

Whitman College Mascot Survey Results: Executive Summary

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For generations Whitman College athletes have played as the “Missionaries,” named for the college’s namesake, Marcus and Narcissa Whitman. While Marcus Whitman was a central figure in the history of the Walla Walla valley and the Oregon Trail, Whitman has experienced several attempts to change the mascot, dating back at least to 1925 when “Wild Cats” was suggested, and most significantly in 1973, when the football coach and news service director began calling Whitman teams the “Shockers.” Some anecdotal evidence suggests that the issue is raised with varying levels of discussion and seriousness about once every decade. As the topic of diversity on college campuses has received more focused attention in recent years, discussions about the appropriateness of the “Missionary” mascot have again surfaced.

In the fall of 2015 President Murray put together a Mascot Working Group to investigate the appropriateness of the “Missionary” mascot. To gather information from the broad Whitman community, a survey was launched to 2,102 faculty, staff, and students on the Whitman College campus on Wednesday, February 10 and to 14,286 Alumni and other off-campus constituents for whom we had e-mail addresses on February 11. Also on February 11, a letter containing a link to the survey was mailed to those without e-mail (N=2,458). The survey had an overall response rate of 38% (N=7,190), including 1,073 responses from current students, staff, and faculty (a 51% response rate) and 5,830 responses from alumni and other external constituents with e-mail (a 41% response rate). The mailed letters generated only 111 responses (a 4.5% response rate). The survey link was quite long and difficult to accurately type into a web browser, which almost certainly decreased the response rate from this group.

The primary question on the Mascot Survey was, “Do you think the ‘Missionary’ is an appropriate mascot for Whitman College today?” Responses to this item varied depending on the respondent’s relationship to the college. For alumni, responses varied by graduation year.

Table 1: Do you think the “Missionary” is an appropriate mascot for Whitman College today?

Constituency	No	Yes	No Opinion	N	Overall Resp Rate
Overall	62%	29%	9%	7,161	37%
Current Students	78%	6%	16%	719	48%
Faculty	78%	13%	9%	150	60%
Staff	65%	26%	9%	204	60%
All Alumni	59%	31%	10%	5,951	42%
1950s and earlier	40%	50%	10%	241	21%
1960s	52%	39%	10%	577	35%
1970s	49%	40%	10%	681	32%
1980s	57%	32%	11%	882	34%

1990s	58%	31%	11%	971	33%
2000s	63%	28%	9%	1,521	43%
2010s	70%	22%	8%	1,075	47%
W Club	49%	42%	9%	397	47%
Varsity Athletes	54%	37%	9%	1,514	42%
Friends of the College	66%	28%	6%	129	42%

*Percentages add to 100% across rows. Reported numbers may add to 99% or 101% due to rounding.

A follow-up question asked “How strongly do you hold this opinion?” Not surprisingly, those who marked “no opinion” were the most likely to mark “not very strongly,” with those marking that the “Missionary” is appropriate or not appropriate holding similarly strong opinions. Of those marking that the “Missionary” is not appropriate, 38% held this opinion “very strongly.” Similarly, 42% of those marking that the “Missionary” is appropriate held this opinion “very strongly.”

Respondents provided a variety of reasons for finding the Missionary appropriate or not appropriate. Our closed-ended items suggest that the most compelling arguments against the Missionary relate to the potential offense it could cause some people, and that the Missionary is not a mascot “we can be proud of.” On the other side, arguments for retaining the mascot for reasons of college history and tradition, and bridging generations of Whitman students saw more support than arguments related to honoring the legacy of Marcus Whitman or early missionaries to the Walla Walla Valley. Among those for whom the Missionary is an appropriate mascot, the statement about whether changing the mascot would be in reaction to the “the pressures of political correctness” was a particularly significant issue. Among those who think the Missionary mascot is appropriate, over 50% agree “strongly” with this item. Further, among those who “very strongly” think the Missionary is an appropriate mascot, 81% *strongly* agreed that “changing the mascot would be an inappropriate response to the pressures of political correctness. These “strongly agree” values are much higher than those for other similar survey items.

Open-ended Comments

The survey included an option for respondents to write open-ended comments to clarify or expand upon their previous survey responses. This question generated 3,377 responses totaling over 295,000 words of text. Every comment was read by at least one member of the working group. These comments can be grouped into several main themes:

1. Arguments in support of the current mascot

- a. The mascot is a way for us to honor history and tradition. These comments do not all argue that we should glorify the early white settlers of the Walla Walla Valley, only that we should acknowledge that they are integral to the history and founding of the college.
- b. We should not give in to the pressures of political correctness. Sub-themes include statements about how students are claiming to feel oppressed and are looking for ways to be offended, or that current students are privileged and coddled.
- c. We should be focusing on more important issues than the mascot. The mascot is a small

issue, and we should be more concerned with other things.

- d. Changing the mascot is a slippery slope and may lead to further changes in the collective identity of Whitman. For example, we can't separate the name of the college from the mascot, and changing one suggests a need to change the other.
- e. Whitman should promote the many meanings of "Missionary" and represent it in a positive light. These are, perhaps, attempts to shift the discussion about the mascot from Marcus Whitman to some other, more universally accepted, understanding of the term.

2. Arguments against the current mascot

- a. The Missionary mascot celebrates the systematic oppression of Native Americans.
- b. As a mascot, the "Missionary" does not inspire Whitman's athletic teams. The college mascot should be something fierce, or strong, or intimidating, and the "Missionary" is none of these.
- c. The "Missionary" does not represent what Whitman is today (or should be today). These comments start from the premise that Whitman represents something (occasionally defined in the comments) and the mascot represents something else (such as an outdated way of thinking about indigenous populations, religion, etc.).
- d. Whitman is a secular college, and "Missionaries" is the wrong mascot. A religious college might have this mascot, but Whitman is not a religious college. It sends the wrong message, particularly to prospective students and athletes.
- e. The mascot has never been central to the identity of the college or the student body / Mascot is embarrassing / Mascot is divisive, and therefore should be changed to something else. A number of people simply were tired of having to explain the college's mascot to people who did not attend Whitman. Others used a similar starting point (that the mascot is embarrassing or divisive) to argue that a mascot should unify the campus, and the Missionary does not do that.
- f. The current mascot hinders Whitman's attempts to increase diversity. These comments argue that the mascot pushes away some demographic groups that Whitman is trying to attract.

3. Other themes related to changing the mascot

- a. We should try to change the mascot, but should find other (better) ways to honor and teach about the history of the college. History is important and we should acknowledge it and not forget it, but we can leave the mascot out of it.
- b. If we have a new mascot, it should be consistent with Whitman's history and culture. These comments are similar to the above line of thought, but in the opposite direction. We should try to come up with something that is similar to "Missionary" in acknowledging the history of the college, but something that avoids the offensive baggage.

4. Other Comments

- a. Suggestions for new mascots
- b. Discussions of previous attempts to change the mascot
- c. Complaints about the survey, or about the link in the mailed letter

- d. Advice for the committee and the Whitman administration on what to do next, including offers of help and contact information
- e. The Missionary mascot is quirky / strange / funny (but not necessarily appropriate or inappropriate).
- f. Will support the college no matter what decision is made