

The last public hearing on Dixie State name change marked by emotion, arguing and threats

Those for and against dropping the term “Dixie” spoke out before the Legislature is set to take a vote this week.



(Trent Nelson | The Salt Lake Tribune) The room divided as the Education Interim Committee meets during a special legislative session, contemplating changing the name of Dixie State University, at the State Capitol in Salt Lake City on Tuesday, Nov. 9, 2021.

By Courtney Tanner
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The final public hearing on changing the name of Dixie State University lasted for more than two emotion-packed hours — with a few heated exchanges, tears on both sides and a long line of people wanting to give their last thoughts about who has ownership over a term and who is hurt by it.

The Utah Legislature’s interim education committee heard Tuesday from more than 50 people and, after extending the meeting once, ended up closing before all who had signed up could talk. A decision is expected to come later during this week’s special session from the full House and Senate.

It will bookend what has been a yearlong process for the southern Utah school in its attempt to drop “Dixie” from its name, with the hope of severing ties with the last connection it has to the Confederacy in the Civil War.

After surveys and focus groups and listening tours, the institution’s administration wants to rename and rebrand as Utah Tech University. But it requires the signoff from the Legislature to do so.

“We have been having this debate for 30 years,” said Dixie State President Richard Williams during the debate on Tuesday. “Every president before me has had something that they’ve had to change, the mascot, the Rebel nickname, the Confederate flags. But we haven’t changed the right thing: which is the name of the university.”

He was backed by half of the room, with students and faculty who agree with changing the name. The other side was emblazoned in matching red “KEEP DIXIE” T-shirts, divided cleanly down the aisle. That group, made up of largely longtime community members in St. George, have met the calls for dropping “Dixie” with fierce resistance and cries of “cancel culture.”

Both sides, totaling more than 100 people, drove or bused up more than five hours Tuesday to debate.

Ahead of the public hearing Tuesday, some protested outside the Utah Capitol, carried red flags in the rain, and chanted, “There’s no shame in the name.”

A few in the back of the group of protesters quietly sang about “beating the red man” and clashed with students who’d come to rally to support the move to Utah Tech. That group shouted, “Listen to the students” and “Vote for the future.” A few of the Dixie supporters stepped in front of them to argue.



(Trent Nelson | The Salt Lake Tribune) Supporters of the name Dixie State University at the State Capitol in Salt Lake City on Tuesday, Nov. 9, 2021. The Education Interim Committee of the Utah Legislature is expected to address the school’s possible name change during the current special session.

Gerardo Vargas, a sophomore, held a poster that read: “Be the change that supports our students.” He said he feels a stigma with the university’s name, especially as a Hispanic student of color. He recalled walking down the streets of St. George last semester when a white man yelled the N-word at him repeatedly.

Vargas hopes a name change can help the school and community move on from the past and address racist attitudes in the future.

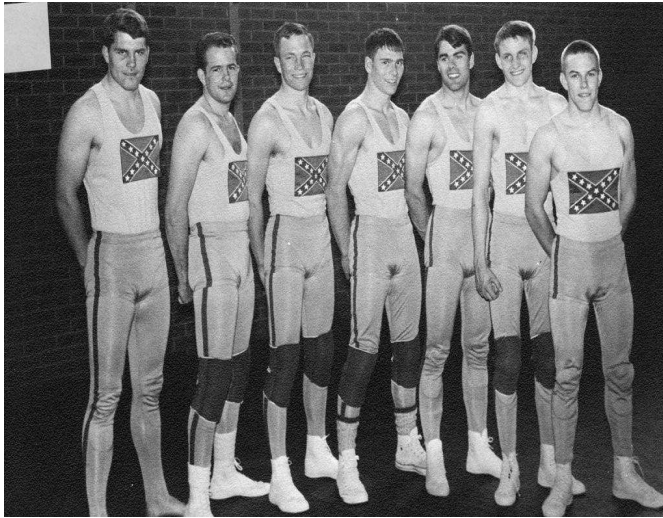
Moesha Spencer, a senior and also a student of color, said the university’s name has racist connotations. “And they’re claiming it as their heritage,” she added. “It makes me sick to my stomach.”

President Williams said he started the name change process last year after hearing from students who were having a hard time explaining “Dixie” in job interviews and in applications to graduate schools outside of Utah. Last December, the school’s board voted to move away from the name.

Proponents of keeping the name, though, have said it means something different here and that it’s about community and their white ancestors who founded the school in the early 1900s. They distance themselves from any connection to the term with slavery or the Confederacy.

The school also has, in the past, heavily used Confederate flag imagery, had the Rebel as its

mascot and nickname and had statues of southern soldiers on campus. Yearbooks also show students wearing blackface and holding slave auctions, a practice that continued into the 1990s.



(Dixie College., "The Confederate 1966," UA 009 Dixie State University Yearbooks, Dixie State University Special Collection & Archives) This photo from the 1966 edition of Dixie State College's yearbook shows the school's wrestling team.

Those who love the name Dixie say those traditions aren't going on any longer.

"We moved away from that," said Victor Iverson, now the chair of the Washington County Commission, which passed a statement in support of the Dixie moniker

and sent a letter to state legislators.

Iverson said he was the student body president of Dixie in 1993, and he decided to move away from the Confederate flags because they were "not very welcoming."

But now, he said, it's not an issue, and changing the name would only cause hurt.

"Some have said it's like ripping off a Band-Aid," Iverson said. "No, it's like creating a wound that won't heal."

The issue has become a debate over history, over ties to the community and over how the name affects different groups.

Some opposed questioned the reasons behind the change, arguing that Dixie State University has thrived and grown under its current name to 12,000 enrollees and 23% students of color. And they questioned the surveys and data supporting a new name.

One alumna, Stephanie Grant, who is white and played basketball when she was a student at Dixie, said the university was dropping the name because "this generation has been indoctrinated by critical race theory, trying to look for racism anywhere they can." Critical race theory is not being taught in Utah's K-12 schools, though.

Others said they were never asked about the Dixie name in job interviews. "It has not set me back from enjoying the growth of my career," said Jonathan Peterson, who graduated in 2011. He told lawmakers: "You were elected by a majority, and the majority wants to keep Dixie State."

Some, like Gary Schneiter, threatened to stop donating to the school. Others said it didn't make sense to have "tech" in the name when there are arts and English and more majors there.

Abraham Thombiano, a Black graduate, said the word Dixie doesn't offend him.

A few recommended a middle ground with St. George State University but were drowned out. (Trent Nelson | The Salt Lake Tribune) Dixie State University students chant in support of changing their school's name at the State Capitol in Salt Lake City on Tuesday, Nov. 9, 2021. The Education Interim Committee of the Utah Legislature is expected to address the possible name change during the current special session.



(Trent Nelson | The Salt Lake Tribune) Dixie State University students chant in support of changing their school's name at the State Capitol in Salt Lake City on Tuesday, Nov. 9, 2021. The Education Interim Committee of the Utah Legislature is expected to address the possible name change during the current special session.

Many in support of a change said that giving up the name Dixie wouldn't mean getting rid of the heritage around it. They also pointed to unanimous support from the school's board of trustees and the Utah Board of Higher Education. And they noted that the school has changed names eight times before, from its original St. George Academy, and later to reflect being a junior college, college, state college and public university.

Ultimately, their line to speak was much longer than the one on the opposing side.

"We're trying to evolve with the world," said Morgan Wilson, a junior who has been serving as Miss Dixie State for the past two years.

She compared it to an old coach wanting his son to play under the same football stadium lights that he once did. But it hampers the new team's ability to succeed. "Why continue having us play under old lights?" she asked.

"The Dixie spirit lives in our souls, not within the name," added another alumnus, Bruce Hurst, who served on the name recommendation committee that came up with Utah Tech as a replacement.

The group was joined by many business owners in the community, as well as former Republican state Rep. Mike Noel, who represented Washington County.

They pleaded with lawmakers to support the change and let them move forward.