

Whitman College Mascot Working Group
Recommendation
March, 2016

The Whitman College Mascot Working group was formed in December, 2015 by President Kathy Murray to evaluate whether the college's unofficial mascot, the Missionary, is an appropriate mascot for the college today. The working group, consisting of current students, faculty, staff and alumni represented key stakeholders in the debate and embraced the charter to ensure that 'all voices be heard' relative to the issue. The various perspectives were to be considered by the working group in developing a recommendation to advance the decision-making process regarding the mascot.

Process

A thoughtful process was employed by the working group in pursuit of data on which a recommendation would be based. In order to obtain input from the broad Whitman community, a quantitative survey was developed and administered to over 18k students, faculty, staff, alumni and other friends of the college. The survey was designed to educate respondents on the various aspects of the issue and allow for analysis of the results holistically as well as by key demographic groups. Over 7k responses (a 37% response rate) were compiled and analyzed, including over 3k responses to an optional open-ended question where respondents could clarify or expand upon previous survey responses (survey results report and document of all open ended comments included as an appendix). In total, these additional comments generated over 295k words of text and filled almost one-thousand pages. The working group immersed in the quantitative data, every comment was read by at least one member and all perspectives were thoughtfully considered in pursuit of a deep understanding of both sides of the mascot debate. As a result, this recommendation is delivered with complete alignment across the entire 10-member working group. Additionally, in evaluation of the broad input, the working group also identified implications and considerations of its recommendation based on responses from various constituents.

Guiding Principles

Prior to even reviewing the survey data, the working group identified a number of guiding principles and desired outcomes that anchor this recommendation. Specifically,

- We must honor with integrity the spirit and tradition of Whitman College and create a positive dialogue around it.
- We seek to foster a sense of inclusion and unity amongst the Whitman 'family' – past, present and future.
- We must provide a positive platform for the college to resolve an issue that has been discussed for decades.
- We seek to create a positive inflection point in the college's history and a bridge between past and current students.

In focusing on these guiding principles and desired outcomes, the working group hopes to unequivocally refute perceptions that this process is succumbing to pressures of political correctness and, rather, that it is purely about determining what is best for Whitman College.

Recommendation

In evaluating the survey data through the lens of the above principles and desired outcomes, the working group has determined that the Missionary mascot is no longer appropriate for Whitman College and recommends that it be retired.

This recommendation is based on the fact that a vast majority of constituents surveyed are overwhelmingly in support of a change, with 62% responding that the mascot is no longer appropriate.

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Furthermore, evaluation of the individual demographic groups indicates strong bias against the Missionary mascot, with 78% of current students, 78% of faculty, 65% of staff and 59% of alumni responding that the Missionary is no longer appropriate. Evaluation of alumni groups by graduation decade indicates more variability, with opinions tending to split across generations. For example, just 40% of alumni who graduated in the 1950s and earlier indicate the mascot is no longer appropriate compared to 70% of alumni who graduated in the 2010s.

Regardless of opinion on whether the mascot is appropriate or not, approximately 40% of each group felt 'very strongly' in their opinion. As such, the working group recognizes that not all will agree with this recommendation. With utmost respect for those who have a strong tie to the Missionary as the college mascot, the working group sought to develop a deep understanding of those opinions and offer an evaluation of that perspective as part of this recommendation.

It must be noted that by no means does this recommendation suggest that the name of the college itself be changed. The working group strongly believes Whitman to be an appropriate name for the college.

Rationale for Recommendation

1. The Missionary mascot is divisive and doesn't represent Whitman's commitment to inclusion. Irrespective of one's opinion as to the appropriateness of the mascot, 68% of survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the name 'Missionaries' could be offensive to some people. One could argue that Whitman College 'is' those who are on campus today and the data indicates that those constituents are most opposed to the mascot. Furthermore, the survey indicates that decades of Whitman students, both past and present, report feeling shame, embarrassment and/or ambivalence about the mascot. A mascot is intended to create unity, yet the data indicates it is clearly dividing the various constituents. Bottom line - the mascot is offensive to many members of the Whitman community because it can be interpreted as honoring the imperialistic policies and actions of the western movement in North America in the 19th and early 20th centuries. In addition, as indicated by Native American students and alumni responding to the survey, it is also offensive to members of Native American cultures whose ancestors were the victims of that movement. The college is unable to create an inclusive environment when so many members of the Whitman family are offended by the mascot.
2. While intended to honor the legacy of the Whitmans and the history of Whitman College, the mascot is instead ridiculed and avoided. In reading hundreds of pages of written comments, it became clear that the historical seriousness of the mascot and the reverence to Whitman's traditions have not been maintained across generations and, instead, the ironic and humorous qualities of the Missionary as a mascot are more present. Athletes and those recruiting athletes speak of avoiding its use, alumni report being embarrassed when asked about their school's mascot and current students pretend it doesn't exist. In addition, 63% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that 'Whitman seems to avoid using the mascot whenever possible. The college should have a mascot we can be proud of.' Finally, just 36% of respondents agree or strongly agree that the mascot is important to the history of the college. That said, there is broad agreement that the history of the college should not be lost and that there is opportunity to revitalize a common understanding of our history and a connection to the tradition of Whitman College.
3. The Missionary mascot implies an inappropriate association with the Christian church and is misleading to those not familiar with the college. Again, regardless of one's opinion as to the appropriateness of the mascot, 58% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that 'Missionaries' has religious imagery that is not appropriate for a secular college. In addition, members of the college administration indicate that, in some cases, this has been a problem in attracting highly-

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qualified potential applicants. This connotation gets in the way of the college accurately representing itself in the marketplace.

Alternate Viewpoint

The working group deems it valuable and actually necessary to present the perspective of those that will object to retiring the mascot. In understanding the reasons why many feel the mascot is appropriate, the working group hopes to create a positive dialogue and an opportunity to create unity of thought and common ground around the positive outcomes relative to this recommendation. Key points of those who feel the mascot is appropriate for Whitman today:

1. The Missionary is an important part of Whitman's history and tradition and, therefore, should be honored. The working group agrees with this point and does not dispute the historical relevance of the Missionary in the college's history. The recommendation to retire the mascot should not be interpreted as an attempt to erase or whitewash history. Just 24% of survey respondents agree or strongly agree that 'we should honor the legacy of Marcus Whitman, and the college mascot is an appropriate place to do that.' The fact that the mascot is divisive, ridiculed and avoided does more to inhibit thoughtful reflection and dialogue on the history of the Whitmans, the region and the college. For those alumni who passionately associate with being 'Missionaries' and tie their Whitman experience to the mascot, those individuals will always be 'Missionaries' regardless of whether the Missionary remains as mascot. The working group believes that a connection to tradition and the college's history can substantially be revitalized while, at the same time, addressing decade-long concerns.
2. Whitman's mascot creates a common identity between past and present students. This common identity is cited overwhelmingly by those that believe the mascot is appropriate (82%) versus those that don't (19%) and survey responses suggest that the Whitman Experience is what connects and not specifically the mascot. In fact, survey responses strongly suggest that the mascot is not actually serving as a unifying symbol – either across alumni groups or between alumni and current students.
3. Whitman is just bowing to current pressures and trends around political correctness. This topic has been debated amongst students, college administration and alumni for decades and it is recommended that the mascot be retired because it is not unifying. Addressing the topic now has more to do with a desire to mitigate this lack of unity and pave an inclusive path forward than a response to national trends and discussions about how to be politically correct.
4. Changing the mascot will alienate some constituents. The working group has been asked to make a recommendation for what is best for the college overall and, based on thoughtful consideration of all perspectives, has determined that it is in the best interest of Whitman College to retire the mascot. While some may not be happy or agree with this recommendation, it is the working group's conclusion, based on the data, that a change would be welcomed by most.

Implications

If the recommendation is accepted and the mascot is retired, the working group strongly suggests that the college devote thoughtful consideration to how to create an ongoing dialogue around Whitman's history. Through our deliberations, review of open ended comments and in personal conversations, it has become apparent that tradition, education and critical dialogue around Whitman's history has been lost. Even those who find the mascot inappropriate believe passionately that Whitman's history should be taught, discussed and understood as it is the origin of the college and is central to the present and future.

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A strong connection to Whitman, regardless of whether one is a current student, faculty, staff or alumni, is one of the college's greatest assets and will surely contribute to Whitman's ongoing success. Ensuring a meaningful connection between past and present students and those on- and off-campus should be a priority coming out of this decision. The working group does not immediately default to the need for a new mascot in order to achieve this objective and recommends that more attention be focused on this challenge.

That strong connection to Whitman generated highly passionate feedback on both sides of the debate. The engagement, commitment and (sometimes) zealous response from the various constituents clearly demonstrated the love and connection people have for Whitman. This is quite unique and the college should continue to foster it. If the survey responses, emails and phone calls were any indication, it should be expected that this recommendation and a resulting decision will generate equally passionate responses. In considering those that will object to the recommendation, the college should have a communications plan in place, providing a venue for feedback and arming key constituents with message points.

Conclusion

The working group embraced this assignment passionately, thoughtfully and with deep concern for ensuring the process to a recommendation was sound, fair and transparent. Through the process, our eyes were opened to the enormity of our recommendation and the fact that not all would be pleased with whatever the recommendation would be. However, the recommendation comes with a strong belief, based on the data and input from the broad Whitman community that retiring the Missionary mascot now is in the college's best interest.

Respectfully,
The Mascot Working Group

Tricia Montgomery, class of 1990 and member of the Board of Overseers, chair

Caroline Bauwens, class of 2019 and member of ASWC

Preston Frederickson, class of 2002 and member of the Alumni Board

Kazi Joshua, Vice President for Diversity & Inclusion

Chris Leise, Associate Professor of English

Hailey McDonald, class of 2016 and member of the Student Athletic Advisory Committee

Nancy Mitchell, Director of Alumni Relations

Jim Moore, class of 1966, member of the Board of Trustees, member of the W Club board

Cassandra Otero, class of 2018 and member of the Indigenous People's Education and Culture Club

Dean Snider, Athletics Director