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What Will Harvard's Slavery Report Actually Change?

By Katie Reilly : 10-12 minutes

Nile Blass remembers hearing about Georgetown University's [2016 report on its historical connections to slavery](#) before she even applied to the school. The report, which detailed how the university profited from the sale of 272 enslaved people in 1838, recommended steps for the university to atone for its role. For Blass, it became a factor in her decision to enroll at the university, which she saw as “an educational institution where a Black student like myself could thrive.”

“If they're dealing with their history in this capacity,” Blass remembers her family thinking, “that means that they're doing something above and beyond, and that can probably spell something positive for the campus culture.”

But while Blass, now a graduating senior, did thrive on campus, she has also spent the last four years pressuring the university to do more to repay descendants for what was taken from their enslaved ancestors.

“The existence of these individuals and their work [permeates] the entire Georgetown experience, even if you're not directly looking for it. That's a debt owed,” says Blass, who was, until recently, the school's student body president. “There is direct economic harm to be found there.”

Read more: [3 Ways America's Elite Universities Benefited From Slavery](#)

Last week, Harvard became the most recent and one of the most prominent universities to reckon with its own complicity in slavery, acknowledging that university presidents, faculty, and staff enslaved more than 70 people in the years from 1636 to 1783, when the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court ruled that slavery was unlawful.

“Enslaved men and women served Harvard presidents and professors and fed and cared for Harvard students,” stated [the Harvard report](#), released on April 26. “Moreover, throughout this period and well into the 19th century, the University and its donors benefited from extensive financial ties to slavery.”

“I believe we bear a moral responsibility to do what we can to address the persistent corrosive effects of those historical practices on individuals, on Harvard, and on our society,” Harvard President Lawrence Bacow said in a [letter](#) to the school community.

The university pledged to spend \$100 million toward a “Legacy of Slavery Fund” that will support the continued study of Harvard's ties to slavery and will be used to implement other measures [recommended](#) by the report—including that Harvard honor the labor of enslaved people with a memorial on campus; develop partnerships with Historically Black Colleges and Universities; and improve educational access through partnerships with local colleges and nonprofits, to confront “enduring inequities that impact descendant communities in the United States.”

The report also recommended that Harvard identify the descendants of people enslaved by Harvard's leaders, faculty, and staff and “engage with these descendants through dialogue, programming, information sharing, relationship building, and educational support.” But it stops short of calling for direct financial reparations to those descendants.

Some experts argue that's a missed opportunity for one of the country's wealthiest universities—Harvard has a [\\$53 billion endowment](#)—to make a more meaningful difference for victims of slavery and their descendants. Advocates for financial reparations argue it's a step that would help to address the lasting inequities that can be traced back to slavery in the United States, including the persistent racial wealth gap and under-representation of Black students in higher education. In 2016, the median white household had nearly 10 times the wealth of the median Black household, [according to Brookings](#).

And while about 12% of the U.S. population is Black, just 7% of students at both Harvard and Georgetown were Black in fall 2020, according to the National Center for Education Statistics.

"The institution and individuals in the institution were paid for their role in the buying, selling, trading of slaves," says Andre Perry, a senior fellow at Brookings Metro, who has written about inequality and reparations in education. "Cash was exchanged. So at some point, you should cut a check to the descendants of those who were burdened by those actions."

So if \$100 million sounds like a lot, Perry says, it's still "somewhat of an insult" considering what the institution can afford.

To Perry, direct impact in the form of reparations would be all the more meaningful because, while honest acknowledgement of an institution's involvement in slavery is a step in the right direction, he thinks similar reports released at other universities have thus far had a "minimal impact" on the individual descendants of those who were enslaved.

Read more: [Slavery on America's College Campuses Went Beyond Buying and Selling](#)

Take Georgetown: The Jesuit-founded school in Washington, D.C., acknowledged that it profited off the sale of enslaved people and pledged to give an admissions advantage to their descendants—similar to the admissions advantage offered to children of Georgetown faculty, staff and alumni. The university has admitted 16 descendants of enslaved people since 2016, [GBH News reported in February](#). (Thousands of descendants have been identified, though it's not clear how many have applied to the school.)

Students, like Blass, have continued to call for more action and more engagement with descendants.

Two-thirds of Georgetown students voted in spring 2019 to pass a student fee that would pay reparations to the descendants of those enslaved and sold to benefit Georgetown. Instead, the [university announced](#) it would raise \$400,000 annually to spend on projects benefiting descendant communities. In 2021, the university said it aimed to provide the [first project grants that year](#). A spokesperson for Georgetown did not respond to a request for comment regarding the status of those grants.

But that decision frustrated some students, including Blass, who doesn't want that money to be thought of as a charitable donation.

"This is not a matter of charity," she says. "If you owe someone for work that is done, you pay them for it."

Julia Thomas—a junior at Georgetown and a descendant of Sam Harris and Betsy Ware Harris, who were sold to benefit Georgetown in 1838—says she would like to see Georgetown and the Jesuits make direct payments to descendants, in addition to supporting projects like scholarship initiatives and campus memorials.

"The issue of reparative justice for the descendants is larger than Georgetown taking action," Thomas said in an email. "It must include the Jesuit order. After all, it was the Society of Jesus that enslaved my ancestors for the benefit of Georgetown College."

Last year, students at Brown University also voted overwhelmingly in favor of the university identifying descendants of those who were enslaved at the university and paying them reparations. In November, the school released an update to its [2006 report](#) about its ties to slavery, but did not take action on the student referendum.

"There is no active process underway to identify descendants or pay reparations, but it's a question that continues to be relevant," Brian Clark, a spokesperson for Brown, said in an email, adding that the university is committed to remembering and addressing issues of injustice in its teaching, research, admissions, and hiring practices.

William Darity, a public policy professor at Duke University who studies racial inequality and the economics of reparations, notes that most universities that have studied their own historical involvement with slavery have not gone much further in their responses than renaming buildings, removing Confederate statues, or erecting memorials to the

contributions of enslaved people. But, while he says those moves just scratch the surface of what would be a commensurate response, he believes such a solution won't be found in a piecemeal approach from a handful of universities.

"I don't think that colleges and universities or private donors actually have the capacity to meet a full-scale plan for reparations," he says, adding that he would like to see universities use their influence to advocate for a federal reparations plan that would help to eliminate the longstanding racial wealth gap across the country.

"If they truly feel a sense of obligation, given their history, then what they should do is actually pursue having a national program of reparations, and they should use their clout and influence to make that happen," Darity says.

Still, Perry is hoping that Harvard's report will inspire other institutions in higher education to reckon with their own history and complicity in slavery.

"Harvard, arguably, is the biggest name in higher ed," he says. "As Harvard goes, so will other institutions."

And he would like to see those universities take more comprehensive steps, such as improving diversity in their student body and faculty, investing in Black-led companies and Black neighborhoods, and divesting from companies with a history of discrimination.

If more universities do that, he says, it would not only change the institutions taking those steps, "it can help transform higher ed as a whole."

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