Lawmakers and advocates on Capitol Hill last week discussed a seismic question: Should the U.S. government pay reparations to African-Americans for the lasting damage caused by slavery and Jim Crow? During the congressional hearing, a similar fight continued at a slow burn on the other side of town — one that could set a precedent for colleges called upon to atone for their own roles in that troubled past.

In 1838, Jesuit priests sold about 300 slaves to save Georgetown University from crushing debt. Student activists on the campus have been campaigning for the slaves’ living descendants to receive some form of reparations from the university.

In April the student body passed a symbolic referendum that called on each student to pay a $27.20 fee per semester on top of their tuition bill. The money would form a fund to benefit those living descendants of the slaves, known as the GU272, about 4,000 of whom are alive today. Now the proposal is with the university’s Board of Directors, which would need to approve it for it to take effect.

Activists are pushing Georgetown U.’s board to vote on a referendum, already approved by the student body, that would award funds to the descendants of slaves whom Georgetown Jesuits sold in 1838.
Reckoning With Slavery

In recent years, scholarship on the history of slavery has leapt beyond academe to force a societal reckoning. This occasional series explores fresh questions scholars are asking as America confronts its history of human bondage.

- The Trouble With ‘Ole Miss’
- A New Path to Atonement
- A ‘Long Overdue Conversation’:
  Do Universities That Benefited From Slavery Owe a Debt to Black Colleges?

But activists are accusing the board of dragging its feet. Members of the GU272 Advocacy Team, the group that wrote the referendum and organized the vote, say they are disappointed that the board didn’t vote on the matter at its June 6 meeting and has given no indication of when it will.

Georgetown did not make members of the board available for comment, and says the board has not scheduled a vote because it wants to deliberate seriously on a complex matter.

That tension, in tandem with a new genealogical project tracing the family histories of the GU272 slaves, and revitalized national conversations about reparations, has some questioning whether a university will be the first institution to take action — and set a precedent — on this controversial topic.

Georgetown’s Reparations

Nile Blass, a rising sophomore and member of the GU272 Advocacy Team, said she and other students had been under the impression, based on conversations with administrators, that the board would vote on the referendum at its June meeting. Instead,
the students were invited to present their case on June 4 and answer questions from the directors. Blass said the board members had been respectful and attentive, but the conversation was rushed, and the cause dismissed.

“It kind of felt like an institutional bone given to us that actually didn’t necessarily have any meaning beyond symbolic,” Blass said.

Norman A. Francis Jr., a rising senior and student-body president, mirrored Blass’s concerns. He understands that complex issues take time to untangle, he said, but thinks the board is stalling.

The issue is so contentious that the GU272 descendants themselves have myriad opinions about how reparations could be used to support them. Some don’t agree with reparations at all. The university has also taken other steps to redress its past ties to slavery: It formed a working group in 2015 to “reflect upon” its involvement in slavery, renamed two buildings that originally honored the Jesuits who organized the GU272 sale, and gave the descendants of the GU272 legacy status if they applied for admission.
Slavery and Academe

You may also want to read these Chronicle articles:

- Historians of Slavery Find Fruitful Terrain: Their Own Institutions
- Many Colleges Profited From Slavery. What Can They Do About It Now?
- How Colleges Are Turning Their Racist Pasts Into Teaching Opportunities
- In Explaining Confederate Symbols, Colleges Struggle to Summarize History

Even some members of the advocacy team don’t mind the wait for a vote. Mélisande Short-Colomb, a 65-year-old descendant of Abraham Mahoney and Mary Ellen Queen, two of the slaves sold in 1838, is studying at Georgetown with the legacy status she was awarded. She said she wanted the board to take its time in discussing the referendum.

“This has not been addressed for 181 years,” Short-Colomb said. “That it didn’t happen in June is OK with me. I’m not going anywhere.”

A 1984 Georgetown alumnus, Richard J. Cellini, said the genealogical project — which his foundation, the Georgetown Memory Project, helped launch on June 19, the same day as the congressional hearing on Capitol Hill — helps to legitimize the student activists’
cause.

The GU272 Memory Project maps the genealogy of the GU272 descendants and has identified and reconstructed the family trees of most of the people who were sold. Cellini said Georgetown’s efforts so far are not enough to rectify the harm inflicted on those families, and his project puts pressure on the university to commit to an economic-reparation model that higher ed has never seen before.

**Setting a Precedent**

A number of colleges and universities have formally apologized for their historical connections to slavery, and have started researching their pasts and sharing their findings with the public.

But no institution in the United States has formally pledged economic reparations for its role in slavery, said Leslie M. Harris, a professor of history at Northwestern University. And so Georgetown is at the forefront of this national conversation.

While Harris called the student-fee proposal admirable, she said hypothetical reparations paid by one institution to one population could distract from the larger system of racialized economic inequality that developed in the United States because of slavery.

“This was a national set of systems, an international, that produced wealth and created the economy,” Harris said. “And so sending money to those immediate-descendant communities — that’s great — it doesn’t get us out of the issue that Georgetown then continued to operate in a city and a nation that continued to work with slavery.”

William A. Darity, a professor of public policy at Duke University, echoed that view. He said staff, faculty, and students at institutions tied to slavery should advocate for reparations on a national scale.

“The fundamental claim,” he said, “should be directed at the United States government.”

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