

Dear members of the Whitman community,

I write today to provide an update on the work of the Mascot Working Group and information on the next steps in this process.

There are myriad elements and influences that define a college experience: its history, its faculty, its students, its location, its governance, its co-curricular opportunities. As I have learned in my first year at Whitman, our college offers a wonderfully rich and robust experience. We work hard to make that experience as inclusive of and welcoming to all members of our community as possible, while also acknowledging that it is sometimes the difficult conversations around challenging ideas that lead to meaningful learning and growth. Last fall, based on questions raised in the past about the Whitman mascot and conversations that were then taking place across campus, I decided that it was time to ask whether our college mascot was appropriately inclusive and welcoming to today's Whitman community. I do not think a mascot (defined as a person, animal, or object adopted as the symbol of a group and believed to bring good luck) should precipitate the difficult conversations around challenging ideas. A mascot is meant to be something around which supporters of a college, and particularly athletic teams, rally.

To help answer the question, we formed the Mascot Working Group in December 2015, chaired by Whitman Overseer Tricia Montgomery (Class of 1990), and consisting of current students, faculty, staff, alumni, and governing board members. They were charged with making a recommendation about whether the Missionary mascot is appropriate for Whitman today.

After a thorough process that took into account the feedback of thousands of alumni, the Mascot Working Group reached a unanimous decision that the Missionary mascot is not the appropriate mascot for our college today. I and the Executive Committee of the Board of Trustees have endorsed that recommendation. The full working group report, including a summary of their process, guiding principles, and recommendation, is available online at <https://www.whitman.edu/mascot> for your information, along with an executive summary of the survey data. While the working group reached a unanimous recommendation, I recognize that a significant group of Whitties, particularly among our alumni, voiced strong opposition to any move away from the Missionary mascot. I know that this decision will disappoint those in that group, but hope that the retirement of the Missionary mascot is understood in light of the fact that all were given the opportunity to comment on the question and that the Mascot Working Group considered all the input it received. More importantly, we all know that the mascot is not the defining element of Whitman College; instead, it is our shared commitment to the educational mission of Whitman – that of providing a rigorous, residential education in the liberal arts.

This review process enabled us to hear from more than 7,100 Whitman students, alumni, and other members of the community; we learned that it is important to have a unifying symbol to reflect our collegiate pride and enthusiasm. And so I have again turned to Tricia Montgomery to lead a new working group to tackle the next phase of establishing an official mascot for Whitman College.

The committee, which will also include faculty, staff, students and alumni, will work over this summer to compile and refine a list of prospective official mascots. We will have the unique opportunity to create a new symbol for Whitman and its athletic teams, with a vote among the entire college community resulting in the naming of a new mascot in the fall of 2016.

There is strength in numbers and there is strength in diversity. On behalf of all our students, alumni, faculty and staff, I thank the members of both the Mascot Working Group who have completed their assignment and the newly forming working group, as well as the 7,100 members of the Whitman community who responded to the survey. As a school that is committed to honoring with integrity the spirit and traditions of Whitman College, we stand with you in wanting to create a college environment that is welcoming to all.

Some might suggest that a change in the mascot might portend more dramatic changes at Whitman. To the contrary, Whitman staff, faculty, students, and graduates across the generations are united around the value Whitman College places on intellectual inquiry in the liberal arts and how that education prepares students to make a difference in the world. Even as we retire one mascot and eventually identify another, our pride in the 134-year history of this college makes it clear that Whitman College will remain our name.

Among the thousands of comments on the topic of the mascot, including both those for and against the Missionary, there was a common thread expressed as a sincere desire to re-introduce a greater understanding of the history of the Whitmans, this region, and the emergence of Whitman College. We look forward to adding this perspective into our new student orientation.

Moving forward, I know that Whitman College will be strengthened as a result of the collective efforts that we are making to be inclusive and welcoming. I look forward to working with all of you as a college community to ensure that we are always evolving while remaining true to what makes us Whitman College.

Very sincerely,

Kathleen M. Murray
President