Petitioners, v. Joe HOGAN. | Supreme Court | US Law | LII / Legal Information Institute,” accessed November 4, 2021, <https://www.law.cornell.edu/supremecourt/text/458/718>.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> “MISSISSIPPI UNIVERSITY FOR WOMEN, et al., Petitioners, v. Joe HOGAN. | Supreme Court | US Law | LII / Legal Information Institute,” accessed November 4, 2021, <https://www.law.cornell.edu/supremecourt/text/458/718>.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Bridget Smith Pieschel and Stephen Robert Pieschel. *Loyal Daughters: One Hundred Years at Mississippi University for Women, 1884-1984*. (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1984), 151.

In 1988 there was a civil suit filed in federal court against Mississippi University for Women by two men in an attempt to force the university to change its name.<sup>16</sup> The lawsuit claimed the actions taken by the university violated Title IX of the Educational Amendments of 1972. The claims included that the university had acted in four different types of sex-discrimination. The plaintiffs argued that not only did the male students' have a right to a gender-neutral university name, but the mission of the university needed to change to be gender-neutral as well. They also argued that the university needed to "adopt a policy of recruiting and retaining male students on the same basis as females."<sup>17</sup> The two male students claimed that the university's name discouraged male applicants and discriminated against male students.<sup>18</sup> The proposed name change not only addressed the societal issues that the university's name had created, such as discrimination and inequality, but also the economic issues that had been tied to it as well. Many supporters cited financial needs as a reason for a name change in order to increase enrollment at the university.<sup>19</sup> This lack of male enrollment also became a basis for future attempted name changes. The judge dismissed the case because the plaintiffs had not been personally discriminated against, and the conduct challenged was the conduct of the legislature; they were the ones responsible for name changes of universities and not Mississippi University for Women, the defendants.<sup>20</sup>

The women's rights movement of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century challenged many gender constraints women faced, but it also raised the question as to whether women needed single-sex institutions. If women could go to any university, why did they need a separate one? No women's institution experienced this time without real questions being raised of its mission. Case studies of women's colleges, private and public, after the 1960s indicate that many were forced to change. While some remained single-sex (if they were private), others went coeducational or closed. Vassar Female College chose to transition to coeducation as well as change their name by the late 1960s. They first changed their name in 1866 out of concern for the term "'female' [which w]as a timely reference for Vassar women."<sup>21</sup> This concern over the term female was a result of a campaign by Sarah Josepha Hale, who claimed that the title female was "repugnant" because it stemmed from Darwin's *The Origins of Species*, which discussed males, females, and the sexual chase in animals.<sup>22</sup> The college's president, Sarah Blanding, presented the concerns about the future of women's colleges to the alumnae. In 1966, Yale president and Vassar board of trustees began looking at the possibility of Vassar merging with Yale, much like the proposed merger of MUW and MSU in the 1990's. This idea was met with significant opposition, including opposition from alumni, faculty, and students. As a result, Vassar adapted through an alternate method, which was coeducation. The proposition was

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<sup>16</sup> "2 males file suit to change MUW's name," *Associated Press: Columbus*, "MUW Name Changing Suit 1988" Vertical File, Beulah Culbertson Archives and Special Collections, Fant Memorial Library, Mississippi University for Women, Columbus, MS. Hereafter cited Beulah Culbertson Archives.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> George Hazard, "Local Men File Action in Court", *Commercial Dispatch*. "MUW Name Changing Suit 1988," Vertical File, Beulah Culbertson Archives.

<sup>19</sup> "Readers Respond to Poll," *The Commercial Dispatch*, June 14, 1988, "MUW Name Changing Suit 1988" Vertical File, Beulah Culbertson Archives.

<sup>20</sup> George Hazard, "Dismissal," *The Commercial Dispatch*, November 17, 1989, "MUW Name Changing Suit 1988," Vertical File, Beulah Culbertson Archives.

<sup>21</sup> Helen Ciernick, *Challenged by Coeducation: Women's Colleges since the 1960s*, vol. 94 (Catholic University of America Press, 2008), 26.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

supported with an astounding majority, and in 1969 Vassar began accepting male students.<sup>23</sup> Another example is Wheaton College, which was founded as a seminary for women and transitioned to coeducation in 1988. The college was originally known as Wheaton Female Seminary and changed its name when it gained college status in 1912. Wheaton College's President Alice Frey Emerson favored coeducation because there had been a decline in enrollment as well as a "decline in the applicant pool, in both numbers and admissions profiles."<sup>24</sup> Consequently, in 1988 the college became coeducational.

Texas Women's University (TWU) is an important model for MUW because while it transitioned to coeducation, it, too, did not change its name. The university coeducated in 1972 due to legal provisions made against sex discrimination in the Title VII and VIII of the Public Health Service Act. At first TWU only admitted men into certain programs of study that were in the Institute of Health Sciences, included nursing, occupational therapy, physical therapy, and health-care services. However, the university eventually admitted men into all other programs on campus beginning December 1994. After this transition to coeducation, the university began to alter their mission to a more gender-neutral mission for the university.<sup>25</sup> In 1986, the Select Committee on Higher Education for the state of Texas seriously considered the merger of Texas Women's University and University of Northern Texas in an attempt to save money and restructure higher education across the state.<sup>26</sup> The possibility for a merger at Texas Women's University had occurred three times prior to 1986, and each time the question was prompted by difficult economic times and/or a decline in enrollment.<sup>27</sup> These attempted mergers between Texas Women's University and University of North Texas occurred in 1933, 1953, and 1979. During each of these three attempts, there were organized campaigns, which were put together by the Alumnae Association, university presidents, and sometimes the Texas Federation of Women's Clubs, all of which were successful in preventing the merger.<sup>28</sup> After admission of men to the graduate programs, there were disagreements as to whether the undergraduate programs should be open to men as well. This was met with much resistance on campus. Opponents argued that it would harm the university's mission, which, like MUW's, was aimed at the higher education of women in Texas. The immediate result of men's admission in December 1994 was the creation of women-centered degree programs.<sup>29</sup> The university made the decision to admit men into all programs because a prospective male student challenged the policy preventing the admittance of men into the undergraduate general division.<sup>30</sup> After becoming coeducational, Texas Women's University's administration created the M.A. degree program in Women's Studies. This program was a result of the policy change on men's admittance because "the administration actively sought ways to strengthen TWU's mission and adopted women's studies as an integral part of their strategic plan."<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Helen Ciernick, *Challenged by Coeducation: Women's Colleges since the 1960s*, vol. 94 (Catholic University of America Press, 2008), 30

<sup>24</sup> Helen Ciernick, *Challenged by Coeducation: Women's Colleges since the 1960s*, vol. 94 (Catholic University of America Press, 2008), 50.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 116.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.

<sup>28</sup> Helen Ciernick, *Challenged by Coeducation: Women's Colleges since the 1960s*, vol. 94 (Catholic University of America Press, 2008), 119.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 129.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 122.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 129.

Sarah Kratzok examines the push for coeducation in women's colleges. She argues that women's colleges shifted to coeducation because of financial issues within the institutions. She argues that universities that made the decision to become coeducational faced issues that put them near closure. In an effort to save the universities from a merger or closure, the administration decided they would make their universities coeducational.<sup>32</sup> Emily A. Langdon agrees with Kratzok. In the 1960's and 1970's, women's colleges began the transition to coeducation not because of "ideology, pedagogy, or educational equity" but due to the financial struggles their colleges were facing.<sup>33</sup> This problem not only applies to women's colleges; men-only colleges, such as Harvard, Dartmouth, and Princeton, also made the transition to coeducation in efforts to ease their own financial issues. These men-only colleges did not face the same issue of name change due to the fact that they did not include "men" or "male" in the name prior to coeducation.

David Gold and Catherine L. Hobbs track the name changes of southern women's universities from their founding to their current status as coeducational universities in *Educating the New Southern Woman: Speech, Writing, and Race at the Public Women's Colleges, 1884-1945*.<sup>34</sup> The book focuses on eight different southern public colleges that remained open and operational long enough to become coeducational. Out of the eight universities, only two that made the transition to coeducation have kept their pre-coeducation name which includes the term "Woman's" and "Women." These two universities are Texas Women's University and Mississippi University for Women. It is unusual, then, for a college that is coeducational to not have an inclusive name representing itself since most colleges adapted their name upon coeducating. This proclivity for a name change with coeducational status suggests that colleges feared financial difficulties without changing their names.

Historian Amy McCandless focuses on coeducation and women's higher education, including Randolph-Macon Women's college, in her work *Past in the Present: Women's Higher Education in the Twentieth-Century American South*.<sup>35</sup> McCandless frames coeducation and name changes as a difficult decision that was often fought against but one that was also primarily political and viewed as necessary to save the colleges.<sup>36</sup> This idea is evident through Randolph-Macon's decision to change its name as it made the transition to coeducation in 2007, a decision not supported by its students. Not only did students protest the name change in groups on campus and hang banners that read "An Independent Woman Never Changes Her Name," but there were also nine students who filed a lawsuit against the university in efforts to keep the name from changing.<sup>37</sup> The students filed the lawsuit with the complaint that "the College was established in 1891 for the primary purpose of educating women, and that all gifts and donations to the College since its inception were given to support that objective." Also, they raised the issue that the "College is a charitable trust and that the plaintiffs are beneficiaries ... [; thus,] the

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<sup>32</sup> Sara Kratzok, "Tough Questions Facing Women's Colleges," *New Directions for Higher Education*, no. 151 (January 1, 2010): 49–59.

<sup>33</sup> Emily A. Langdon and Emily A. Langdon, "Women's Colleges Then and Now: Access Then, Equity Now," *Peabody Journal of Education* 76, no. 1 (January 1, 2001): 8.

<sup>34</sup> David Gold and Catherine Hobbs. *Educating the New Southern Woman: Speech, Writing, and Race at the Public Women's Colleges, 1884-1945*. (Carbondale: University of Southern Illinois Press, 2014).

<sup>35</sup> Amy Thompson McCandless, *The Past in the Present: Women's Higher Education in the Twentieth-Century American South* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1999).

<sup>36</sup> Amy Thompson McCandless, *The Past in the Present: Women's Higher Education in the Twentieth-Century American South* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1999). 87.

<sup>37</sup> Burton Bollag, "Not for Women Only," *Chronicle of Higher Education* 53, no. 19 (January 12, 2007): A7–A7.

college breached certain duties owed to them.”<sup>38</sup> Nevertheless, the court held “that the College is not a trust, so it is not subject to the Uniform Trust Code.”<sup>39</sup>

In 1988 the President of Mississippi University for Women, President James W. Strobel, was willing, if not eager, to discuss a name change.<sup>40</sup> A 1988 lawsuit, filed by Darrell Glenn and David Turner, forced the issue. Strobel argued that because Mississippi University for Women had become coeducational, the discussion of a name change was necessary. However, he did not support one name over the other and declined to push the name change at all. Instead, Strobel argued that for the change to occur there should be majority support among students, faculty, and alumni.<sup>41</sup> While Strobel did not take a clear stand on the name change, there were other factors at play. The University faced financial problems related to declining admission, which raised the possibility of merging with Mississippi State University or closing the university. Written between MUW’s transition to coeducation in 1982 and the lawsuit for a name change in 1988, President Strobel’s letters with the Alumna Association and the IHL Board of Trustees’ Executive Secretary and Director E. E. Thrash reveal concerns about the potential merger or closure of the University.<sup>42</sup> In these letters Strobel proposed alternatives to merging or closing while focusing on the need to increase enrollment in the university.<sup>43</sup>

The MUW Alumnae Association (MUWAA) was against the transition of the University to coeducation in 1982, which bled over into efforts to change the name in following years. In 1988 when Mississippi University of Women faced a lawsuit over their name, the MUWAA was very vocal about their dislike for the proposed name change. The association was aware of the argument that the name change was a necessity for the survival of the University, but the alumni argued that there should be no name change or change in curriculum until there was sufficient evidence to support or deny the need for the name change.<sup>44</sup> The Alumnae Association also insisted that President Strobel carry the motion – declining a name change unless there was sufficient evidence from students, administration, and townspeople to support the change – to the board of trustees of the Institute of Higher Learning (IHL). The MUWAA claimed that the decision of the university’s name and mission could not be decided only by themselves but also should have support from the students, administration, and townspeople.<sup>45</sup> During this attempted name change, it was not only the MUWAA but also individual alumni from the university and across the state who wrote letters to the editor of *The Clarion-Ledger*. One alumnus, Beth Stowers, went as far to say that she imagined “Emma Ody Pohl is spinning in her grave” because of the proposed name change of the university.<sup>46</sup> She argues the previous name changes of the university were acceptable because they were able to respect and preserve the university’s

<sup>38</sup> “FindLaw’s Supreme Court of Virginia Case and Opinions.,” Findlaw, accessed November 17, 2021, <https://caselaw.findlaw.com/va-supreme-court/1421812.html>.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> “Some Want New Name,” September 28, 1987, “MUW Name Changing Suit 1988,” Vertical File, Beulah Culbertson Archives.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Letter from James Strobel to MUW Alumna. Box C306, folder 146. Strobel Records, Beulah Culbertson Archives.

<sup>43</sup> Letter from James Strobel to Academic/Administrative Leader. Box C306, folder 151. Strobel Records, Beulah Culbertson Archives.

<sup>44</sup> “MUW Alumnae Board Wants Name To Stay,” *Columbus Dispatch*, “MUW Name Changing Suit 1988,” Vertical File, Beulah Culbertson Archives.

<sup>45</sup> “MUW Alumnae Board Wants Name To Stay,” *Columbus Dispatch*, “MUW Name Changing Suit 1988,” Vertical File, Beulah Culbertson Archives.

<sup>46</sup> Beth Stowers, “Thinks Emma Ody Pohl ‘spinning in her grave,’” *The Clarion-Ledger*, “MUW Name Changing Suit 1988, Vertical File, Beulah Culbertson Archives.

unique history and mission as an institution of higher learning for women. However, she also believes that the name change would cause MUW to become generic and “just another university in the eyes of the public.”<sup>47</sup> Another alumnus, Maggie Parker, expressed her support for the motion that the MUWAA had sent to President Strobel that argued the University’s mission as well as their name should remain the same.<sup>48</sup> A common theme among the alumni’s opposition to the proposed name change was the belief that if Mississippi University for Women were to undergo a name change that was more inclusive to the men on campus, it would lose its history and mission as a university. Bridget Smith Pieschel, an MUW alumna and English Professor at MUW, voiced her concern for changing the mission of the university and argued that MUW provided women with extra emphasis in education, which was like “a head start program that women still need.”<sup>49</sup>

During the 1988 lawsuit against MUW, public opinion was divided. A big difference amongst the students was between the female students and the newly admitted male students on campus. Male students who were only recently allowed to enroll at MUW argued that with a name change they would “feel more at home.”<sup>50</sup> However, it was not only male students that were in favor of the proposed name change; a portion of female students also supported the change. The MUW SGA president during the 1988 lawsuit, Sally Burchfield, reported a survey’s results that addressed the student body’s support or lack thereof for the name change.<sup>51</sup> Conducted during registration, this survey, which only 10% of the university’s student body filled out, reported that out of that 10% who participated, 48% supported the name change and 50% were opposed.<sup>52</sup> Not only did the opinion of the students on campus vary dramatically, but the public opinion within Columbus and the surrounding community was also mixed. The divisiveness of this question can clearly be seen in the polling carried out in local newspapers. Over the course of the 1988 lawsuit, the *Commercial Dispatch* carried out various polls for their readers to tell the newspaper what they thought about the university and the proposed name change. One article included a sampling of opinions which were sent in from readers. The three responses the paper received and subsequently published expressed support for the proposed name change of the university. They supported not only the name change for the university but also a change to the women-centered mission that the university had kept. The reasons given were based on the talk of a merger with another university, decreasing enrollment, the university “slowly hemorrhaging to death,” and the need for MUW to appeal in name and in mission not only to women, but males as well.<sup>53</sup> However, in the *Clarion-Ledger*, there is clear opposition to the proposed name change. In one editorial, a graduate of MUW first approaches the topic from a comparative standpoint, arguing that if MUW must change its name then all others should, too. She even references Ole Miss, saying, “If they’re man enough to go to a Miss, they’re man

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> “MUW Alumnae Board Wants Name To Stay,” *Columbus Dispatch*, November 18, 1987, “MUW Name Changing Suit 1988,” Vertical File, Beulah Culbertson Archives.

<sup>49</sup> Hayes Johnson, “Students, alumni discuss possible new name for ‘The W,’” *The Clarion-Ledger*, April 27, 1989, “MUW Name Changing Suit 1988,” Vertical File, Beulah Culbertson Archives.

<sup>50</sup> Hayes Johnson, “Students, alumni discuss possible new name for ‘The W,’” *The Clarion-Ledger*, April 27, 1989, “MUW Name Changing Suit 1988,” Vertical File, Beulah Culbertson Archives.

<sup>51</sup> State Senator [https://ballotpedia.org/Sally\\_Doty](https://ballotpedia.org/Sally_Doty)

<sup>52</sup> “Some Want New Name,” September 28, 1987, “MUW Name Changing Suit 1988,” Vertical File, Beulah Culbertson Archives.

<sup>53</sup> “Readers Respond to Poll,” *The Commercial Dispatch*, June 14, 1988, “MUW Name Changing Suit 1988” Vertical File, Beulah Culbertson Archives.



enough to go to Women.”<sup>54</sup> If humor did not appeal, she tried history, arguing that if the name changed at MUW, so would the traditions on campus, such as the names of the “Old Maid’s Gate” or the yearbook *Meh Lady*.<sup>55</sup> One month later the *Clarion-Ledger* published another editorial in which a member of the public expressed the opinion that the name of MUW needed to change for the benefit of its future. This individual, a “Columbus citizen,” wrote that the name must change to one that would “immediately notify everyone concerned that it is no longer a college for women only.”<sup>56</sup> Landis Rogers, a Columbus resident, proposed the university name be changed to “Columbus State University,” which she argued would “tell the full story at first glance;” the city of Columbus had historically played a major role in the establishment and the continued development of the University.<sup>57</sup> In 1988, the *Commercial Dispatch* feedback, unlike the feedback from the alumni, was split between support and opposition. There were responses that argued that the name should change because of men’s admission to the university and the need for the university to focus on educating anyone who wants to learn, instead of placing all their focus and efforts on women. Other arguments proposed that the name change would be the only way more men would enroll in the university, which would also solve MUW’s economic troubles.<sup>58</sup> Further responses argued that the university should keep the name Mississippi University for Women because of the university’s rich history and traditions. Others claimed that if MUW had survived so long with a women-centered name and mission, there was no need to change now. Another argument supported this position by taking the stance that women still need extra provisions when it comes to education—the argument here is that women-only institutions still serve an important role in achieving women’s equal opportunity.<sup>59</sup> As evident in the newspapers, public opinion – even within the Columbus area – varied from person to person. What the newspaper conversations made clear was that this issue deeply divided the state and Columbus area and that these opinions were strongly held.

While the students, faculty, administration, and alumni association had opinions on the issue of name changes at MUW, the final decision for the university’s name and mission statement came down to the Mississippi Legislature. In the 1988 lawsuit, Representative Miriam Simmons, an MUW alumni, did not favor the name change but agreed to support it if the alumni association and the students of MUW were organizing efforts to make the name change happen.<sup>60</sup> Contrary to her personal opinion and feelings on the issue, Rep. Simmons acknowledged the potential necessity of the name change for the viability of the institution.<sup>61</sup> Representative Simmons’ statements on the issue indicate that the results of the vote would depend on the support of the students and the alumni association, regardless of the Legislature’s stance on the name change. In November 1989, the U.S. district judge Glen Davidson dismissed

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<sup>54</sup> John Johnson, “They’re playing the name game at MUW again, and it’s a mess,” *The Clarion-Ledger*, September 28, 1987, “MUW Name Changing Suit 1988,” Vertical File, Beulah Culbertson Archives.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Landis Rogers, “Would rename ‘W’ Columbus State U.,” *The Clarion-Ledger*, October 22, 1987, “MUW Name Changing Suit 1988,” Vertical File, Beulah Culbertson Archives.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> “Readers: MUW Needs A Name Change,” *The Commercial Dispatch*, June 24, 1988, “MUW Name Changing Suit 1988,” Vertical File, Beulah Culbertson Archives.

<sup>59</sup> “Readers: MUW Needs A Name Change,” *The Commercial Dispatch*, June 24, 1988, “MUW Name Changing Suit 1988,” Vertical File, Beulah Culbertson Archives.

<sup>60</sup> Hayes Johnson, “Students, alumni discuss possible new name for ‘The W’,” *The Clarion-Ledger*, April 27, 1989, “MUW Name Changing Suit 1988,” Vertical File, Beulah Culbertson Archives.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

the lawsuit against MUW, ruling that the plaintiffs did “not allege that they have been personally discriminated against in the recruiting process” and had not shown “a concrete personal injury.”<sup>62</sup>

In 2008 the topic of name changes arose again, with two main proposed names of Reneau University or Waverley University. Unlike Strobel, President Claudia Limbert was an open supporter of the name change and even proposed Reneau University as the new name.<sup>63</sup> This name refers to Sallie Reneau, who at 18-years-old in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, lobbied the Legislature for the creation of the first state-supported female college in the United States and was credited as one of the founders of Mississippi University for Women. Limbert proposed Reneau as the new name for the university saying, “it was time to build that monument (to her).”<sup>64</sup> After the announcement of the proposed name, President Limbert sent it to the IHL for approval.<sup>65</sup> Trustees of the IHL, along with other local councils in Columbus, voted in support of President Limbert’s efforts to change the name of the university. Supporters of the name change pointed to the economic trouble the university faced. These economic motivations for the name change stemmed from various aspects, like the increase in the cost per student, especially since it was higher in comparison to other universities nearby.<sup>66</sup> Everyone agreed that, as in the late 1980s, the university faced tough economic times; the question was simply how to answer those challenges and whether a name change should be part of that solution. Unlike the 1988 debate, the 2008 debate also included Mississippi’s First Alumnae Association’s dissatisfaction in President Limbert’s term.<sup>67</sup> While President Limbert and other officials, like West Point Mayor Scott Ross, argued that the name change was essential to the university’s survival, the alumnae did not agree.

Tensions between President Limbert and the MUWAA were high before the proposed name change. These tensions began in 2006 when the IHL required all Mississippi universities to enter into an agreement with all affiliated entities, including alumni associations.<sup>68</sup> The provision which sparked the controversy gave “the University Alumni Director the power to appoint members to the Association’s nominations committee.”<sup>69</sup> President Limbert wanted this provision in the agreement in order to change the nomination procedures that were already in place. She felt the current proceedings enabled the same small group to stay in leadership positions, those of whom she believed were “undermining the objectives of MUW.”<sup>70</sup> The Alumnae Association signed the agreement after describing the provisions as “restrictive and

<sup>62</sup> George Hazard, “Dismissal,” *The Commercial Dispatch*, November 17, 1989, “MUW Name Changing Suit 1988,” Vertical File, Beulah Culbertson Archives.

<sup>63</sup> Kristin Mamrack, “Supporters: MUW name change critical to survival,” *The Commercial Dispatch*, August 11, 2009, “MUW Naming Comm. 2008-2009,” Vertical File, Beulah Culbertson Archives.

<sup>64</sup> Kristin Mamrack, “MUW NAME CHANGE: Limbert’s choice will now need College Board, legislative OK,” *The Commercial Dispatch*, August 10, 2009, “MUW Naming Comm. 2008-2009,” Vertical File, Beulah Culbertson Archives.

<sup>65</sup> Kristin Mamrack, “Supporters: MUW name change critical to survival,” *The Commercial Dispatch*, August 11, 2009, “MUW Naming Comm. 2008-2009,” Vertical File, Beulah Culbertson Archives.

<sup>66</sup> Kristin Mamrack, “Supporters: MUW name change critical to survival,” *The Commercial Dispatch*, August 11, 2009, “MUW Naming Comm. 2008-2009,” Vertical File, Beulah Culbertson Archives.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> “FindLaw’s Supreme Court of Mississippi Case and Opinions.,” Findlaw, accessed October 27, 2021, <https://caselaw.findlaw.com/ms-supreme-court/1331225.html>.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> “FindLaw’s Supreme Court of Mississippi Case and Opinions.,” Findlaw, accessed October 27, 2021, <https://caselaw.findlaw.com/ms-supreme-court/1331225.html>.

punitive” and then continued the process of rewriting their bylaws and constitution.<sup>71</sup> However, in 2007 President Limbert sent a letter terminating the agreement, which disaffiliated the Alumnae Association and Mississippi University for Women.<sup>72</sup> This conflict resulted in the Alumnae Association’s opposition not only of the name change but also to the university’s administration at the time.<sup>73</sup> Dissatisfaction with the administration at the time was high. President Limbert had closed the popular Demonstration School (which served as a normal school for local elementary children), dissolved the intercollegiate sports program, and disaffiliated the alumnae association all during her term and before the name change issue. Many viewed these changes as destructive to the university’s history and their mission, so the idea of changing the university’s name was regarded in the same light, as just another way the administration would reduce the uniqueness and heritage of Mississippi University for Women.<sup>74</sup> The MUWAA sued President Limbert over their disaffiliation, and this played out in the courts in 2007 and 2008. Ultimately, the MS Supreme Court ruled in favor of President Claudia Limbert and Mississippi University for Women.<sup>75</sup> Afterwards, Alumnae Association held a predetermined opposition to any motion put forth by President Limbert. Still, this opposition was not the only reason against the name change. There were also individuals who argued that a name change would “disassociate... the university from the benefits and strengths of that heritage, history and well-known name.”<sup>76</sup>

Similar to the events surrounding the attempted name change in 1988, the public opinion on the issue continued to be divided in 2008. The varying support or opposition often resulted from the position the individual held in the university or the community. Usually, the MUW alumni and a majority of the faculty opposed the name change although students and those not directly connected with the university in the community, such as previous students or employees, were divided evenly for the most part. The animosity many in the community held toward President Claudia Limbert resulted in a heated debate. Many of the men in the community, which were often alumni of MUW, supported the name change. One alumnus argued for a name change and said that the majority of the alumni who opposed the issue were wasting their time and energy. The individual, who chose to remain anonymous, believed that the name Mississippi University for Women prevented self-respecting men from enrolling at MUW.<sup>77</sup> Another MUW alumnus who chose to remain anonymous went on to say that the first name of MUW, “The Industrial Institute and College for the Education of White Girls of Mississippi,” was a racist tradition, whereas the current name was a sexist tradition and the name should “die a graceful death.”<sup>78</sup> Janie Miller, a Columbus native, noted how much this debate mirrored exclusion based on race. She remembered not being allowed into the university because of her skin color and

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> “FindLaw’s Supreme Court of Mississippi Case and Opinions.,” Findlaw, accessed October 27, 2021, <https://caselaw.findlaw.com/ms-supreme-court/1331225.html>.

<sup>73</sup> Kristin Mamrack, “Supporters: MUW name change critical to survival,” *The Commercial Dispatch*, August 11, 2009, “MUW Naming Comm. 2008-2009,” Vertical File, Beulah Culbertson Archives.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> “FindLaw’s Supreme Court of Mississippi Case and Opinions.,” Findlaw, accessed October 27, 2021, <https://caselaw.findlaw.com/ms-supreme-court/1331225.html>.

<sup>76</sup> Kristin Mamrack, “Supporters: MUW name change critical to survival,” *The Commercial Dispatch*, August 11, 2009, “MUW Naming Comm. 2008-2009,” Vertical File, Beulah Culbertson Archives.

<sup>77</sup> “READER COMMENT: From our Web site,” *The Commercial Dispatch*, August 10, 2009, “MUW Naming Comm. 2008-2009,” Vertical File, Beulah Culbertson Archives.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

advocated that, since all races and genders are admitted, the name should reflect that inclusion. Miller believed that with the new name, Reneau University, the university would survive beyond the twenty-first century.<sup>79</sup>

The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), however, voiced their objection to the proposed names of Reneau University or Waverley University for the change.<sup>80</sup> The objection was rooted in the fact that both Reneau and Waverley derived from association with nearby slave-holding plantations in the Old South. While supporters for the name “Waverley” argued that the name stemmed from a work of literary fiction by Sir Walter Scott instead of connection to the nearby “Waverley Plantation,” the NAACP rejected this argument because regardless of the spelling or what specifically the university intended to reference, the name would inspire thoughts of the antebellum era, discrimination, and the “degradation of African Americans through the institutions of slavery.”<sup>81</sup> In the same way, the NAACP also opposed the reference to Reneau. This argument assumed that Sallie Reneau’s family owned slaves themselves.<sup>82</sup> However, Dr. David Sansing, a retired professor of history at The University of Mississippi, conducted research into the background of the Reneau family, and indicated that Sallie Reneau was not a member of a slave holding family and was not connected to a slave-holding plantation, as previously thought.<sup>83</sup>

Regardless of the attempts to change names by alumnae and other affiliated groups, the state legislature is responsible for names and missions of public Mississippi universities. The process for name changes on the university level in Mississippi follows the path from the university, to the IHL, then to the state legislature for final approval. First, the President of the university must propose a new name for the university, which he or she will send to the IHL for approval. When the IHL receives this, it will be given to the Board of Trustees who will decide if the proposal is placed on the agenda. If the proposal is placed on the agenda, then at the corresponding meeting, the 12-member board will have to vote to approve the request. If approved, the name change will have to be introduced to the Mississippi Legislature for consideration. If the proposal makes it to the Legislature, then the proposal will be referred to a committee, having to be passed in both the House and the Senate before it can be sent to a joint committee to be passed and put into effect.<sup>84</sup>

The proposed name changes in 1988 and 2008 were slightly different due to the fact that the name change was sparked from a lawsuit in the 1988 case. The proposed name change in 1988 was a result of a lawsuit against MUW, and therefore had to be determined in the U.S. district court. However, in 2008 this decision was made in the Mississippi State Legislature. During that time, Lowndes County legislators made several remarks regarding the issue, including State Representatives Gary Chism and Jeff Smith. Both demonstrated dislike for President Limbert. These representatives said privately that if it were not for Limbert, they would

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Kristin Mamrack, “Reneau,” *The Commercial Dispatch*, August 11, 2009 “MUW Naming Comm. 2008-2009,” Vertical File, Beulah Culbertson Archives.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Kristin Mamrack, “New Light on Reneau’s background,” *The Commercial Dispatch*, “MUW Naming Comm. 2008-2009,” Vertical File, Beulah Culbertson Archives. (9 of 9)

<sup>84</sup> “MUW Is Still Mississippi University for Women,” accessed October 27, 2021, <http://www.msfirstalumnae.com/late-breaking-news-muw.asp>.

support changing the name of MUW.<sup>85</sup> Many assumed that, after President Limbert announced her retirement, the legislature would change its position on the matter; however, this did not happen. The Mississippi Legislature listened to testimonies in support of and in opposition to the proposed name change in February of 2010. The measure died because there was a lack of motion in both the Senate and in the House in response to the proposed bills.<sup>86</sup>

The attempted name changes of MUW, both in 1988 and 2008, were partially motivated by economic troubles facing the university. Presidents Strobel and Limbert approached these issues in different ways, with Strobel looking for alternatives and Limbert supporting the name change. In either case, financial issues motivated the decisions in coeducation and name change, and these circumstances are common to other women's college campuses. The opposition in both 1988 and 2008 primarily stemmed from a concern for the university's mission as a women's-focused university and the history and traditions that go along with that mission. MUW survived both eras with the "for Women" still in its title, however. In this, they have only one peer – Texas Women's University.

Texas Women's University (TWU) transitioned to coeducation in all programs offered in 1994 and has kept its original name and a mission similar to its original, with a slight alteration, that classifies the university as "primarily for women and especially for women" instead of "for women."<sup>87</sup> TWU transitioned to coeducation, not by popular opinion or support from the majority, but because the university's regents placed the issue on the agenda without publicly acknowledging they would be voting on the issue.<sup>88</sup> After this transition the university began to take extra steps to preserve its mission, which was women-oriented. The university not only created and continued to maintain women's studies programs in their curriculum, but they also went, and continue to go, the extra mile in order to make the primary mission of the university women, specifically the women of Texas.<sup>89</sup> In 1994, after the University's Regents voted to make the transition to coeducation, the university President Carol Surles made her position known with statements like "We have a university-wide commitment to remain women centered. We are deliberate in planning to focus on the needs of women and ensure that TWU remains focused on the needs of women."<sup>90</sup>

While Texas Women's University is the closest peer that MUW has had in this endeavor, there are some key differences between the two. The first difference between the two universities is geographic location. TWU is located in Denton, Texas, which has a population of 136,195, as of the 2019 census. It sits just forty miles from Fort Worth, Texas, with a population of 909,585 and forty-two miles from Dallas, Texas, with a population of 1,343,573. Whereas MUW is located in Columbus, Mississippi, with a population of 23,573, MUW sits twenty-five miles from Starkville, Mississippi, with a population of 25,653 and ninety-three miles from Meridian, Mississippi, with a population 36,347. Another and possibly the most important difference is that TWU never altered its mission to include men. It removed language that indicated the university

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<sup>85</sup> "Legislators misguided on MUW name change," October 20, 2009, "MUW Naming Comm. 2008-2009" Vertical File, Beulah Culbertson Archives.

<sup>86</sup> "Senate Passes on MUW Name Change | Jackson Free Press | Jackson, MS," accessed October 26, 2021, <https://www.jacksonfreepress.com/news/2010/feb/01/senate-passes-on-muw-name-change/>.

<sup>87</sup> Helen Ciernick, *Challenged by Coeducation: Women's Colleges since the 1960s*, vol. 94 (Catholic University of America Press, 2008), 136.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 124.

<sup>89</sup> Helen Ciernick, *Challenged by Coeducation: Women's Colleges since the 1960s*, vol. 94 (Catholic University of America Press, 2008), 134.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 133.

was only for women, opting instead for statements such as, “primarily for women.”<sup>91</sup> MUW, on the other hand, changed its mission statement to include both women and men. This indicates MUW’s attempt to include men on campus and attract men to enroll at the university while TWU has made no such effort.

Reasons for proposing the name changes of women’s-only colleges and universities have predominately been cited as economic struggles facing those institutions, and this was the case in 1988 and 2008 at MUW. In both instances the Presidents of the university did not publicly oppose the name change, the IHL supported the proposition, and mixed opinions were held among students and local residents. However, in instances at MUW and other similar universities, the alumni associations opposed the name changes. The reasons often cited for the alumni’s opposition are concern for the universities’ mission, history, and traditions. Those at TWU shared this concern as well in their transition to coeducation and their fight to keep their name and mission afterwards. While there have been other women’s-only colleges that have made the transition to coeducation and changed their name, Mississippi University for Women most closely aligns with Texas Women’s University in their endeavors. However, Texas Women’s University differs from MUW in a major aspect, which is the universities’ respective mission statements. MUW has changed their mission statement, as recently as October 21, 2021, now including men in the mission. MUW mission states, “Mississippi University for Women provides high quality undergraduate and graduate education for women and men in a variety of liberal arts and professional programs while maintaining its historic commitment to academic and leadership development for women.”<sup>92</sup> Whereas TWU’s current mission states, “Texas Woman’s University cultivates engaged leaders and global citizens by leveraging its historical strengths in health, liberal arts, and education and its standing as the nation’s largest public university primarily for women. Committed to transformational learning, discovery, and service in an inclusive environment that embraces diversity, Texas Women’s inspires excellence and a pioneering spirit,” and they have declared that their purpose is to “Educate a woman, empower the world.”<sup>93</sup> The mission of each university is significant to the name changes of women’s universities due to the fact that the mission, history, and traditions of the universities have been a primary concern. This knowledge provides certain lessons for MUW if the name change is considered in the future.

The first lesson gained from this issue of institutional names for historically women-serving schools is that the mission of the university would need to be reevaluated and addressed before the name could be changed. The alumni need assurance that the traditions and history of the university as a women-focused university would remain the same. To ensure the alumni’s trust in maintaining this focus, a detailed plan would need to be set forth to describe the transition. This plan would include how the university intended to preserve the women-oriented mission and specific measure it would take to do so.

Women-only universities have changed drastically over the late twentieth century. The majority of women-only public universities made the transition to coeducation in that time, but these transitions were primarily a result of economic struggles facing the universities. These institutions still faced opposition regarding coeducation and especially name changes from

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 132.

<sup>92</sup> “About The W - MUW,” accessed November 14, 2021, <https://www.muw.edu/about-muw>.

<sup>93</sup> “TWU’s Purpose, Mission, Vision, Values & Principles - Texas Woman’s University,” accessed November 14, 2021, <https://twu.edu/about-twu/purpose-mission-vision-values-principles/>.

various groups, including alumni, faculty, students, and community members. This opposition often resulted from a concern over the women-focused mission and history of the universities. Only two public universities, Mississippi University for Women and Texas Women's University, made the transition to coeducation while keeping their women-oriented name. These universities accomplished this feat but not without controversy. If there is ever a desire for a name change at either of these universities, this study reveals that establishing trust between university officials, students, and alumni will be critically important, and proponents would be wise to focus careful attention on the preservation of the university's women-focused history and mission. The name itself is important in that it represents the mission of the university.

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