

MEMORANDUM

To: John Hutchinson, Dean of Undergraduates

From: Committee of the Masters

Date: March 29, 2016

SUBJECT: Recommendation to Change the Title "Master"

Leah Whittine
Chair, Committee of Masters

Since the beginning of the Fall 2015 semester, the Committee of the Masters has been engaged in a wide-ranging discussion of the issue of whether we should change the title of our position as "College Masters." At issue has not been the formal title of College Master, but rather the more common and widespread usage of the title "Master."

Recommendation:

For many of us, the title Master no longer conveys the jobs and expectations associated with our roles, while its common usage in the history of slavery and racism in the United States renders the title problematic in other ways. Though several current and past Masters had periodically raised the issue before 2015, our conversations this year spanned multiple meetings and represented the committee's first sustained attention to the question. These conversations culminated in a vote on March 7, 2016. By a vote of 7 to 2 (with two other colleges abstaining), we voted to recommend that the title "College Master" be changed.

History of the Masters at Rice University:

The discussion on the Masters' titles provided an opportunity for us to reflect on the evolution of the residential college system at Rice and our place within it. Rice University instituted the position of College Master in 1957. At that time, all but one of the original residential colleges included only men. The committee that planned the college system anticipated that Masters would also be men, but it recommended, in deference to expectations about gender that now appear dated, that "careful consideration be given their wives." Moreover, when the college system began, only white students could gain admission to Rice. Members of the faculty, and by extension the College Masters and College Associates, were exclusively white.

Over the next half century, the college system changed dramatically. What once were dormitories of white, mostly male, students directed by white male professors and their wives, became diverse, coeducational colleges led by students in collaboration with a diverse group of faculty and staff. Never a static institution, the college system has evolved in tandem with broader changes in the University and society as a whole, though examples of intolerance and insensitivity still occur within the colleges, and only one African American faculty member has ever been appointed college Master.

Meanwhile, as the role of Masters has evolved over the last 60 years, it has also become a vital part of the traditions that Rice University students and alumni hold dear. Masters at Rice have never been mere officials or supervisors. Instead, students look to Masters to be mentors, leaders, and trusted advisors, and Masters gain just as much from the close relationships they form with students in the colleges. Preserving these unique features of Rice's residential college system into the future remains imperative.

The context of national discussions:

Our deliberations this year continued conversations that predated the decisions of several peer institutions to discontinue the use of the term Master to refer to faculty members who reside in their residential colleges. Yet decisions at other universities, including Harvard, Princeton, and the University of Pennsylvania, unavoidably contributed to the context in which our discussions took place. These discussions come at a time of heightened awareness and debate surrounding racial justice in higher education across the nation. As Rice University President David Leebron noted in a message to our campus community last semester, students and faculty in many places are "questioning whether our campuses are truly inclusive, and whether our institutions of higher education are fulfilling their aspirations to be both engines of opportunity and centers for understanding of the racial and ethnic issues that continue to confront us. We must all listen carefully to the emerging dialogue."

This dialogue is connected to larger social challenges that will take hard work to address. For example, in our discussions many took the position that increasing the number of faculty and students of color on campus is necessary to correct current imbalances in representation and to diversify the pool of potential residents in the colleges. Our colleges should reflect the diverse population and perspectives of our society as a whole. We know that many administrators, students, and faculty are discussing these crucial issues, and we stand ready to use our positions within the colleges to support their efforts.

The context of our local discussion:

Our dialogues over the last few months coincided with discussions at other institutions but were not constrained or controlled by them. Locally, our discussions were not prompted by any demands from students that our title be changed, nor were they initiated by administrators. Instead, the discussions originated within our committee and continued conversations that previous groups of Masters began.

These conversations revealed a wide diversity of viewpoints among us. Many argued that the title Master fails to capture the complex set of duties and roles expected of us. Some believed that the title's association with a history of slavery and racism in the United States could make it unnecessarily alienating to people of color and interfere with the colleges' goals of creating an inclusive, welcoming environment for all students, associates, and staff. A few Masters reported any number of ways that they have employed to avoid using the term altogether either

because of embarrassment or principle. Others cited the necessity of having to explain the term in writing letters of recommendations for students to institutions or potential employers who might not have any idea about the dynamics of a residential college system and therefore might cringe at the title without any explanation. Some worry that explaining the title to colleagues, prospective students, and members of the general public unfamiliar with the actual culture and history of the position at Rice will become even more difficult as the title is retired from use at other schools.

On the other hand, those who opposed changing the title noted that the term Master has deep and rich associations with the most accomplished and historic institutions of higher learning in Europe and the United States. It frequently shows up in other contexts, as in master carpenter, master plumber, or headmaster, and does so without any allusion to slavery or race. Some committee members noted that for many current students the term does not convey any history of slavery or racism, much less subordinate them in a paternalistic manner. On this view, to eliminate the title Master is to undermine the original vision of Rice residential colleges as close-knit communities, headed by educated and experienced administrators. Changes to the title at other institutions, some of us argued, should not force Rice to make changes where none may be needed.

Another line of thinking also opposes changing the title but not for the above reasons. This position does not necessarily discount the experience of those who object to the term, but questions whether these objections should take priority over other issues that might be more difficult to address institutionally but are nonetheless more fundamental to systemic social changes. Some were troubled that more difficult work, like the efforts of students and administrators to improve the recruitment and retention of faculty and students of color, might be postponed or overshadowed by a symbolic change that has little value over the long term.

Conclusion:

By March 7, 2016, the Committee of Masters agreed that the above discussions had reached a point where a vote was called for. After careful deliberation of this complicated issue, we voted 7 to 2 (with two other colleges abstaining) in favor of recommending to you that the title of College Master be changed. (Each college received one vote, even if the college was represented by two Masters.)

In closing, we want to emphasize the strong agreement among us that while changing our title would be easy to do, this change should not occur to the exclusion of more substantive steps aimed at increasing diversity among the faculty and student bodies, and in general the promotion of an inclusive climate at Rice. But we recognize that as the residential college system continues to grow and change, our roles, titles, and aspirations will and should change with it.