



FUMBLING the MASCOT

A decade ago, the NCAA challenged 18 collegiate athletic programs' Native American symbols, imagery and nicknames. These schools have fought to rebrand in a way that endears students and alumni to their hallowed halls and gameday gear.

BY SARAH STEIMER





The master brand of colleges and universities is often tightly intertwined with schools' athletics programs. Students come together under the institution's iconic colors and logos, magnetic mascots and fans' chants that echo throughout the stadium. It's a unifying experience, one that continues when alumni don their old college T-shirt and turn on Saturday football games.

"Having a symbol that people can recognize on a sweatshirt is something that brings the community together," says Michael Lewis, a professor of marketing at Emory University. "Football and basketball, in particular, represent the touch points for the whole community. Whether or not that's how academia should be, that's how academia is. That's the incident that bonds people together."

When that community is stripped of its collective imagery, it presents the institution with the great challenge of rallying the troops under a new banner. With the emotional connection that so many students form with their school, changing the mascot is akin to Disney dropping Mickey Mouse. That is, if Mickey were also offensive to an entire culture.

A decade has passed since 18 colleges and universities were given one of their hardest assignments from the National Collegiate Athletic Association: change your symbols or forfeit your rights to postseason competition. The announcement came in 2005, and the decision has been enforced since 2006. Schools that failed to change mascots, imagery and nicknames that were deemed "hostile or abusive" would be prohibited from hosting any NCAA championship competitions.

The schools on the list had team nicknames that alluded to Native Americans, including those called the Indians, Braves, Redmen and Savages. "The NCAA objects to institutions using racial/ethnic/national origin references in their intercollegiate athletics programs," the original announcement read. Native Americans have been vocal about their opposition as well, with the National Congress of American Indians (NCAI) specifically calling out the use of native imagery for branding purposes.

The NCAI launched a campaign in 1968 to address stereotypes of native people in popular culture, media and

sports. The organization's website points to 2013 research that suggests derogatory "Indian" sports mascots have serious psychological, social and cultural consequences for Native Americans, particularly native youth.

The NCAI notes the progress that has been made to remove such wording and imagery, including the impact of the NCAA decision. More than 2,000 "Indian" references in sports have been eliminated during the past 35 years, while 1,000 still remain. No professional teams have established new mascots that use racial stereotypes in their names and imagery since 1963.

Whether or not the school's students, alumni or fans agreed with the NCAA's decision or Native Americans' position on the matter, colleges and universities were forced to rethink their branding. The past 10 years have been a lesson on what to do and what not to do; but perhaps most importantly, institutions have learned their collegiate sports' image can make or break their communities.

Playing for the Win

The symbols and culture surrounding college athletics are priceless for the fans, athletes and students. That same brand is also worth a lot to the school and apparel makers. Billions, to be specific.

The International Licensing Industry Merchandisers' Association released a report in June 2015 that found collegiate brands generated retail sales of licensed merchandise totaling approximately \$4.625 billion in 2014. The Collegiate Licensing Company (CLC), which represents almost 200 colleges, universities, conferences, bowls, the NCAA and the Heisman Trophy, says 65% of the retail marketplace for collegiate-licensed merchandise

is apparel. The CLC says it has paid its collegiate partners more than \$1.5 billion in royalties since the organization's 1981 inception.

Placing college logos on apparel has been a main branding strategy for schools, but collegiate trademarks are now being used on office products, travel bags, automotive products and even fitness equipment, according to a report from *Forbes*. Over the history of college sports, this merchandise has managed to blend commodity with community. When a school is tasked with changing its brand identity, it's moving away from a symbol that fills students' and alumni's memory banks—not to mention their closets.

"You've got to start over," says Emory University's Lewis, who has researched the use of Native Indian nicknames and symbolism by sports teams. "It's almost some form of marketing judo."

As far as the cost of rebranding, Lewis says it is negligible. It's an expense a school will likely incur in the course of the operation as the brand goes through refresh cycles, making it a normal cost of doing business. There's a trend among sports teams at various levels wherein the ability to be innovative with symbols, uniforms and designs is actually a huge positive, Lewis says. He can't speak to short-term costs, but his own research shows absolutely zero long-term costs. In fact, he notes a small positive bump, likely the result of time simply moving forward. College sports have only become more lucrative over the years, Lewis says, which makes branding ever-important.

Bracing for Homecoming Crowds

There are two key audiences that a school's brand needs to appeal to: prospective students and alumni, according to Kelly Ruoff, partner and chief creative officer at branding, marketing and digital agency Ologie. She says the team mascot and nickname play a critical role to the alumni, in particular, as so much of their affinity to the school brand is often through the so-called spirit brand, or the athletics portion of the brand.

"You may have been wooed to attend the school by the master brand, but you often graduate with a stronger affinity to the spirit brand," Ruoff says. "That's the brand you carry forward. It's why, when institutions change their mascot, there's some uprising from the alumni. That's the part of the brand that they align most to."

College of William & Mary's mascot, the Griffin, plays on the college's British and American heritage.



Alumni approval matters to schools, Ruoff says, especially given the importance of donor dollars. She suggests the trick to getting alumni on board with an evolving brand—or to at least quell their concerns—is to introduce the new symbols and names carefully and involve the alumni community. Some of the most successful rebranding has surveyed and included alumni. Ruoff says this strategy provides the institution with the ability to say, "This came from you. You guys voted on what core traits influence our brand?"

Alumni should not be the last to see the new branding, Ruoff says. The new name or imagery should be featured in the alumni magazine, she says, and alumni chapters should be alerted. Ologie has worked on teaser campaigns with colleges that have included social media components and postcards that worked as puzzle pieces to the final logo.

"[A lot of] your alumni base is still connected to the institution through social media," Ruoff says. "That's a good platform to explore sharing that relationship." The campaigns Ologie worked on with schools also included information on why the change was happening and how alumni could get products with the new imagery. "It's so important to always explain the why, not just, 'Ta-da! Here it is,'" Ruoff says. "You have to make sure that the school is accessible and hasn't left that audience out."

Mascot Yearbook: Where Are They Now?

In the years since the NCAA decision, some schools have tweaked their names and mascots, some changed entirely, and others received approval from local tribes to keep theirs.

Alcorn State University **Braves** ▶ Kept name, changed mascot

Central Michigan University **Chippewas** ▶ Kept name with Saginaw Chippewa Indian Tribe approval, removed Native American-related imagery

Marketers tend to believe that if they repeat something enough or make it look nice enough, people will come around to the new brand. That isn't always the case.

Tony Poillucci, vice president, creative director and senior strategist at VisionPoint Marketing, a higher-education marketing agency, echoes Ruoff's suggestion. His own organization involves as many stakeholders as possible in the decision-making process.

Talk to alumni early and often, Poillucci says, but don't try to market to them or sell them on the idea that change will be easy. Getting more stakeholders involved may be difficult, expensive and could take a bit longer; however, it will also be more effective.

The College of William & Mary was not on the NCAA's list of offenders, but it chose to remove some of its Native American imagery that went along with its Tribe moniker to abide by the new regulations. The school removed feathers from its logo, but retained the nickname. Joel Pattison, director of strategy at mStoner, a higher-education marketing communications agency, worked in William & Mary's creative services department in 2008 and 2009 and remembers a "pretty big" backlash from alumni when the NCAA announced the guidelines.

"Many people felt like the institution should have fought harder against the NCAA. That was the first point of umbrage people had: 'Why did you allow them to do this to us?'" Pattison says.

"That was a period where there was a little bit of anarchy. That's why the president [Taylor Reveley] decided fairly early on in his tenure that a new mascot was something we needed to get on the same page about as a community. This is something we need for the good of the college. We needed to help unify people."

The quest for a unifying image led to what Pattison calls a comprehensive mascot search campaign. He says more than 800 people representing 44 states and Washington, D.C., suggested a mascot idea through the university's website, with about 50% of total participation coming from alumni. During the 30-day comment period for the five finalists, William & Mary's website had 17,000 unique visits and more than 11,000 individuals provided feedback. Throughout the process, the school posted updates to its website.

The school made it clear that the new mascot was not up to a vote, Pattison says, to avoid any outrageous new mascots ("Like a brick," Pattison says of one suggested mascot. "Bricky the Brick.>").

"We were careful to say, 'We want your feedback, we want your thoughts, we want your comments, but we're not setting up a poll,'" Pattison says. "We're not setting up a voter situation, so we're not stuck with something

that doesn't represent the institution and the way that the institution wants to be represented. ... People just want to be heard, and they want the chance to feel like they contributed, and they care about their alma mater. They want to know that it's a two-way street."

Rich Whipkey, principal at Waybetter Marketing, a higher-education enrollment management company, says schools in transition need to have an empathy component to the marketing of a new mascot, name or imagery.

"You don't want to be the Washington Redskins," Whipkey says of the controversially named NFL team. "You have got to be strong-willed about this. It's going to create waves, but you've got to stick to it. You have to show some compassion and feel [alumni's] pain to achieve where you want to go. Nobody likes change."

Whipkey says marketers tend to believe that if they repeat something enough or make it look nice enough, people will come around to the new brand, but he warns that this isn't always the case. "There's got to be an element to it where you just say, 'Change is never easy. It's not easy for us, but it doesn't change who we are. It's only going to change who we become,'" Whipkey says.

Undergraduate college years are formative, Poillucci says, and a lot of warm and fuzzy memories are formed during Saturday football games, tailgating and taking photos with the school mascot. "[Schools] should expect disappointment and anger," Poillucci says. "They should also empathize with it. It's okay that people are hurt and angry and disappointed. That's part of life. Respect it and let them know you understand. Let them express themselves and get it all out. Then let the healing begin."

Catawba College Indians

► Changed name to Catawba Indians (vs. just Indians) with approval from Catawba Indian Nation

Midwestern State University Indians

► Changed to Mustangs

Indiana University-Pennsylvania Indians

► Changed to Crimson Hawks

Bradley University Braves

► Kept nickname, changed mascot to a gargoyle named Kaboom!

Cobranding College and Culture

Some schools, such as the University of Utah and Florida State University, have had cobranding success by working with a local tribe.

FSU received a waiver from the NCAA because the school had the approval of the local Seminole Tribe of Florida to use its name and certain imagery. The school offers courses on Native American history, and the sports teams' logo and uniforms were altered upon consultation with the tribe. It is, however, worth noting that the far more populous Seminole Nation of Oklahoma officially resolved in October 2013 that it "condemns the use of all American Indian sports-team mascots in the public school system, by college- and university-level and by professional sports teams."

Central Michigan University also won a waiver from the NCAA, which allowed it to keep its Chippewas nickname. The school has worked with the local Saginaw Chippewa Indian Tribe to make its brand more appropriate and less appropriated. CMU teams now sport a flying C, having dropped the arrows and feathers of previous imagery.

The cobranding efforts between the Saginaw Chippewa Indian Tribe and the school are vast, but they all focus on the school's master brand: education. Erik Rodriguez, public relations director for the Saginaw Chippewa Indian Tribe, says the tribe reaches out to students through presentations and other educational events. The brochures or programs for the school's athletics show respectful ways of face painting that wouldn't be considered derogatory or offensive to Native Americans. The Saginaw Chippewa tribe even advertises its local cultural center, which is only a 10-minute drive from the school. Not only is the CMU community invited to learn more about the tribe, but opposing teams and their fans learn about the culture as well.

The school has had challenges with unofficial apparel; however, it's come from other teams' fans. Rodriguez and Heather Smith, director of communications at CMU, note an incident that occurred about a year ago when an offensive T-shirt surfaced online. CMU students called out the shirt on social media and alerted the university, which then reached out to the rival school to rectify the issue. "There have been issues like that where they're really taking the lead to make sure that inadvertent or advertent racism is not part of what the student experience is all about," Rodriguez says of CMU.

Whipkey applauded CMU and its work with the Saginaw Chippewa tribe, in particular for its ability to unite and educate. "Central Michigan seems like a winner," Whipkey says. "You're going to have minimal disruptions with the alumni base, and you're actually going to become more inclusive. Having the tribe come in and talk to students, educate students—that's fantastic."

Shaping the Rookie Season

Alumni may be the biggest challenge to rebranding, experts say, but prospective and current students could be a school's greatest ally during the transition.

A new brand's formative years are key. The rookie brand should be prevalent around campus and on other platforms so the community can get familiar with it.

After William & Mary considered its options and heard from the community, it introduced Griffin as its new mascot, a half-lion, half-eagle character that nods to the school's British and U.S. history. The school hosted a launch event on campus for Griffin that was attended by a crowd of about 700, with even more able to watch via YouTube. Pattison says the #WMMascot hashtag trended on Twitter in Northern Virginia for 24 hours after the announcement.

The school even used the new mascot to continue honing its master brand. Pattison says the school sometimes has a stodgy or uptight reputation, likely due to its royal British founding in 1693. The college chose to get in on some jokes about the Griffin, particularly the theory that the character's bottom lion half makes him appear pantsless. In response, the school introduced its first-ever iPhone app: Dress the Griffin.

"Things like the app that were a little bit whimsical showed that we're not taking ourselves too seriously," Pattison says. "We're not getting uptight about the fact that you think our mascot has no pants on. That helped the brand."

Blocking the Kick

Some schools, despite their work to move forward, continue to wrestle with a major hurdle from their old logos: copyright issues.

The University of North Dakota continues to sell products with its old Fighting Sioux logo. Under UND's settlement with the NCAA, the school has to maintain the copyright over the old imagery. "Our lawyers tell us that the only way to do that is to make some commercial use of the logo," says UND's Johnson. "It's a bit of a Catch-22. We're not supposed to use it, but we have to use it to retain ownership."

The school most recently released what it calls the Dacotah Legacy Collection, which uses the Fighting Sioux logo and name. Johnson says the school has worked to modify and limit the number of items available in the line. The Associated Press reports that some products from the Legacy Collection sold out within hours of being released in early 2016. Prior to releasing the new logo, former Interim UND President Ed Schafer told the AP that people were holding on to the old one because there was no alternative.

University
of Louisiana-
Monroe Indians
▶ Changed to
Warhawks

University
of Utah Utes ▶
Changed mascot to Swoop,
a red-tailed hawk, in 1996
and continues to use Utes
nickname with approval
from the Ute Tribal
Council

McMurry
University
Indians ▶ Changed
to War Hawks

Retired University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign mascot Chief Illiniwek.



Even when the school or its licensed distributors aren't releasing merchandise with old imagery themselves, some unlicensed manufacturers have done so. Martin says retailers near Arkansas State have been known to release merchandise with the former logo, and it's not unusual for alumni from any school to wear their old apparel at games.

Ruoff says there will always be huge variations on the spirit brand and plenty of unlicensed merchandise that takes extreme liberties with the brands. She says schools need to think in terms of density: There should be more of the new brand than the old.

"The new brand has to be out there in the majority of the channels to really signify a shift," Ruoff says. "The school needs to say, 'This is the mark, this is the mascot going forward.' The best thing would be saturation—how much of the new mascot is out there, versus the old one. It has to be significantly heavier."

While UND continues to juggle its old merchandise with new, it's also trying to work the new imagery into its hockey arena. NCAA representatives have toured the facility, Johnson says, and understand that certain changes will take some time, while other changes may never occur. For instance, Fighting Sioux insignia carpeting won't be

changed out until it wears down. There are also logos embedded into the building's marble that the NCAA isn't expecting the arena to remove and replace.

"We'll continue to look at how we can infiltrate it," Johnson says. "Unfortunately, it would take significant dollars to just make wholesale changes, given the budget reality."

Fumbling the Pass

One collegiate athletic team in particular, of Big Ten Conference affiliation, has run into roadblocks in its branding transition. The University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign removed Chief Illiniwek as its mascot in 2007 and has yet to find a replacement.

Jay Rosenstein, a professor in the department of media and cinema studies at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, says there is a hope that a new mascot would reduce the attachment of fans and others to the ousted chief. Interim Chancellor Barbara Wilson announced plans in May to appoint a steering committee to choose a new mascot, with the hopes that it would help build school spirit and loyalty. The effort never moved forward and a new chancellor was named this fall.

Unlike other schools, University of Illinois didn't have to drop its nickname—because the Illini Tribe doesn't actually exist. It was a nickname for the Illinois Confederacy, which was, as Rosenstein explains, a loose grouping of tribes that once lived in the Illinois region.

Carthage
College Redmen

► Changed to
Red Men

University of
Illinois-Champaign
Illini ► Kept nickname,
removed mascot and
imagery. No new mascot
has been chosen.

Arkansas
State University
Indians ► Changed
to Red Wolves

Southeastern
Oklahoma State
University Savages
► Changed to
Savage Storm

“I call it the ESPN ‘SportsCenter’ test. Are you going to come up with a mascot that’s going to be mocked on ‘SportsCenter’ or embraced on ‘SportsCenter?’ ”

Rosenstein posits that the school hasn’t done a better job at handling the shift out of fear—specifically fear of upsetting and offending alumni who loved Chief Illiniwek and all of the school’s traditions that went along with him.

“From a marketing point of view, I would say what Illinois has done has been a complete disaster,” Rosenstein says. “You have this former symbol that you no longer can really market, and you haven’t replaced it with anything. That created a big marketing and promotional hole. One of the reasons why the former chancellor was pushing to bring in a new mascot was so you could have something that you could market. She looked at the ways in which other universities market their mascot and they get all sorts of value by doing that.”

Poillucci says he empathizes with the leaders and other stakeholders at institutions that are stuck somewhere between brands, considering the sensitivity and politics of the subject. “The schools who have still not addressed the issue—the ones still loafing in the middle—risk being perceived as indecisive and weak; neither of which are attributes you want to associate with your brand, never mind your athletics program,” Poillucci says.

There are numerous implications to not rebranding. Whipkey warns that if fans and others aren’t given something new, they’ll just cling to the past, which could actually be worse than stumbling during a new

rollout. “If you fumble a new rollout, at least you’re making progress,” Whipkey argues. “You might have done it in a haphazard way, but to do nothing means you haven’t even moved from the starting block yet. Is a lack of a strategy a strategy? I don’t think so.”

Reinventing the brand is an enormous opportunity for a school and its athletic organization, but it can be easily wasted. Ruoff says an institution must move past an inappropriate mascot or nickname, but it shouldn’t be at the risk of something generic that the community can’t build support and spirit behind. She jokes that birds are often the default mascot for schools. “We see it as such a missed opportunity,” Ruoff says. “It’s tough to build pride and affinity, particularly among alums who are used to this old mascot, when you’ve got an almost generic one.”

Ruoff and others say shifting to a mascot, nickname or other imagery that has a localized or historical bent, as William & Mary did, is a great option. Lewis says he used to give an assignment to his students to choose any college or university and give it a new nickname. One of the best he saw was the University of Illinois Rail-Splitters. The name brought together the relevance of famed Illinois resident Abraham Lincoln being a rail-splitter, along with it being a term used in electrical engineering, an expertise for which the school is known. Lewis says it’s a creative option, rather than defaulting to yet another Wildcats or Lions. He cautions against choosing a nickname or logo that would be easy to ridicule.

“I call it the ESPN ‘SportsCenter’ test,” Lewis says. “Are you going to come up with a mascot that’s going to be mocked on ‘SportsCenter’ or embraced on ‘SportsCenter?’ ”

Ruoff says school athletic brands could also look outside of the mascot to drum up team spirit. She points to The Ohio State University, where she argues the O-H-I-O chant is just as popular as the athletics mascot, Brutus the Buckeye.

“If the school doesn’t have those elements, you can build them authentically over time, and you can try lots of different ones to see what sticks, instead of it being forced,” Ruoff says. “It doesn’t have to be so mascot-centric. It can be based on the experience or based on another historical element that isn’t controversial that can be brought to life. See if that sticks.

“It’s so critical to put stuff out there, see what people gravitate toward and then promote that heavily.”

A school looking to rebrand needs the community cheering it on. **m**

Mississippi College Choctaws
▶ Kept with approval from the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians, retired their mascot

Newberry College Indians
▶ Changed to Wolves

Florida State University Seminoles
▶ Kept with approval from Florida Seminole Tribe.

University of North Dakota Fighting Sioux
▶ Changed to Fighting Hawks