

Hirst Lounge Flag Display

May 2021

BACKGROUND

In February 2020, President Sarah Mangelsdorf and Provost Rob Clark convened an *ad hoc* advisory committee to examine, “expressions of concern: raised by the display of flags in the Hirst Lounge in Wilson Commons.” In their charge to the committee, they stated: “Our hope is that those serving on this committee will see their role not as advocates for a particular viewpoint, but rather that the committee will broadly engage with the community—in-person, online, and through discussion forums—and formulate several options for recommendations moving forward.” The committee was asked to work quickly and make recommendations by April 30, 2020. The decision about possible actions to take would be made jointly by the president and provost.

The immediate need for the committee stemmed from protests and disputes regarding the flag display as modified in November 2019. The flag display was intended as one method of representation of the diversity of students on campus and, through Fall 2019, was updated each year in November prior to International Education Week to reflect the current student population. The flag display was designed and envisioned in the spirit of inclusivity, with a process in place for following international flag protocol established by the United Nations and allowed petitions for changes. However, in Fall 2019 many members of the community expressed feelings of dissatisfaction, harm, and exclusion with the way flags were displayed in Hirst Lounge. The primary issue expressed was with the categorization of flags. The categories were: UN Recognized States, Sub-National Entities, Native American Sovereign Nations, US Territories. Students felt that by separating flags into these various categories, specifically the Sub-National Entities Category, was unjust. This category was later changed to Other Countries and Regions, but that still didn’t sit right with students, including students whose nations fell into that category (Hong Kong and Taiwan).

This was not the first time that students have expressed sentiments of concern or exclusion regarding the display. A brief history of the flag display in Hirst Lounge, including the most recent and previous concerns about the display, are outlined in the history section below.

Despite well-intentioned plans for a rapid solution, the emergence of Covid-19 in the United States in March 2020 and the worldwide pandemic that followed both delayed the initial timeline, changed the makeup of the committee, and altered its capacity for robust community engagement on the topic. The initial committee was co-chaired by Joan Saab, Susan B. Anthony Professor of Art History and Vice Provost for Academic Affairs, and Jamal Holtz, (The College) Students’ Association President and member of the class of 2020. The current committee is co-chaired by Joan Saab and Marc Haddad (The College) Students’ Association Vice President and member of the Class of 2021. See Appendix A for the initial makeup of the Advisory Committee in spring 2020 and its current representation as of this writing.

A summary of the committee’s progress, process, findings, and recommendations follows.

HOW THE COMMITTEE PROCEEDED

The initial committee met three times during the Spring 2020 semester and had an event scheduled for late March—but all plans were put on hold as the university pivoted to online/remote learning and work due to COVID-19.

The committee was asked to reconvene during the latter part of the Fall 2020 semester and to submit its recommendations to President Mangelsdorf by the end of the 2020-2021 academic year. As such, the group resumed its work with a reconstituted membership due to students graduating, faculty research leaves, and other administrative conflicts. The makeup of both versions of the committee is outlined in Appendix A. The committee met five times via Zoom during the 2020-21 academic year.

The committee's discussions intentionally focused on the flag display and various alternatives, ranging from no display in Hirst Lounge to other mechanisms to visually represent the global diversity of the Rochester student body to reinstating a flag display using a different organizing rubric. A summary of the advisory committee's recommendations follows below.

In addition to the meetings of the main advisory committee, undergraduate students in AS&E formed a subcommittee in order to have in-depth discussions about what students would like to see happen regarding the flag display. The membership of that subcommittee is presented in Appendix B. The AS&E student subcommittee was incredibly productive, engaging with peers to gain input from students and bringing ideas and feedback to the main advisory committee. They met seven times throughout Fall 2020, fielded two surveys with their peers, and drafted a recommendation for the flag display. Details pertaining to the latter are highlighted in further sections, as well as in Appendix C.

HISTORY OF FLAGS IN HIRST LOUNGE

Dedicated in April 1976, Wilson Commons was designed and built by world-renowned architect I.M. Pei. At the heart of the Commons, Hirst Lounge serves as the central courtyard, connecting it to the quadrangle and campus beyond. The building was created to serve as the University's student union following internal planning in the mid-1960s that resulted in the selection of Pei as architect. Pei was known for his use of simple shapes and natural light, and Wilson Commons is in keeping with his other major works, which include the pyramid at the Louvre Museum in Paris and the John F. Kennedy Library in Boston. At the building's dedication in 1976 Pei spoke of some inspiration stemming from a discussion with Xerox Corporation founder, Rochester alumnus, and Wilson Commons namesake Joseph C. Wilson. "[Wilson] mentioned how much he was concerned about improving the quality of student life," Pei said. "And he dreamt of a space much like the center court of [the Isabella Stewart] Gardner Museum in Boston," which contains an interior courtyard with a triangular skylight shaped like a prism. "That struck a very sympathetic chord in me and what you see today reflects that one meeting and that one idea from Mr. Wilson himself," Pei added.¹

¹ Aiken, Wil. "I.M. Pei, Wilson Commons architect, is dead at 102," *Campus Times*. May 18, 2019. Accessed May 14, 2021. <http://www.campustimes.org/2019/05/18/i-m-pei-wilson-commons-architect-is-dead-at-102>

A student of modern architecture, Pei believed that form follows intention. The initial concept planning for Wilson Commons emphasized the need for a place that allows for the intersection of all university students, including graduate students, as well as faculty. The goal was to create a space that “would alleviate the ‘closed in’ feeling of campus.”² Pei brought a vision for the creation of “a lively play between open space and building,” and the University “needed a real aesthetic contribution rather than just another academic building”³ for its student union. Pei’s design briefs illustrate a multipurpose building that seeks to bring the outdoors in and to create a central, urban-living-room-style space for campus (see Appendix C).⁴

The earliest documentation of the flags appearing in Hirst Lounge is in 1994 for the “International Fiesta,” although it is unclear whether the flags were hung centrally in the lounge or from the white space frames.⁵ In the years that followed, the flags remained, and although it is reported that the flags were updated annually, the process for doing so was not documented. In 2011, a committee was formed to increase transparency regarding the flags displayed and to document the selection and display process. Additionally, students wanted to expand the display to Native American Sovereign nations and U.S. territories. The committee comprised students and campus partners including (The College) Students’ Association Government, International Student Services, Registrar, College Admissions, and Wilson Commons Student Activities.

Starting in AY 2015-16 Wilson Commons Student Activities and Global Engagement began to have discussions about how the flags were selected and ordered. Since the University of Rochester is a non-profit institution, it refrains from making statements in support of political parties and from participating in political activities (see [Political Activities Policy](#)). Since national flags represent the governments of nation states, they have political connotations, as do sub-national flags of states and territories. Additionally, some international students must undertake a degree validation process by their home countries following graduation from a foreign institution (as the University of Rochester is for international students), and geopolitics can play a role in this degree validation process. Thus, the selection of flags and their ordering have notable consequences for an institutional display in a non-profit, globally engaged University.

Following these discussions, the Office of Global Engagement made recommendations about the selection and ordering of the flags. These recommendations were based on the recognition that flags are emblems of nation states and other sovereign or subnational entities, and as emblems of these nation states, protocols exist for their display and handling. Global Engagement recommended that if the University displayed flags of nations, those managing the display must acquaint themselves with various principles of international flag protocol outlined in protocol guides and, in some cases, by the nations themselves. Global Engagement created some basic guidance framing and referred WCSA to additional information for reference to assist in its management of the display.

In 2018, a committee was again formed to look at the statement to see if the display could be more inclusive as students had expressed concerns about representation, especially from dual citizens, as the

² Ina Goldman & Fern Ginsberg. *Wilson Commons*. University of Rochester Archives. May 3, 1967: 4.

³ *Ibid.*, 5-6.

⁴ “A ‘plug-in’ student union for the University of Rochester,” *Interiors*, April 1977.

⁵ “Fiesta ‘94,” *Campus Times*, March 24, 1994: 10.

only dataset utilized was a list of the students whose visas the University sponsored for study.⁶ Global Engagement had again recommended during the previous year that the committee adopt a clear mechanism for identifying and ordering the flags, noting that the United Nations (UN) offered a ready-to-hand supra-national structure for identifying and ordering countries. Global Engagement made this recommendation so that the University is not placed in the position of determining nationhood. As with any selection mechanism, the UN is not without controversy, but it does have the benefit of being an internationally recognized body independent from the University. This recommendation was not implemented during Fall 2018, but rather remained the same until it was updated Fall 2019.

During Spring 2019, focus groups were held with students to update the display for a Fall 2019 implementation. Some of the changes to the statement included: expanding the dataset used to include both visa sponsorship and citizenship data, using the UN as a framework for country selection, and creating a petition process so that students would have the opportunity to petition to have their country's flag hung. The general recommendations from Global Engagement (described above) continued to guide the organization of the display. Through the committee's discussions and petition review, the number of flags displayed increased and the groupings increased from three to four.⁷ The committee also decided to hang flags from countries that are both recognized UN members and non-member states, which created challenges for the display particularly because locations such as Hong Kong and Taiwan are not formally recognized as independent countries by the UN. The timing of the adoption of this newly adopted ordering principle was quite unfortunate. Even though it was intended to coincide with the U.S. State Department's annual celebration of International Education Week in early November 2019, the re-ordering also coincided with democratic protests in Hong Kong against Mainland China. While attempting to organize the display in as apolitical and normalized manner as possible, the display had exactly the opposite effect. It is evident that those who felt the former flag display to be offensive was due to the categorization of the flags, not the mere hanging of them.

In August 2020, the flags were removed for what was initially described as cleaning. Wilson Commons staff advised that they do not typically remove flags for cleaning; the flags were nonetheless removed and have not been rehung. An explanation was not provided to the University community at the time, and to date, no clear statement from the University has been issued regarding their removal.

SUMMARY OF DISCUSSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

The committee spent portions of several of the meetings discussing the events of Fall 2019⁸ as it contemplated the flag display itself as well as alternative. The committee did not achieve clear

⁶ The committee membership now included The College Dean's Office, the Dean of Students Office (The College), and the International Services Office in addition to student representatives.

⁷ The use of both sponsored-for-study and citizenship datasets did increase the number of flags displayed and the petition process was utilized by students to bring their particular situation forward. Additional flags were hung based on the petition process.

⁸ While the events of Fall 2019 expand beyond the committee's scope, they are relevant. The following article in the *South China Morning Post* (4 July 2020) provides robust coverage:

consensus on any one of the recommendations about the display itself; however, all agreed that the University should acknowledge that the November 2019 display created a scenario for some students to feel excluded and that the University should offer its sincere consolation and apology to those who felt excluded or otherwise harmed. The University should also acknowledge that by taking the display down without any explanation or plan for reinstatement, it hurt students who felt the absence of a prominent visual representation of our diverse student body.

The committee reflected on the following framing questions to guide its discussions: what types of visual displays can reflect and celebrate the global diversity of our student body? Should these displays also reflect the totality of our institutional global diversity, including faculty/staff? Are flags the only or best way to do this? Where should this display/ these displays be located on campus?

The committee discussed various approaches to the display as a flag display, including:

1. Location: return the flags to Hirst Lounge or rehang them somewhere else.
2. Display order: order the flags in a randomly selected order by computer-generated program; allow the students to select the order of the flags; rehang the flags several times throughout the year.
3. Flag selection: allow students to choose any flag to represent themselves; reflect the flag of any political unit inhabited by a current Rochester student that satisfies broadly established criteria for sovereignty.⁹

The group discussed the difference between a University display and a student-organized display, noting that a University display necessarily connotes an institutional statement and sensibility—highlighted perhaps by the harm felt by many students during Fall 2019. A student-organized display, on the other hand, may offer some leeway, much as the paintings in the tunnel and chalk drawings on sidewalks do. Following this, the committee reflected on whether Hirst Lounge should focus on individual identity or the collective community of campus and, if there is a student-organized display, would Hirst Lounge be the appropriate location.

All on the committee want our students, faculty, and staff to feel a part of and welcome within the larger University of Rochester community. Some felt that the circumstances of Fall 2019 illustrate the inextricably political nature of the display of national flags and remain concerned that any ordering can/will be interpreted politically. Many national flags have specific protocols for handling and display defined by their nation, and taken as a whole, a flag display of nations necessarily raises questions of nationhood (e.g., what constitutes a nation? Who decides?) (as described above). Further, some on the committee expressed concern about a display that creates a direct correlation between a student and “their” country, even if they may individually—and perhaps quietly—oppose their country’s policies or governance. For these reasons, some on the committee view the flag display as inherently flawed and

<https://www.scmp.com/magazines/post-magazine/long-reads/article/3091643/how-strained-us-china-relations-are-playing-out> (accessed April 29, 2021).

⁹ The sovereignty claim could be met, for example, by meeting any one of the following criteria: 1) Is a member or observer of the United Nations, 2) is recognized as a state by at least two UN members, 3) is on the United Nations list of non-self-governing territories, 4) was formerly listed on the United Nations list of non-self-governing territories and has not been completely administratively integrated into another state, or 5) is a federally recognized Native American or Indigenous tribe.

were advocates of other mechanisms, such as interactive maps or geospatial displays, for the institution to celebrate its global diversity.

Several committee members, in particular the student representatives from The College, reflected an affinity for the display, noting that it provokes thought about the global diversity of the student body and that it was a welcome colorful display in an often-grey environment. Many on the committee, including both faculty and students, noted that the flag display seemed like a Rochester tradition that was worth keeping.

The student subcommittee also recommended that the flag display should be put back until a better solution is determined on how to represent the identities of students within the University community.¹⁰ While many members of the committee recognized that flags may not be the best way to represent one's identity, many students, faculty, and staff felt that an imperfect display of our University's diversity is better than no display. It was noted that the Hirst Lounge is overwhelmingly referred to as "Flag Lounge" by the student-body and that some students now call it the "Flagless Lounge" to signify the notable absence of the flag display.

Some members acknowledged that the flag display may be an unsuitable tool to reflect global diversity in an inclusive manner, given the challenges inherent in displaying national flags and their limitations for expressing diversity. The committee discussed that nation states are ideological constructs, and flags often act as flashpoints for the many issues that create and maintain the idea of the nation. Because of this, flags can be sources for feelings of exclusion as well as inclusion. One committee member noted that the flag display contained "irreconcilable interests." The committee discussed that although we were tasked with creating recommendations on what to do with the flags, another type of display around identity should be created. National identity is only one part of how students may identify, and we are a diverse school in more ways than the number of countries we have students from. The committee recognized that a solution which encapsulates the identity of the student body is something that should be discussed in the coming years, but was not the duty of the committee to solve.

Despite considerable discussion of these various viewpoints, the committee remained strongly ambivalent about the flag display and was not able to come to a consensus about its appropriateness. Due to the rigors of managing the pandemic, the committee did not make progress regarding alternative mechanisms for displaying or reflecting the University's global diversity.

However, it should be recognized that there were two primary perspectives on how to proceed with the flag display and a notable division between the students on the committee and a few of the staff, faculty, and administrators. The students on the committee, along with select faculty and staff members, demonstrated the importance of the flag display to the University community and felt that until a viable alternative for the flag display is determined the flags should be rehung in Hirst Lounge. The remainder of the faculty and staff were worried that the flag display introduced more challenges than intended and should therefore be removed, but no alternative solutions to the flag display were proposed.

¹⁰ Since the previous flag display represented students from all colleges within the University, it is necessary to include...

The general consensus of the committee was that there should be some sort of display to represent diverse identities but felt the specifics of another display should be determined by a separate committee. This committee should be formed for the Fall 2021 semester and tasked to create and discuss ideas for alternative displays of identity, in addition to, the flags. This committee should be tasked with gathering student input from all colleges within the University, hosting various town hall meetings to discuss identity, and polling the University community for creative ideas to replace the flag display.

Additionally, there was unanimous agreement that the University should issue apology, acknowledging two important issues: 1) that the previous display caused many in the community to feel alienated and harmed, and 2) that by taking the display down without any explanation or timeline for reinstatement, we caused additional harm to students who felt its absence as a prominent visual representation of our diversity.

Even though the committee was split on the appropriateness of the flags, the committee did largely agree that something should be installed, even if it is provisional, in Hirst Lounge which highlights and celebrates the diversity of the student body. The committee acknowledges the significant effort over the past academic year by students in The College to organize discussions amongst undergraduates regarding an alternative management structure for the flag display as well as the possibility of a student competition for a display of global diversity in Hirst Lounge.

In addition, the committee is supportive of an initiative to garner input from the University community about a display of global diversity. This could take the form of subcommittees or focus groups across the University. We recommend looking at the AS&E student subcommittee model for future planning. Also, a larger, more comprehensive and inclusive survey across the institution to better understand the sentiments of undergraduate and graduate students, faculty, and staff on this issue. If implemented, this will need to be further fleshed out so that the current flags/no-flags dichotomy is disrupted. Therefore, the committee also recommends that the University launch a competition to solicit proposals for displays that celebrate the University's global diversity in all its dimensions.

PROPOSAL: STUDENT-LED INITIATIVE

Given that the Undergraduate Student Subcommittee met separately from the general Flag Committee, we feel that it is important to include their unanimous resolution for the flag display.

Members of the Undergraduate Student Subcommittee discussed the events which prompted the formation of the original flag committee and how the nature of the flag issue escalated to its current situation. It became clear after several student testimonies that the general atmosphere was "disappointment" in the way the issue was handled and that many students were saddened to learn that the display had been taken down without any reasoning or notification to the students.

It became clear that the nature of the issue was a geopolitical conflict that the university administration could not get involved in, but most students did not seem to have a problem with the display as it was, rather, there were issues on how they were not equally represented or viewed. The students on this committee recognized that the flag display presented political challenges but stressed that the display was a representation of identity and not the University's political beliefs. However, since this can be

misinterpreted by someone who has no previous knowledge of the flag display, the students felt that it was important to shift the responsibility of the flag display from the University as a whole, to the student-body, leaving the use of the flag area of Hirst Lounge up to the students. This proposal ensures proper representation through a student-led initiative as should have been the case all along.

The approach that the students took in finding a solution for the display is to remove political/social culpability from the University's administration, as well as to ensure student contentment with the display. Overall, as mentioned in the report a few times already, there was a division within the committee where the students and a few other members had a certain opinion, and the rest of the committee had another opinion, but without any clear reason for their opposition or any tangible solutions. That's the reason why the students drafted this solution, in an attempt to best predict the reason for the rest of the committee's malcontent and find an adequate solutions. Like the tunnels, Hirst lounge has the potential to be another space for the student body to express themselves - and while flags here are the specific mode of identity, leaving the process within the student body almost completely accomplishes all of these goals. Yet, there would still exist the issue of the flawed UN system in the placement of the flags. The subcommittee discussed alternative ways to hang the flags, so as to eliminate the hostility associated with the UN system of arrangement.

The way that this would work is by placing the responsibility of flag selection and representation on the Student Life Committee of the Student Association. The Student Life Committee works every year to ensure that students are having the best campus experience through the work of senators and legislative advisors, so giving students a permanent (and primary) role in the approval and review of new flags and a permanent role in answering for their own decisions would allow for that same representation that students would want. The basic guidelines for flags would remain the same or relatively unchanged, as well as some additional specific exclusions—like state flags and flags representing social movements rather than culture/identity. The basic mechanism for automatically updating the flag display every year does not need to be changed, the issue primarily lies in placement. Removing separation of flags by their category in favor of hanging all approved flags alphabetically or randomly removes any placement issues as long as the guidelines and system of choice is broad enough and student run. To ensure a smooth transition into a new system, the Director of the Campus Center (currently Assistant Dean Laura Ballou) should oversee the operations with the Student Life Chair (currently Lillian Hutton). Additionally, this advisory committee should reconvene every other academic year to discuss the progress and issues that might arise from the display. The membership of the advisory committee should include a member of the executive leadership of the Undergraduate Student Association, the Student Life Chair, and 2 involved undergraduates chosen by the executive leadership member. The rest of the membership of the committee should be decided by the President and the Vice Provost for Academic Affairs, who should remain as the co-chair of the committee with the executive leadership member being the second co-chair.

In conclusion, the students unanimously agreed that the Flag Display should be returned prior to the arrival of students for the Fall 2021 semester. Multiple members of the student subcommittee expressed their fear that it may take months, if not years, for a new committee to determine the best solution for a display of diversity and for that display to be implemented. All of the students on the subcommittee were upset that the Flag Display was removed with no reasoning and feel that returning them is the first step to rectifying the issue.

Student Subcommittee Survey Work

Throughout the year, the student subcommittee conducted surveys of their peers to gather data and student feedback, which they were able to share with the main advisory committee, and which helped inform their proposal. Appendix C highlights testimonials from 50+ students and alumni about the importance of the flag lounge. People reading this report are highly encouraged to read through the entire Appendix of testimonies, as an informed decision can only be made if all of these testimonies are fully read and understood. Most of the testimonials were collected by former Senator and Student Life Chair, Lea Thome, during the Summer of 2020 as a reaction to the flags being taken down. Some of the testimonials are anonymous.

In addition to Lea Thome's work, students fielded a poll on the URConfessions Instagram account, which has approximately 2,900 followers, most of them University undergraduates. The pulse survey asked if students preferred to have the flag display reinstated; more than 90% indicated that they did want to see the flags hung again.

APPENDIX A:

Flag Advisory Committee Membership

Members of the initial Spring 2020 advisory committee included:

Joan Saab (Co-chair), Susan B. Anthony Professor and Vice Provost for Academic Affairs
Jamal Holtz '20C (Co-chair), The College Students' Association President
Laura Ballou, Assistant Dean, Student Life Operations and Director, Campus Center
Chunkit Fung, Associate Professor, Department of Medicine; Cancer Center; Dept. of Public Health Sciences, School of Medicine & Dentistry
Bob Foster, Richard L. Turner Professor of Anthropology and Visual and Cultural Studies
Kai-Ting Huang, URM Candidate for MD/PhD
Karima Kusow, '21S MBA & interim Vice President of Diversity and Inclusion, Simon Business Council
Alex Lee, Assistant Professor of Political Science
Jim Newton, Assistant Dean of Administration, Simon Business School
Ravi Shankar, Director of International Relations, Office for Global Engagement
Shiyi Shen, Warner Candidate for PhD in Teaching & Curriculum
Silvia Sorenson, Associate Professor, Warner School of Education
Sasha Tulgan, Deputy to the President
Jim Ver Steeg, Assistant Vice President, Office of Equity & Inclusion
Gerardo Zam '20C, '21 (MA), AS&E, Economics and International Relations

Members of the current (Fall 2020 – Spring 2021) advisory committee include:

Joan Saab (Co-chair), Susan B. Anthony Professor and Vice Provost for Academic Affairs
Marc Haddad '21C (Co-chair), The College Students' Association Vice President; AS&E, Mechanical Engineering
Laura Ballou, Assistant Dean, Student Life Operations and Director, Campus Center
Alexandra Fegler '23C, AS&E, Biology/Molecular Genetics
Chunkit Fung, Associate Professor, Department of Medicine; Cancer Center; Dept. of Public Health Sciences
Jane Gatewood, Vice Provost for Global Engagement
Lillian Hutton '22C, AS&E, Political Science/International Relations
Ezra Kruger '22C, Student (The College class of 2022, AS&E)
Karima Kusow, '21S MBA & interim Vice President of Diversity and Inclusion, Simon Business Council
Alex Lee, Assistant Professor of Political Science
Andre Marquis, Associate Professor of Counseling & Human Development, Warner School
Amy McDonald, Associate Vice President for Communications and Strategy
Jim Newton, Assistant Dean of Administration, Simon Business School
John Osburg, Associate Professor of Anthropology, School of Arts & Sciences
Benjamin Schiffman '23C, AS&E, Political Science and Public Health
Shiyi Shen, Candidate for PhD in Teaching & Curriculum, Warner School of Education
Jim Ver Steeg, Assistant Vice President, Office of Equity & Inclusion

APPENDIX B

Undergraduate Student Subcommittee Membership

Members of the Fall 2020-Spring 2021 Student Subcommittee:

Marc Haddad (Chair), The College Students' Association Vice President
(The College Class of 2021, AS&E)

Alexandra Fegler, Student (The College class of 2023, AS&E)

Lillian Hutton, Student (The College class of 2022, AS&E)

Benjamin Schiffman, Student (The College class of 2023, AS&E)

Ezra Kruger, Student (The College class of 2022, AS&E)

Abigail Gunther, Student (The College class of 2022, AS&E)

Amber Hu, Student (The College class of 2021, AS&E)

Caleb Wohn, Student (The College class of 2023, AS&E)

Selina Xu, Student (The College class of 2022, AS&E)

Yutian Wang, Student (The College class of 2022, AS&E)

APPENDIX C

Student and Alumni Testimonies

In response to the University of Rochester's decision to take down the flags in Hirst Lounge in Wilson Commons, an important hallmark of the university and its global community, members of the Students' Association Government got together to gather testimonies from students and alumni about the importance of the flags and why they cannot simply be removed. Students were asked "How do you feel about the flags being removed? Why is the existence of the Flag Lounge important to you and our University of Rochester community?".

Testimonies were kept anonymous if students indicated that they wanted them to remain anonymous or if they did not indicate whether they wanted them in the University Archives or not. Testimonies where students indicated that they did not want them to be included in the University Archives were not included, but will be shared privately with the university administration and anonymously if indicated. If students answered that they feel comfortable sharing their name and that they want their testimony to be recorded in the archives, their names and class years are listed below their stories.

The majority of these testimonies were collected by former Student Life Chair, Senator Lea Thome, as mentioned in the report. For question about the testimonies and how they were collected, feel free to reach out to her lthome@u.rochester.edu

TESTIMONIES:

The day the flags were removed was my first day back on campus. I was about to have my coffee in Hirst when I found it barren, lifeless, and almost sad. I am one of only about five Lebanese students on campus. Lebanon is a small country. Whenever I'm asked where I'm from, I usually have to follow up with where Lebanon is because few people know about it. But whenever I would pass through Hirst, I would scout for the red, white and green Lebanese flag and stupidly smile to myself. I guess I would think, "Oh look, we made it." It felt like a nod from the university, like "Hey, we acknowledge where you're from and your background! WE KNOW YOU EXIST!" I think the fact that the flags were in Wilson Commons of all places says a lot too, because it's essentially the hub of student activity. It's a place where everyone can see and acknowledge that well over 30% of the UofR's student body is international. I think, actually I'm willing to bet, that at some point every international has smiled proudly at their flag in Hirst. It's a celebration of culture and diversity that the UofR has always claimed to foster. So why remove it? Why now, of all times, when international solidarity is needed most?

Charbel El Haddad, Class of 2023

I strongly disagree with the decision to remove the flag display from Hirst Lounge. I vividly remember the first time I saw the flags on a tour of the university back when I was a senior in high school assessing my college options. The fact that the flags could all come together in one place to represent the student

population at Rochester was a breathtaking concept for me. Each flag on its own represented a different place from where Rochester students come from, but all together, the flags symbolized something far more significant: the very singular community that calls the University of Rochester its home; the same community that I am so grateful to be a part of. They did not simply stand for their nations, they stood for the students; our students, people who I have come to know as my friends, peers, mentors, and family away from home. During my tour, when we got to the Flag Lounge and heard its story, my family and I immediately looked for the flag of Pakistan, the country of our heritage, and were pleasantly surprised to find it. Years later, I find myself in the same spot, this time the Meridian, proudly showing off to eager high school students and their families my favorite part of campus. Each time I tell them the story and the meaning behind the flag display, the families look up to the flags and point out the ones that resonate with their ethnicities, reminding me of how my family did the same. It truly is a beautiful moment that never gets old. Being in such a prominent location on campus with staggering architectural features that allow for it to be seen day and night, the flags offer a kind of welcome to visitors and students that nothing else could replicate. It stood as a beacon of Rochester's cultural openness and proud identity as a "melting pot" of students and faculty from all over the world. We as individuals once stood under only one or two flags, but at Rochester, we stand under all of them. They are all our own, and no other university that I have been to honors its diverse student population the way Rochester did with the Flag Lounge. Now, with global movements fighting to dismantle centuries of systemic racism and the concept of "otherness," it is important that Rochester maintains this symbolic welcome to people from all walks of life. Doing so will allow more students to feel not only welcome, but also honored and appreciated within the halls of our campus. It will show them that we as a community not only care for and recognize their individual and cultural backgrounds, but we celebrate them for who they are and what they bring to our university in the constant spirit of Meliora, a spirit that, like our community, spans the world, and has no one flag, but rather all of them.

Faraan Hamad, Class of 2022

As an International student, the flag lounge is a significant symbol of my representation on this campus and seeing my flag alongside my peers' flags represents the diversity and inclusion we have been fighting towards at this PWI. The flag lounge has given students the abilities to converse on their ethnicities, their cultural heritage, and their nations of origin.

Brian Yegela, Class of 2021

As someone who isn't an international student but whose place of origin is represented in the Flag Lounge, I still have some connection to it. Me being from the District of Columbia, the people's lives within sometimes are overshadowed by the massive momentums around them. Most people don't know the native issues to the district, even less what the flag looks like. Seeing my home displayed in such a manner with other places brings an enormous feeling of recognition and pride. In my view, the Flag Lounge is a symbol not alone of fellow students' place of origin but a symbol of unity. The betterment of tomorrow doesn't happen with one country, but with the collective effort of many, the Flag Lounge is a beckon for all to see.

Devon Rogers, Class of 2023

Going into my first tour of UR as a high school senior, I knew nothing about the University. When the tour guide took us into the Flag Lounge, that was the moment I decided I wanted to go to the university of Rochester.

Ada Wightman, Class of 2021

Representing the student body by the flags of the countries, despite being largely symbolic, gives prospective students the comfort of knowing that they will fit in, even if they are international. By taking such a drastic measure, the university is showing that they value politics over pragmatism. This is not the way forward, and especially not the path to a way ever better.

Vlad Maksimovski, Class of 2022

Although I won't be returning to campus this fall semester, this removal does bother me a lot as a member of the U of R student body. I understand why issues may arise in regards to current international issues, but it saddens me to see them taken down nonetheless. The depth of my emotion on this matter probably sounds ridiculous, considering most of the community likely views the flags as nothing more than pretty decoration, but personally, the flags have always been a symbolic reminder that my heritage and nationality can coexist peacefully regardless of the current political climate. Additionally, seeing my home country's flag has always been extremely validating for me, considering the censorship and violent disputes that are currently taking place there. To know that my people's plight is not ignored, and that I remain connected to their fight for liberty has always been comforting. Taking down the flags in an effort to diminish complaints feels like a symbolic dismissal of my people's voices. It feels like the administration chose to trade my voice for another's comfort, which is disappointing at best and at worse, feels like censorship of my people from yet another oppressive third party. As a person of color, there exist already too few representations of my race and ethnicity on this campus. I do not wish to be stripped of one more, however inconsequential it may be to anyone else. What message does the administration, who prides itself on inclusivity and thoughtful critique, send when it rids the campus of its boldest, and most public symbol of that same inclusivity? And how does that message negatively impact the members of this community who joined with the expectation of free discourse that they may not be afforded off campus?

Phoebe, Class of 2022

Whether it's catching up with friends, attending meetings for clubs or simply grabbing a bite to eat, Wilson Commons is where I'll be. Wilco is undoubtedly the heart of student life at the U of R, and so it's especially important that people feel welcome and accepted there. As an international student who has travelled thousands of miles from home in pursuit of an excellent education, seeing my flag among many others proudly hung in Flag Lounge always gives me comfort in knowing that I have a firm place at the University of Rochester, as well as pride in knowing my university is devoted to international excellence and intercultural understanding. That's why Flag lounge is extremely important to me and so many others who have made the U of R our home.

Niharika Thakur, Class of 2022

I am a Romanian-American student. I have lived in the United States my entire life, but have always felt very connected to my culture. I speak Romanian at home, eat Romanian food, celebrate the Orthodox

holiday, and am lucky enough to have a community of other Romanians in Syracuse who I consider to be family. When I went to college it was the first time away from family, friends, and my normal life. I was incredibly excited to start my new life at Rochester but felt homesick. A source of comfort for me was the flag of my Romania hanging amongst all of the other world flags. It reminded me that I didn't leave my community, it just got a little bigger. Now I had the opportunity to join something bigger, something global. I felt proud to be a part of an institution, which brought people from different nations under one roof for the purpose of education. The flag lounge does not represent what is, but what could be. A future where people can be a community, not despite their cultural differences, but because of them. If we are to promote unity amongst our students, the flags must be reinstated in the Hirst lounge.

Alexandru Mihaila, Class of 2023

I am going to keep this short and simple. The flag lounge has been there for a long time and is sort of like a symbol or landmark for our school. It means a lot to see where all of our students are from. I can tell you that sitting in the lounge and naming all the flags is a pastime for many groups. Them being removed with no talks or anything is crazy. Things just keep getting worse and worse with school and COVID. This is just the cherry on top :(

Alara Ozkum, Class of 2023

Those flags represent the many countries/islands that make up the University of Rochester. It has served as a symbol of motivation where students can go to be reminded that their hard work can one day benefit not only them but their countries. It's also a place where you go to gain appreciation. Walking by Hirst Lounge, you can't help but feel a sense of pride and purpose when you look up and see that your country's flags are represented. Temporarily taking down the flags to have a conversation seems irrational and not well thought out in my opinion. How about having the conversation first, getting us, the actual students who are represented through those flags in the conversation and then make a decision on the keeping or removing of the flags.

Claudene Roye, Class of 2021

I've always been away from home. At a young age me and my family emigrated from Albania to the U.S. for our future. So when I moved to campus, and felt like missing my family, I would look at the Albanian flag and feel close to home. There are hundreds of other students, from different countries, who probably share the same experience as mine. Flag lounge really is important to us.

Elisa Stefani, Class of 2023

When I came to tour the university with my mother, one of the features that stood out to us the most was the flag display. My mother began crying when she saw them and the clocks on the wall because, as a mother, she loved that the young students had something to remind them that they belonged here. While I am a student from the U.S., every time I walked into Hirst Lounge, I was reminded of my mother and why I chose UofR over every other school. My mother passed away this year from breast cancer, and the idea of walking into Hirst Lounge and seeing that the display that sparked so much joy for her is gone is devastating beyond words. The flag display is a symbol that no matter where we come from, we are all

connected. We all have the same goal of obtaining knowledge and personal growth. How you could remove that symbol, especially during times like these, is beyond me.

Ali McCommon, Class of 2021

The flag lounge is a vital and iconic part of campus, and it's a main marker that shows the diversity in our community. When I first toured the school I distinctly remembered the flag lounge due to its status and it made me really appreciate the school, and removing it just makes no sense.

William Most, Class of 2023

One of the very reasons why I was so captivated with the University of Rochester during the waning days of my high school career was because of the sheer diversity of people that the University of Rochester was able to unite. I loved the cosmopolitan spirit that the University embodied, and there was no better testament to this international identity than the iconic flag lounge. For me, the flag lounge represented not only the good will the University had with its community of international students, but also with the world at large. But most importantly, I believed that this flag lounge was the truest manifestation of our school's indefatigable spirit: that even though things may not be perfect and unexpected situations may arise, we, as a community, would be able to weather through it and climb out ever stronger, ever better. The removal of this flag lounge is not only damaging to the international image that the University has delicately cultivated over the decades, but is also damaging to the trust that the students have for this current administration. By becoming a part of the student body, it became apparent to me that the adhesive which holds together the wide and far reaching elements of the Rochester community is trust. By removing the flags from the Hirst Lounge, not only has the school administration repudiated their trust with the international community to provide exemplary education and treatment to all students, but they have forsaken their oath to the students to improve ever better, for the better. It is with a heavy heart that I will accept the removal of this dear piece of the university's identity, and I can only hope that the current administration considers carefully before doing something similar in the future.

Andrew Deng, Class of 2021

When I visited U of R, the first memorable thing I saw was the Flag Lounge. It showed me that this school is a unique and appreciative community and it made me want to be a part of it. I've spent so many late nights looking at those flags with my friends, and I find it upsetting that the display has turned into nothing but a political statement to the administration. The removal of the flags shows that the administration fears making the wrong decision more than they care about representing their students' national identities and beliefs.

Claire Breitinger, Class of 2023

I think the fact that the University began considerations for removing the Flag Lounge because of controversy over the recognition of Taiwan and Hong Kong's sovereign status is very telling of the University's priorities. The University would rather bow to the demands of students who marginalize and alienate their own peers than actually stand up for the ideals of diversity and equity it claims to uphold. I am beyond disgusted with this decision and I seriously urge the University to reconsider what this action

means in the context of today's politics. Furthermore, the action was taken without any kind of communication to the general student body. This is not how a responsible, transparent, and fair school administration functions. In fact, it's indicative of very serious problems in where this school's loyalties lie. When you admitted every one of us, you brought us into your school with the promise of giving us a space and a voice, and in turn we actively contribute to your community and bring in perspectives and minds from all over the world. The Flag Lounge is a place to celebrate our unique backgrounds, embrace our heritages, and come together as one to eat, talk, and commune. We need to establish a community in Rochester, now more than ever, not tear it down. Bring back Flag Lounge.

Atalanta Ritter, Class of 2022

When I first visited UR, I knew nothing about it. A scholarship was the only thing that led me here. But as I learned more about its unique style of learning, I was intrigued. What made my decision to attend final was seeing my flag on the ceiling within UR walls. As a first generation immigrant, I have always felt alienated from my 5th generation plus peers. From slight incorrect pronunciations, to not understanding pop culture references, to being asked if I'm speaking Spanish as I converse with my Bulgarian mother on the phone, I never truly felt a sense of belonging. I tried to relate to Russian-American pop culture, because Bulgarians are too obscure. Because of UR, I was able to speak my home tongue again with people who were not my mother. I was accepted due to my essay praising my home country. The Flag Lounge was not A reason for why I came. It was THE reason.

Sophia Troanska, Class of 2022

Being originally from Germany and growing up there, but having lived in China, Slovakia and now the United States, no one place has felt like home to me. When I first arrived on campus and saw all the flags when I walked into Hirst Lounge, I knew the University of Rochester was the right place for me. The existence of the flags signaled to me that our campus is a place that welcomes students from all over the world and that I felt represented here as an international student. The Flag Lounge is an important sign to our student body that we are a global institution and community that prides itself in welcoming people from all over the world. Removing the flags would make our students lose this recognition and sense of belonging.

Lea Thome, Class of 2022

From a young age, I have always been fascinated by other countries and cultures. My favorite show is The Amazing Race, in which contestants travel the world, and as a hobby I have memorized all of the country locations, capitals, and world flags. Personally, my family is a rather diverse one, and I have immediate relatives who are from Indian, Thai, African, Russian, and Jewish backgrounds. In addition, I have close friends who are from or currently reside all around the world in places like Canada, the UK, Singapore, Pakistan, and Venezuela to name a few. For me, when I look at the Flag Lounge, it is a constant reminder to me of not only the people who I love, but of how diverse the world we live in truly is. At the University of Rochester, those flags also act as a symbol of how people from every corner of the planet can come together in a common Yellowjacket community. We should not allow international issues to stand in the way of celebrating this beautiful process. Removing the flags is ignoring the stories of our international students and our domestic ones.

Matt Kiel, Class of 2023

The first day I arrived during international student orientation I was wandering around campus after checking in wondering if moving across the world to be here was even worth it. I felt lonely and already homesick, but then I wandered into Wilson Commons and suddenly felt incredibly happy upon seeing the flags. The flags gave my scared freshman self a pocket of comfort, and seeing such a symbolic thing taken away made me wonder if international students were even valued by the admin.

Victoria Bela, Class of 2021

When I toured the UR flag lounge was the thing that stood out to me most. I wanted to attend this school because of how international and proud it was!

Victoria Ter-Ovanesyan, Class of 2022

The first photo I ever took on campus was in a flag lounge. Seeing my flag made me feel included in the University of Rochester Community. It made me feel as if University was waiting for me even long before I arrived. I am very sad that my last photo on campus this year, when I graduate, couldn't happen in the flag lounge. Please bring them back for future generations!!!!

Iryna Kmyts, Class of 2021

I entered the U of R right at the first year of Trump's presidency, when it was getting hard to believe that immigrants were welcome to the US. Seeing those flags at the U of R made me feel safe here because it felt like our origins were not only recognized, but also celebrated. It is easy for domestic faculty to say that nationalism is dangerous and that the flags only cause trouble when they don't need to make an effort to not lose their heritage on campus every single day. Seeing those flags be taken down was one of the saddest things and it came off as the University giving up on its international student community, especially right in the middle of the coronavirus pandemic. I don't think the administration really understands how much it means for students to see their flags up. Are we really not worth the trouble of solving arbitrary representation standards?

Larissa Daruge, Class of 2021

In all five years I was at UR, the flags were the unequivocal color that brought UR to life. There have been too many times when friends and I have just looked up and remarked about this flag, and that flag, amazed that they were not just there for decoration but were a representation of actual people on this campus. I even filed a petition to have a flag of Oman up there, even though I'm technically from Pakistan, but was born and raised in Oman. I did that because it MEANT something to have my identity represented amongst the rest of those proud, beautiful flags. The people in charge gave in to weakness when they decided to take the easy way out by removing the flags instead of addressing the core problem. They took away a physical manifestation of people's identity, people who literally travelled THOUSANDS of miles to be a part of the Yellowjacket family. We can't pretend to be Ever Better when moving forward means stripping the campus of the gestures that made me fall in love with.

Muhammad Hadi, Class of 2019, T5 2020

I'm angry about the flags being removed. The Flag Lounge represented the best part about U of R. We have students from all over the world. I get to meet people from different cultures and bond with them. The Flag Lounge symbolized how U of R accepts learners from everywhere. Not to mention, the Flag Lounge looked incredible and was a true spectacle to behold. It was both a powerful symbol and beautiful peace of art.

Anonymous

I came to the University of Rochester in 2017, as the first and only student from the Maldives who has been enrolled here. I had heard about the flag lounge during the admissions process and subsequent acceptance. I was excited to see the lounge during my first few weeks but I noticed that my country's flag was not up there. I was later informed that this was a logistical oversight after some email correspondence with the WilCo team and was reassured that it would be up for my sophomore year. It eventually was put up in the spring semester of my sophomore year.

The flag was a validation (no matter how small) of my efforts to get to the university and a sign of hope that perhaps more Maldivians could come and appreciate the campus I have grown to love. The lounge was a beautiful celebration of diversity, a symbol of the interactions I have had with people all over the world on campus. To learn that these flags in the lounge have been taken down abruptly with no real warning or announcement by the administration is disappointing. International students have come under a lot of scrutiny unfairly during this pandemic and it is actions like this that make me question the sincerity of statements like "You're welcome here". Actions speak louder than words, and this one is both baffling and disheartening for me and so many other international students on campus.

Anonymous

Frankly, I feel betrayed. It's not even about the flags. Granted, the flags, and the message they send is important, but we thought we'd already been through this. In the spring, when we were told the flags were coming down, we responded with outrage, and we THOUGHT that our voices had been heard. But now, without discussion, without warning, and contrary to the reassurances we had been given, the flags are just GONE? Screw that. As for what they mean, I've always seen them as a symbol of inclusivity, and as a reminder that while we come from many places, as we share our planet, we share our campus. And vice versa. I'm sure we can all agree that whether it is right to take down the flags (and I am far from alone in thinking they should stay in their iconic, and meaningful home high above Hirst), the decision needs to be made together, with full, long discussion. Not behind our backs. Not like this. Bring back the flags. I can't put enough emphasis on the gravity of this, on the feelings of betrayal this move has invoked, or on the loss of one of the most iconic symbols of unity left on campus.

Anonymous

It makes me sad to hear the flags were removed, and I hope that they can be returned as soon as possible. Being from Puerto Rico, I have heard many stories about bad experiences that other people had when moving to the states. Although it was my dream to study in the U.S. I was scared that I would face similar experiences to those I had heard. When I first toured around UR, seeing my flag displayed gave me a sense of pride and safety, and made me feel like I was welcome here. I'm sure many other students feel the

same way I do, and that those flags have the potential to give current and incoming students the sense of safety it gave me.

Anonymous

I am deeply upset about the removal of the flags from Hirst Lounge. As someone who doesn't come from a diverse hometown, Flag Lounge is always a reminder of the celebration of diversity that exists here, which is the main reason why I chose the University of Rochester to call home. As a Meridian, it is the highlight of my tours and as a student, it is my favorite spot on campus.

Anonymous

I am a mentor for newcomer internationals, and the flag lounge was a popular spot among our mentees as the flags there backed up the University's diverse student body. The flags were also a reminder for me that I am a part of the amazing international community at this school. With this decision, I no longer feel like expressing my nationality is welcome if my flag isn't even allowed for display. I am horrified and would want to see the flags back in their place.

Anonymous

I'm angry about the flags being removed. The Flag Lounge represented the best part about U of R. We have students from all over the world. I get to meet people from different cultures and bond with them. The Flag Lounge symbolized how U of R accepts learners from everywhere. Not to mention, the Flag Lounge looked incredible and was a true spectacle to behold. It was both a powerful symbol and beautiful peace of art.

Anonymous

When I first came on the U of R campus in 2016, I remember seeing the large display in the Flag Lounge, a display of culture that made me realize in what a diverse community I stepped in. As an international student myself, it made me feel welcome here and proud of my heritage. When I later became a Meridian tour guide, the Flag Lounge was my favorite part of the tour and many families were amazed of the incredibly diverse community at U of R, all visually represented in one space. Taking down the flag display is not only saddening but the fact that the decision was made without any student input it's concerning and disappointing. U of R can do better.

Anonymous

Hearing about the flags being removed makes me sad and seems like a rash and not well thought out decision. I've always found the flags to be a striking and unique display of our college's diversity and I think we should bring it back.

Anonymous

Being able to see my flag up there always made being in Wilco amazing. It's such a welcoming feeling that makes my U of R home feel closer to back home. I was actually talking to my mom in the flag lounge 2 days ago and I showed her the flags for the first time. She was so happy to see them... I think the existence of the Flag Lounge is important to the entire U of R community because it highlights that everyone is

welcome here, and we are all part of a community. Recognizing where each one of us came from makes people feel safe here. Moreover, the clocks showing the time in different cities around the world are also located there, making the Flag Lounge like a mini-international world even more. I can not imagine the Flag Lounge without the flags...

Anonymous

I used to sit under the flags and eat lunch at least 3 times a week for the past two years. My friends and I would sit under the flags and try to guess the flags we didn't know based on their alphabetical order. Some were easy like Paraguay which has the name written on it while others took days to figure out like Myanmar (because it was alphabetized as Burma). Not only did I make friends because of those flags, I learned about every flag in the world. As a prospective student interested in international relations, the flags were one of things that most drove me to UR, as they represented to me that this was an institution where I could bond with people from all the countries I was studying. If I visited today, there's not an insignificant chance I would have chosen a different university.

Anonymous

I think for context, it is important to acknowledge that I am studying International Relations and Political Science. I vividly remember visiting our campus in my Junior year of high school. I remember being paired up with a student who showed me around campus in my own private tour. When we reached the Hirst Lounge, I cracked a snarky comment about how displaying the flags represented diversity. The student acknowledged my comment but put me in my place by letting me know that each flag was representative of a Country that a member of the student body was from. I was told that there were roughly 130 flags and respective countries represented by our student population. At first glance, the number was undoubtedly remarkable. However, knowing that I wanted to study International relations, the Hirst Lounge ultimately became the deciding factor in my school decision. Upon receiving my acceptance letter, I was ecstatic to be able to study International Relations with people from all over the world. I was going to hear different perspectives and views and get in touch with people who had entirely different experiences than I have had. Obviously, the removal of the flags from the lounge will not negate the opportunities I have been granted by attending such a university that prides itself on its international student population. That being said, I think it would detract from the experience. Everytime I walk through Wilson Commons and the Hirst Lounge specifically, I'm reminded that even though each individual student is undoubtedly important in their own way, the variety of cultures and lifestyles represented by those flags is what makes our community a beautiful medley. I'm reminded that I'm a part of something greater.

Anonymous

I feel betrayed and angered by the removal of the flags. I am angry that a University that prides itself on diversity and inclusion would so blatantly disregard symbols that represent their students. I'm not an international student, I am an average girl from a small rural, upstate town. I remember the first time I visited Rochester and knew it was the place for me. I remember seeing the flags hanging, and my tour guide proudly pointing them out and sharing how proud she was to be a part of this diverse university community. I wanted to be a part of that. I wanted to be a part of a place full of different cultures, peoples, and ideas to challenge the assumptions and unconscious bias that 18 years of living in my town had

created. I came to Rochester excited to be a part of something bigger than myself and to strive to be “ever better” in all aspects of my life. How can we accomplish/foster the MELIORA values as a community when we can’t acknowledge the diversity and identities that make the Rochester community so great?

Anonymous

The flag lounge doesn't mean much to me. However, I am a meridian and it's a pretty good talking point. I doubt that affects whether people come to our school or not, but it does make us look good and showcases our large population of international students. That aside though, removing the flag display doesn't set a good precedent for other fixtures (and the ideas they promote) on campus. When there's a bit of criticism around something that's generally positive and clearly well intentioned, you work to address those criticisms and make the product better. You don't just get rid of the whole thing and expect a pat on the back for being aware. Most people with common sense probably can agree that the flag display promotes a positive idea: diversity. By eliminating something that is largely positive because there has been some criticism of it sets a precedent for the removal of other symbols simply because they don't wholeheartedly appeal to everyone. College should be a place to be exposed to ideas we may not agree with, and to challenge certain fixtures that may not be entirely representative of the ideas they are supposed to portray. By removing the flag display, you promote the idea that things you don't completely agree with should be eliminated. That's not how you encourage critical thinking or resilience. It only diminishes them. As an institution of higher education, we need to do better in improving the things about our University that already stand for something beautiful. By eliminating these symbols, we make our campus uglier instead of the more diverse and inclusive place it can be.

Anonymous

I am extremely disappointed by the University's choice to remove the flags from Hirst Lounge. The Flag Lounge was one of the only visible demonstrations of a University commitment and celebration of diversity, and taking it down does not address concerns over representation, but instead erases the issue while simultaneously erasing the diversity and multicultural nature of our student body. As a former Meridian (tour guide), one of my favorite parts of giving tours was stopping at the Flag Lounge and telling potential students and their families that each flag represents at least one current student or staff/faculty member on campus. It's no secret that the University of Rochester is a primarily white institution, and an expensive one, and it was not a shock to me that most potential students I gave tours to presented as white students. However, the joy and excitement that I witnessed from potential students and families of color when they saw their heritage visibly represented made me feel much better about the job I was doing as a tour guide. As a white student myself, I've learned in classes that representation matters, but I never experienced the impact of representation until I took a group of RCSD students, mostly students of color, on a tour and witnessed firsthand how meaningful it was to them to see the U of R proudly display our flags and our diversity. It was at that point of the tour that I think a lot of those students actually began to let themselves believe that they could be a student at UR, and they began to picture themselves on our campus. That is a really impactful thing to witness, and I'm sure it is even more impactful to those students who experience it. During my time as a Meridian, I saw that experience repeated over and over again for prospective students of color. It breaks my heart that students coming on to campus, be it as a potential

student, a freshman, or a returning student, will no longer have that small visualization that their presence matters on our campus.

Anonymous

I don't agree with it. As the student government email mentioned, the talks have still not reached a conclusion. The removal of the flags is the easy way out. I hope that the flags are put back immediately. I also hope that the talks begin again, with a focus on finding an inclusive way of displaying the flags, rather than finding cheap solutions such as removing every flag. That is a blow to UR's diversity. Each flag represents a real person's origin and identity.

Anonymous

It feels awkward to think about why they would need to be removed. I previously believed that the University of Rochester was proud of being a university that hosts and fosters the development of a global community. I thought 'diversity' was just not a label that was being used as an advertisement like it's said in many places. I believed that the university respected, appreciated and WANTED it's international population. After the ICE rule was published, I felt like an outsider who was staying within these borders at the mercy of the government and who could be kicked out anytime. I felt devalued and disrespected by the land I was standing in. I honestly felt like leaving a place that didn't want me. I cried for several days and was depressed to a degree that impacted my mental health. But every time I went to the pit to get food, I saw my country's flag and those clocks on the wall showing different time zones. And I felt this sense of belonging to the campus. I felt like, even if this country can't stand me for the rest of my time here as a Bachelor's student, MY university wants me, loves me, values me and respects my origins and roots. UoR is MY community that embraces me for who I am and that flag hanging high up ahead was a testament of the acceptance and love that this community has towards me, my origin and culture. And with the support UofR gave to rescind the rule, my belief that UofR wants me was re-established. I love my American friends and they love me for who I am. But it is undeniable that at times I feel like they secretly believe that I am like a guest to this campus since I am here for a max of 4 years only. The flag of my country hanging in line with the flags of the rest of the countries was a reminder to me that me, my country is no less than any other country. We are all equal, and we'll all be treated equally with equal opportunities during our time here. I sometimes get scared to speak in my first language in public if I'm out of campus. But I've never felt scared to speak in my mother tongue on campus. I feel comfortable exposing my language and culture to my American friends because I know that this university endorses mutual respect and tolerance towards foreign cultures and languages. And my country's flag hanging high up openly, in front of the entire UofR community was a testament that I've got nothing to hide, nothing to shelter as long as I was on campus because my community loves me. With the flags coming down, I now feel like I might have something to hide, something to shelter. I feel like I should make sure I do not come off as 'too different' in front of people.

Anonymous

The removal of the flags is a shocking blow to the identity of the university. Flags are powerful symbols. The display in Hirst Lounge represented the idea that the University of Rochester is a place where diversity flourishes. It showed that people come from all over the world to join our community, to proudly share

an identity as students of the University of Rochester. Especially now, when many of our students are physically distant from each other, it is important to cultivate that sense of identity and togetherness.

Anonymous

There is no reason the flags should have been taken down. The flags represent the diversity of the student body that comes to the University of Rochester every year. I understand that some of the flags may "offend" some students, and that should be taken into account. But if the majority of students want to keep the flags in the lounge, why has the administration kowtowed to these students? What is the point of having a student government if we, the students, cannot make decisions about what our campus should look like? The flags moving, then ultimately coming down, is personal for me, the beginning of this controversy was about the moving of the Hong Kong flag, Taiwanese flag, and other flags, and the reason this hits close to home is that my Mother was born in Taiwan, and I still have family living in Taiwan. Even though I might not be from Taiwan, I can still stand side-by-side with Taiwanese students to make sure they feel represented at this university. The only reason a flag should be taken down is that no current student of the University of Rochester is from that country, as long as there is a presence of that nation on our campus, that country's flag needs to be proudly hung alongside the flags of every other nation represented on our campus. Why is the administration concerned about the flag display right now, at a time where hundreds of thousands of people all over the world are contracting COVID-19 and the idea that a college degree is worth it at all? The university, right now, seems to be more concerned with superficial actions like a flag display removal and creating nice acronyms like CURT and CAP; rather than making real decisions about how to make sure the university balances its budget, make sure the students don't contract COVID-19, and, most importantly, to make sure that the vast amount of money spent on our education at this university is being used to give us the best possible education. The University of Rochester has been going strong for over 150 years and will no doubt sit along the Genesee for another 150 years. But, this is a moment that students, faculty, and alumni will look back on and wonder what was the administration thinking. The flag represents all of us, and the reason students from around the world choose to come to the University of Rochester is the diversity in the students, the broad range of viewpoints that they hold, and the willingness of its students to stand for what is right, rather than what is easy. Taking down the flag display is not the right way to make sure every student feels included in the Rochester community, the flag display is one area of the campus that is supposed to show the unity among students and nations, rather than division.

Anonymous

It makes sense. The university is in an impossible situation about how to distinguish certain regions /countries /territories from each other. How should UR decide? Popular student votes? Official US government policy? I think the UR student community needs to realize that the world is much more complicated than they think. The right way to display the flags is a very complex issue with no evident solution.

Anonymous

I'm angry about the flags being removed. The Flag Lounge represented the best part about U of R. We have students from all over the world. I get to meet people from different cultures and bond with them.

The Flag Lounge symbolized how U of R accepts learners from everywhere. Not to mention, the Flag Lounge looked incredible and was a true spectacle to behold. It was both a powerful symbol and beautiful peace of art.

Anonymous

As an international student, the flags meant to me that my presence on campus was noticed and welcomed. While there might be more Jamaican international students on campus, I personally know of only 5. Being able to see my country's flag in the lounge has always been something that I felt proud of, knowing that even though there is a small number of us, we are important enough for our flag to be recognized. In fact, the first picture I sent to my mother upon arriving on campus in Fall 2018 was that of the Jamaican flag being hung the lounge. While this may not seem like a big deal, to many of us from underrepresented countries, this is how we first recognize that we are valued.

Anonymous

I think that the removal of flags from the flag lounge is a spineless act and shame on the university for removing them.

Anonymous

I am deeply saddened to know that now I may never get to see the flag lounge. As an incoming freshman, I have spent all summer taking virtual tours and reading articles about how beautiful the University or Rochester is, and the Flag Lounge was at the top of my list to see once I arrived. It seemed like a such a cool concept, a way to acknowledge the diversity of the campus in a unique and artistic way. I hoped to one day stand under the flags and feel as though I was apart of that community and feel connected to the people around me, but now that is something I cannot do. I truly hope it is brought back so I can experience what many Yellowjackets before me have.

Anonymous

I am upset that the university decided to make a decision about taking down the flags without consulting with the student body. That lounge is for students and have been a place for hanging out, eating food to holding activities and events. For me as someone who was involved with dance on campus, I have had some of my favorite memories dancing in that room during the south asian events to celebrate the diversity of South Asia and learn more about the different cultures. The flags reminded me of that same thing whenever I would look up because it reminded of how many cultures we have represented on campus and makes you appreciate our student body. It is the identity of wilson commons; as soon as you walk in or whenever you pass by, you can see all the flags and appreciate it so much. No one even calls it Hirst lounge, we call it the flag lounge. This action taken by the administration is ridiculous and is yet another example of how they do not bother to consult with the students to know what we want. We pay so much money to the university, it would be great if they could listen to us and hear our voices. As of right now, I know MANY people are upset about this decision and I hope the flags are put back in the lounge sooner rather than later.

Anonymous

While I am a domestic student, my parents are immigrants. Having the flags removed (while there's obviously still the American flagpole up) feels extremely xenophobic and as if UR is acting like America is superior to other countries. This is especially concerning considering how many international students UR has (particularly the many they charge full tuition from).

Anonymous

The flag lounge reminded me that I wasn't the only one. When I was touring Rochester, seeing my country's flag proudly displayed meant there was at least one other person on campus that I shared a language and a culture with. After spending over a decade in the US, I've met two other families who are from the same country as me. Even though I have never met this student, knowing that I wasn't alone meant the world to me. When I decided to accept Rochester's offer, I knew that I could be the reason that flag stayed up for 4 more years. Having it be taken down means there could be a student who feels alone who won't have that little hope to hold onto.

Anonymous

it's atrocious. pandering is unexpected from what is purported to be an academic institution.

Anonymous

The sudden decision by the university administration to remove the flags from Hirst Lounge feels hurtful and entirely unnecessary, especially given the current circumstances. As an international student, I am disappointed that the student body was not given any warning of this drastic change to an integral part of the university's legacy, culture, and aesthetic appeal. The University of Rochester is one of the most internationally diverse colleges in the United States, and few institutions, if any, can claim to host a larger proportion of their student body from around the world. The flag display in Hirst Lounge was a testament to the fact that this international diversity is not merely tolerated or simply accepted, but actively celebrated. Over the last three years, as I have interacted with people from all sorts of backgrounds and attended a rich variety of cultural events in this space, the multitude of flags overhead have served as a symbol of the university's efforts to encourage and facilitate such exchanges to embody the spirit of Meliora. Even on regular days, passing through Wilson Commons and seeing my country's flag hanging proudly amongst the others served as a reminder that I could freely express my national identity in this space as a valued member of the university community, regardless of current diplomatic relations or global developments. As this country's government has adopted an increasingly hostile attitude towards international students and scholars over the last couple of years, the flag display has become a reassurance that I am welcome here, and that the university is as proud to have me here as I am proud to attend it. This comfort has allowed me to settle in and become an active part of the community in a way I might not have done otherwise. As we approach the start of the fall semester and prepare to welcome the Class of 2024, I believe it would be an immense tragedy for the new first-years to not be able to witness the grandeur of the flag display upon their first visit to Wilson Commons, and to feel that same connection to a larger family that I have felt these past three years. In essence, the flag display is equivalent to a grand family portrait that adds to the beauty of our campus. As a proud Yellowjacket, I would like to see that portrait restored as an affirmation to all Yellowjackets, past and present, from all corners of this country and the world, that they do indeed have a home, beside the Genesee.

Mohammad Jassem Nauman, Class of 2021

The flag lounge was the most memorable part of my entire tours (I did 2) when I was applying to the u of r. As a student it felt like a symbol of how many different people it is possible to encounter and that the university was open to students from all backgrounds.

Anonymous

In many ways, this year has been a stark reminder of the hatred and divisiveness in the world both within the US and internationally. To me, the removal of the flags makes it appear this inability to celebrate each other's differences and constructively collaborate has infected our university, as well. The flag lounge wasn't just a cool place to hang out. It was a meaningful reminder of the global nature of our campus community. It showed that despite being a smaller university, we brought together so many people from all over and that the university was a place to be proud of one's culture. It feels as though in an effort to not offend anyone, we've stripped ourselves of a cherished reminder of our diversity and role as a place where students can freely express themselves.

Anonymous

It is a tradition for the flags waving in the flag lounge. To me, it represents the diversity that we have in this university community. As an international student, it lets us be proud of our homeland flag and it teaches us to appreciate other nations as well. As a mainland Chinese student, I am well-known about the disputes around the Taiwan flag and the PR China flag. Anyway around, having or not having flags, having or not having the Taiwan flag, someone will be upset. We can decide about the future of the flags together as a community. We can vote, and enjoy the democracy we have in this country.

Anonymous

I'm really upset by this. I know there has been conflict and controversy over the past year but I feel as though this was the easy way out and a hasty non solution to remove the problem rather than fix it. This is such a unique aspect of our campus and I talk about it to non UR people quite frequently. It stands for something so great and now no one can appreciate it.

Anonymous