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Naming Names: Ten Rules

By John V. Lombardi July 14, 2008
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Periodically, universities and their friends engage in a flurry of conversations about naming things on campus, usually triggered by a high profile naming that

some find inappropriate, interesting, or otherwise noteworthy. Most of us have experience in these conversations, having engaged in them time-and-again, in different contexts over the years. We know we will touch on the ten standard naming rules:

1. Only name buildings for dead people,
2. Only use the names of admirable people,
3. Recognize substantial individual contributions,
4. Ensure a gift large enough to justify the recognition by name,
5. Avoid changing the name already on a building,
6. Avoid using corporate names for permanent recognition,
7. Use more relaxed rules for naming exterior spaces,
8. Allow flexibility in naming interior spaces,
9. Avoid naming things for departing administrators, however beloved
10. Be prepared for controversy over naming choices.

Most universities have variations on these ten commandments for naming, but many styles, traditions, and practices modify their implementation. In principle, these things are not very complicated, but in practice, they can provoke discussion and sometimes outrage.

1. We like to name buildings after dead people for several reasons. These individuals will do nothing to embarrass the university in the future. We can be reasonably sure that their accomplishments are truly significant and praiseworthy. Any controversy will be somewhat muted (but not necessarily eliminated) by the reluctance to appear churlish towards a recently deceased individual, although, being deceased is not a guarantee of universal approbation. In any academic

setting, there will be those who do not believe an individual so recognized appropriately represents the values of the institution. However, in most cases, we can withstand the controversy.

2. We certainly like to name buildings for admirable people, but the definition of admirable is often quite flexible. We can admire great accomplishment of scientific, humanistic, or artistic character; we can honor exceptional public service; or we can recognize the admirable motives that prompt an individual to contribute a significant sum towards the academic goals of the institution. Some individuals honored in a naming may have academic or public service distinction AND provide an exceptional financial contribution. More and more, of course, our institutions see a financial contribution as the primary motivation for admired behavior, and we anoint fewer and fewer buildings with the names of distinguished but impecunious academics, artists, or public servants.

3. With but few exceptions, universities and colleges, public and private, are in desperate need of funding to support the quality that all of our constituents want. Quality is expensive, tuition and fees are high, public support declines, and so we turn again and again to our financial benefactors for help. In return, we must recognize their essential contributions, and so we name things in their honor, both to recognize the gift and to signal to others that we can be grateful for their help as well.

4. However, while most of us find such recognition appropriate, we often have difficulty setting the right price. How much of a contribution is required for a building recognition? Half the replacement cost of the facility, sixty percent of the cost of a new facility? If our state has a matching program, do we count the state match as part of the gift? And, if the name is for a major unit, a college for example, do we calculate a percentage of the annual budget as the appropriate reference for a naming? These calculations may appear crass, but in fact, they are essential because we must be fair. Whatever is worthy of recognizing one donor must be good for another. If, however, we are a poor college just beginning our fund raising, we may have lower thresholds for naming than if we are a rich college. As a result, we often have lower standards for our first campaign and higher standards for our fourth campaign.

5. Often interesting old buildings already have a name, and frequently the name dates from a period when donations were not relevant to naming choices. When we receive a gift to renovate an old building or otherwise support an important activity in that building, and the donor expresses an interest in renaming the building, we run into our fifth rule. Renaming buildings is always problem. While we make today's donor happy by doing it, we may well send a signal to future donors that our assertions about the permanence of building names are suspect. If the old name did not acknowledge a gift, the conversation is easier than if the old name recognized a previous gift. Sometimes we finesse this by hyphenating the building name: The Sam George—Susan Peters building. These conversations can sometimes produce volatile responses from alumni with emotional attachments to old buildings, or friends and relatives of the original honoree. Still, we need the gift, and most universities know that if the gift is substantial and the institutional need great, careful consultation and preparation will help smooth over any potential issues, and the next generation of students who will become alumni will have no vested interest in the old name.

5. Corporations often like to see their names in highly visible places, but these names have their own problems. Usually, it is best to put corporate names on things with a finite life span. The Fancy Chemical Laboratory named for a five-year period in exchange for enough money to outfit the lab. Often the corporations find athletic facilities the best naming opportunities because these high visibility nameplates usually sell for a fixed amount per year. When the company disappears or no longer sees value in the venue, or the university has reason to disengage, the end comes without much emotional angst. Public universities often have difficulty naming anything for corporations other than some programs or athletic advertisement opportunities. Private universities have more leeway, but good policy encourages caution in any permanent naming for a corporation that may not last forever, and one never knows when a corporation will be found to have engaged in some behavior that might embarrass the institution.

6. Rules for naming exterior spaces are often much less formal. Courtyards and patios, streets and walkways offer opportunities to recognize living people. We can name a patio, and should the name become a problem, we can change a patio name. We can name a space but with the proviso that the name lasts only as long as the space remains open, which may not be forever.

7. We can also name interior spaces, again with much more flexibility. We can use classrooms, conference rooms, and

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auditoriums to recognize short term or permanent gifts. We can limit the duration of the naming for the term of the program or for the expected life of the renovation funded by the gift. These interior spaces can also serve to recognize distinguished individuals even without large gifts.

8. There is some difference of opinion about naming things for departing administrators. Often such individuals accumulate constituencies and on the administrator's retirement, a movement will emerge to name this or that building, space, or program. This can be a difficult conversation. If someone says, "Well, José is a fine fellow, but after all, we paid him good money to do good work, and he did good work, so we should say thanks and move on." Naming anything significant for a departing administrator can create an entitlement for subsequent administrators. The exiting president is told, "We named the science building for your predecessor, what building do you want?" The wise president will say, "Thanks, but we shouldn't name anything significant without a donation because the institution is in desperate need of additional funds." We'd prefer not to be ungracious, saying to the long-serving and well-regarded departing hero, "We love you, but we don't want to waste a naming opportunity that could recognize a significant gift."

Whatever we do with a naming, however wise our choices, however clear our rules, we always know that naming things can provoke controversy. Any time we decide to do a naming, we should be prepared for controversy and have our explanations ready. Good rules help, consistency and clarity help even more.

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