

Divisive School Imagery in the Heartland

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Introduction

On November 8th, Dr. Samantha "Sam" Breen was selected as Superintendent of Schools for the Normal School District in a Midwestern State. Sam became Superintendent after 10 years of successfully working as the Assistant Superintendent for her predecessor, Emmett Stewart. Emmett was a local legend. In high school, he was a multi-sport star at Normal High School. He went on to play intercollegiate football at Illinois University and, after his college career ended, he had a short stint in the National Football League (NFL). After his brief time in the NFL, Emmett moved on to the next phase of his life to begin a career in education. As a middle school social studies teacher, Emmett was hired to be the head coach of the football team where he quickly amassed a successful record. Following his second year, Emmett was hired to be the Athletic Director and head football coach at a high school in the district.

As Athletic Director, Emmett learned a lot about management, governance, marketing, and financial accountability. In this role, he became versed in fiscal matters required to run a success school athletic program on limited funds. Ultimately, Emmett was selected to lead the community as the Superintendent of the school district he had served for many years. His gregarious personality resonated with the community members who longed for a strong leader to take the school district to new heights in the blue-collar Midwestern community.

Much of the success that Emmett had could be traced to Sam Breen, the Assistant Superintendent during Emmett's last ten years. Sam earned her EdD in Educational Leadership and was considered by many to be the brains behind the operation. As a doctoral student, Sam learned about the importance of school branding and visual identity. The topic resonated with Sam to such a degree that she wrote her dissertation on the impact of high school visual identity elements and the effect that divisive school identity could have on the school, its students, and related institutional stakeholders. Sam shared her dissertation research with Emmett.

Dr. Breen's Research Highlights

Sam's research determined that schools provide a variety of services and convey numerous messages to the diverse populations served. Accordingly, school symbols (visual identity elements) can send powerful messages to institutional stakeholders and key populations (Alessandri, 2009; Lee & Alessandri, 2018). For example, team names, logos, and mascots serve as symbols, which represent characteristics reflective of a given school, or the ideal image it hopes to convey (Eitzen, 2016). Schools that distinguish themselves from peer institutions commonly use visual identity touchpoints such as nicknames (i.e., team names), color schemes, and mascots routinely to underscore positive characteristics and traits such as strength, courage, and power. Visual identity elements also serve as a means for identification and as a source of school pride for stakeholders (Gregg, Pierce, Lee, Himstedt, & Felver, 2014; Lee, Miloch, & Tatum, 2008).

Sam also discovered that visual identity traits could convey messages that can be problematic. For example, the debate over the use of Confederate and Native American imagery in sport has been prevalent for decades (Eitzen, 2016; Eitzen & Zinn, 2001; Lee, Bernthal, Whisenant, & Mullane, 2010). As a result, notable personnel such as school administrators (i.e., principals, athletic directors) and other concerned school employees (i.e., coaches, physical educators) should regularly analyze institutional names, logos, and symbols. Symbols can include (but are not limited to) visual identity components such as team names, uniforms, apparel, logos, colors, gestures, and mascots (Eitzen, 2016; Lee & Alessandri, 2018). Symbols can develop “community” – as they can unify stakeholders and differentiate groups. In sport, particularly interscholastic athletics, symbols are used to achieve solidarity and build a sense of community for a wide assortment of stakeholders. A sense of community is established when individuals identify with various forms of symbolism such as the display of certain colors, engaging in ritual cheers, chants, songs, and wearing school-themed clothing and accessories (Eitzen, 2016; Lee & Alessandri, 2018).

While rebranding initiatives can be positive, there is also the potential for negative consequences when team names, mascots, logos, songs, or half-time performances are divisive (Eitzen, 2016; Eitzen & Zinn, 2001). According to Eitzen and Zinn (2001), controversial and insensitive symbols of any kind can “dismiss, differentiate, demean, and trivialize marginalized groups” (p. 48). Faculty, students, and other concerned citizens have voiced opposition to contentious images through various mediums nationally. For example, such controversies have generated great debate at educational institutions such as at the University of Mississippi regarding Confederate imagery ranging from mascots to songs played at sporting events. Other examples include students, faculty, and other stakeholders have had heated debates at schools such as the College of William & Mary, the University of North Dakota, and the University of Illinois (to name a few) regarding various forms of Native American imagery.

Regardless of the method of delivery, resistance is a common reaction to requests for modifying visual identity elements, or historical rituals. Sam discovered that sport sociologist D. Stanley Eitzen (2016), identified potentially problematic issues (i.e., discord, negative associations, offending community members) associated with sport symbols that reflect the “dark side” of certain mascots and other symbols with connotations that may be racist or sexist in nature. Accordingly, he defined three primary groupings: Native American imagery, Confederate imagery, and gender-biased/sexist imagery. Sam’s research was compelling, but she did not know how useful it was to become as it moved from theory to practice. Little did she know – this subject was to be a significant subject of her professional career.

The Main Issue

Despite Sam’s efforts to share her research with her Superintendent, she had a longstanding, and sometimes contentious disagreement about the school visual identity with Emmett. Divisive and offensive school nicknames were an increasingly prominent discussion in the media, school board meetings, and even the sources of potential legal battles. While many school mascot controversies involve the use of Native American imagery, names, and representations (e.g., Chief Illiniwek at the University of Illinois), other controversial mascots do exist.

Among the most divisive were the “Midgets” of the Freeburg Community High School. The Little People of America (LPA) opposed this mascot, at Freeburg and other high schools, as disrespectful. Freeburg Community High School, however, still pointed with pride to the mascot believed to derive from a sports reporter’s writing after Freeburg triumphed over a larger

opponent many years ago. Despite pressure from the LPA and some community members, the Freeburg Community High School mascot remained the “Midgets” (Freeburg Community High School, 2017).

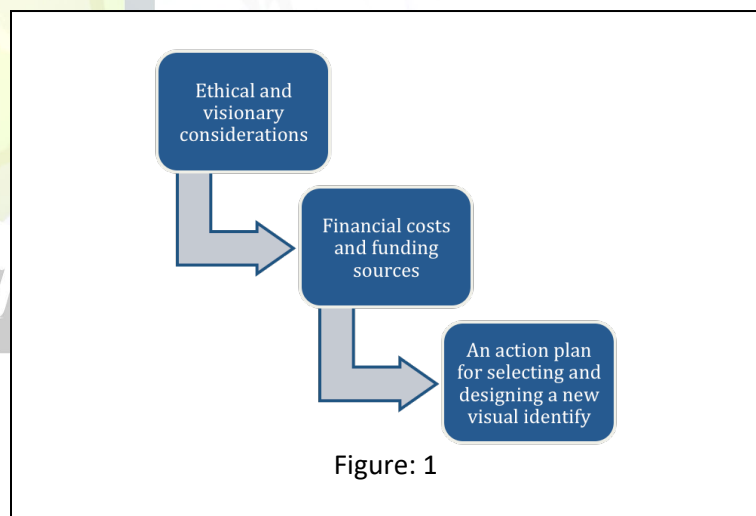
Sam Breen faced a similar challenge with the Normal High School nickname, the “Orphans.” Sam felt that the use of the term “orphan” as a school nickname was insensitive undermined the dignity of those whose lives have been impacted by the absence of parents. Other community stakeholders expressed similar concerns including a School Board member who had adopted two children. Furthermore, a Change.org petition had been established and had featured thousands of signatures from individuals throughout the country.

Members of the community had long known Sam’s personal and professional position on the insensitivity of the mascot. Now, as Superintendent, Sam felt that she was in a stronger position to bring about a change in Normal High School’s identity. Many in the community and on the School Board were resistant to change. As was the case in Freeburg, the community positively viewed the nickname and changing the nickname would also cost a substantial sum of money to taxpayers. Sam had a battle on her hands—her personal and professional ethics versus her fiduciary responsibilities as Superintendent. Sam knew she needed to convince a majority of the School Board to vote to change and she knew that the popular and well-regarded retired Superintendent, Emmett, had not supported her efforts to convince him.

Sam knew that her case before the School Board needed to be presented in three parts: ethical and visionary imperatives, financial costs and funding sources, and an action plan for selecting and designing a new visual identity for the school (See Figure 1). The action plan included stakeholder input for submitting suggestions, processes, and parameters for fairly selecting a new visual identity, timelines, and names of those managing each of these steps.

1. Ethical and Visionary Imperatives

Sam knew that the Normal School District was the exemplar for the rural community and that district documents spoke to the identity of the community. The Mission, Vision, and Values statements served to guide the Board in its decision about what the community valued and what the community wanted for its youth. Those values stood in contrast to the negative and derogatory connotations of the school nickname, “Orphans.”



2. Financial Costs and Funding Sources

Sam researched a number of school districts whose School Boards had voted to change their nickname and visual identity. Sam knew, for example, that on January 24, 2014, in Florida, the Duval County Public Schools School Board (DCPS) estimated the cost to

change the visual identity of one of the district's high schools at \$350,000 (Thompson, 2014). Sam also researched a Houston school district that changed the nicknames and visual identity of three middle schools that had a lower estimated of \$250,000 for all three schools (Solomon, 2014). Even without this research, Sam knew that signage on and within Normal High School (including on the football stadium scoreboard, exterior walls of the school, the campus entrance, basketball court scoreboard and floor, athletic and band uniforms, website, letterhead, etc.) had to be changed. Sam needed to work with a variety of constituencies including the athletic and band boosters, alumni groups, community faith groups, local civic organizations, Parent Teacher Associations, and student governments to plan fundraisers to offset costs of changing the visual identity of Normal High School. Sam planned to solicit private donors and corporate sponsors.

3. Action Plan

Sam needed to present to the School Board an action plan with dates, timelines, and stakeholders and key personnel identified who will spearhead a fair and open process for submitting new nicknames. Sam also knew the selection process needed to be a fair and open for submitting imagery associated with the winning nickname – as well for selecting imagery from submissions. Sam's goal was to allow students to be at the forefront of the selection processes. Sam also wanted to ensure that art classes and art teachers were included in designing and submitting new visual imagery. In addition, Sam requested retired Superintendent Emmett Smith to be the honorary Chair of the committee identified to oversee the action plan for selecting a new nickname. Sam hoped that Emmett would view this honor as a way to unify the community. She simultaneously hoped that the School Board and community would have confidence in Emmett's ability to lead this process. To Sam's surprise, Emmett proudly accepted the honorary Chair position of the committee. As it turned out, after Emmett took a step back from daily school district operations, he had time to think about many of his conversations with Sam. Emmett realized that a new nickname was not only less divisive, but allowed the athletic program to show leadership in a way that it had never done – in other words the athletic program could lead not only on the field but off. Sam knew that she had an uphill battle. Nonetheless, she was optimistic especially with Emmett's unanticipated but very welcome endorsement.

Teaching Notes

Summary

As Miloch, McRee-Wallace, and Lee (2018) noted, the ever-changing sports marketplace presents brands with opportunities to cultivate and reinforce distinct brand identities. The application of such principles also applies when employed in school settings whether it be intercollegiate athletic environments or scholastic sports settings. Schools have been entrusted to oversee student wellbeing and provide educational opportunities. School leadership and key stakeholders need to be mindful of the messages that are conveyed to the public through symbols, mascots, and brand strategies. If schools are conveying messages that are problematic or divisive to a given school's stakeholders, consideration for rebranding is likely necessary (Lee & Gregg, 2017). Institutional rebranding initiatives are not something that schools should take lightly, as they involve complex strategic planning and may incur great financial costs. The need to convey the proper messages to stakeholders may supersede physical accountability. Furthermore, associated examination of ethical considerations in the face of ethical dilemmas is presented.

Public perception of a school is of great importance. The visibility and reputation of an academic institution, including its brand extensions such as athletic programs are commonly primary components for cultivating school brand image. The cultivation and continuation of a favorable brand image can influence desired outcomes. As such, creating and upholding a favorable brand image can create obstacles and challenges. Individuals who are responsible for influencing institutional brand messages and identity elements have the opportunity to engage in activities that can present universities in a favorable light. Such individuals can also be instrumental in keeping the institution from engaging in branding practices that convey negative or divisive messages.

Shortcomings in institutional brand management can be problematic as they produce obstacles that impede institutional marketing initiatives and hinder the overall strategic vision of a school (Gregg, Pierce, Lee, Himstedt, & Felver, 2014). A given school's response to the perceived associations with negative institutional brand associations will affect how key stakeholders view the brand. Key educational stakeholders include students, student athletes, teachers, administrators, boosters, community partners, and many other constituents in which brand managers and decision makers need to be mindful. This case presents various practical application aspects of school branding, athletic brand identity, public relations, financial responsibility, and personal ethics.

Challenges Presented

The journey that Sam Breen embarked upon focuses on educational institution branding and visual identity elements, which have proven to be a divisive force within the local community. Sam feels compelled to do something about the divisive issue, yet she knows that not everyone feels the way she does about the situation. Furthermore, Sam knows that even though what she wants to do is well intentioned, she understands that even if she were to be able to influence the School Board to change their divisive visual identity, there is a cost. The cost, in this case, is a steep price tag that could cost the school district as much as \$500,000. Sam is perfectly aware how difficult it is to procure large sums of money, and even if the school district would procure that much money she can't help but think of all of the other critical needs that could be addressed with that type of cash.

Coordinating Class Discussion

The synchronization and stimulation of class dialogue can be supported by having instructors present various media artifacts (i.e., articles, school websites, press releases, social media communications) that illustrate facets of academic institution branding practices. This includes an examination of institutional branding elements such as visual identity attributes. Furthermore, examining institutional rebrands or visual identity modifications can be useful. For example, Forrest High School in Jacksonville, Florida, had a longstanding controversy associated with the presence of Confederate imagery (Lee, Bernthal, Whisenant, & Mullane, 2010; Lee & Gregg, 2017). When faced with the necessity of a rebranding initiative, examining best practices can assist schools with goal attainment, enhancing notoriety, presenting a more attractive visual identity to the public, and providing a platform for increasing affinity for the institution.

Athletic programs, like the schools that they signify, are significant branding opportunities. Because of the historical connection to both schools and athletic programs, they can also be divisive when it comes to rebranding initiatives. For points of comparison, students may be asked to examine their university's branding efforts, both academically and athletically.

Presenting students with information on the myriad of branding topics within higher education can help to further illuminate the issues at hand and help shape the content of the case to better resonate with the targeted audience.

Students can also apply the notion of educational institution branding to other school settings such as area high schools or middle schools. Examining divisive imagery in schools can be complicated when introducing external variables such as relevant cost associations related to discussions of prospects of identity element modifications (i.e., institutional name changes or rebranding initiatives which may occur great cost). Requiring students to examine their personal ethical values as applied fiscal responsibility in school settings can provide an impactful learning opportunity and inspire additional avenues for research and real-world applications. To better prepare students for rich dialogue in the classroom, additional readings are provided at the conclusion of this teaching note. It is recommended that instructors provide students with the readings at least two weeks in advance of the class discussion.

Discussion Questions

1. What is school brand identity and how does school visual identity impact the school's brand?

Answer: Brand identity is described as a given organization's strategically planned and focused presentation of itself in which a desired goal is to create and maintain a positive image, and ultimately enhance the establishment's overall reputation (Lee & Alessandri, 2018). Operationally, an organization's brand identity is its name, logo, color palette, tagline, and various other tactical elements that serve as a means for identification and promotion (Lee & Alessandri, 2018). School brand identity represents far more than just the school itself, but also the institutional brand and the larger school community that the institution serves, as well as its stakeholders.

For example, institutional names are often rooted in the history of the community and are typically terms that were once acceptable, but now have a derogatory association. Each school nickname comes with its own story and it is imperative to know as much of that story as historical records (i.e., newspapers, School Board minutes, old yearbooks, etc.) will allow. By knowing the history of the nickname, can a School Board make an informed decision about retaining or changing a nickname.

2. Why do you think such that currently utilize divisive names choose not to implement name changes?

Answer: There are generally two factors: community identity and associated cost. By nature, schools like other organizations are resistant to change. This particularly applicable regarding school visual identity elements (i.e., names, colors, logos). School district budget offices can project costs. Those costs will include signage, uniforms, logo design, etc. The community may resist the loss of historic identity. For example, Lee & Gregg's (2017) CHANGE Model outlined best practices for educators and administrators faced with addressing potentially divisive imagery in school settings. The CHANGE model entails confronting the issue at hand, holding oneself accountable, allowing the opposition to express their position, noting strengths and weaknesses of the potential decision, garnering support for a potential decision, and executing the brand transformation. Additionally, Lee, et al., (2010) manuscript provided a detailed overview

of how a professional sport organization addressed an ethical dilemma related to divisive imagery in sport.

3. What are some strategies that schools (and school districts) can employ to help defray the cost of institutional identity changes?

Answer: Districts can use general budgetary expenditures to offset some costs. For examples, uniforms and athlete wear are replaced routinely. In addition, basketball courts and signage are often refurbished or replaced due to age and damage. Those types of capital improvements and schedules for capital repairs and improvements are found in all school budgets.

Districts, especially the high schools within those districts, have many “soft” money fundraising resources to include, but not limited to booster clubs, Parent Teacher Associations (PTAs), foundations, and student clubs. The foundations are specifically created to receive both private and corporate donations. Finally, districts must weigh the uncapped costs of potential litigation surrounding the retaining a divisive versus the controllable costs of changing that identity.

4. How can schools use rebranding initiatives to build trust and enhance perceptions among school stakeholders and desired publics?

Answer: Schools engaging in institutional rebranding can use those initiatives to reaffirm the values of the community as defined in the Vision, Mission, and Values statements. It can send a strong message to the youth of the community about responsiveness, choosing “the harder right than the easier wrong,” and managing compromise in a way that respects all stakeholders.

Because schools are to serve as a beacon representing ideals and values of diverse communities, they have an ethical duty to ensure that all students can learn and develop holistically. If schools fail to model best practices to community stakeholders, they risk losing the respect and trust of community partners. Students should refer to Lee & Gregg’s (2017) CHANGE model as referenced in question three.

5. How should School Boards weigh the costs and benefits of rebranding, especially over issues of ethics and political correctness? Analyze the issue of allowing the continuation of the divisive school mascot (Orphans) from an ethical standpoint.

Answer: School Boards have an ethical responsibility to students and a fiduciary responsibility to taxpayers. School Boards must live up to the ethical considerations found in their Vision, Mission, and Values statements. Those documents and statements are written by stakeholders and serve to guide School Boards in times of crisis.

When examining the issue using the teleological perspective, students are to contemplate the consequences of different courses of action when forming an opinion on the ethical course of action. Utilizing this framework, the most ethical action would be one that results in the greatest good. Students may vary in opinion as to what constitutes the “greatest good” in this situation. For example, some individuals may feel that the greatest good would be served through demonstrating respect for others and compassion through banning the use of the name Orphan and the associated imagery.

Conversely, however, other individuals may feel that the intrusion into freedom of expression may represent a stance that is not in the interest of the greater good.

Under deontological frameworks (e.g., Kantian ethics or Ross' prima facie duties) values such as compassion and respect for others are to be followed to regardless of the consequences. Regarding the issue at hand, the conclusion would likely be that allowing the Orphan moniker to remain violates commonly accepted moral standards such as respect for others and cultural sensitivity—thus making the continuation of the practice ethically questionable.

Sample Group Learning Activity

Organizational symbols can carry great meaning. For sport teams, the use of symbols provides a means of identification, which can create community. Symbols also have the potential to be divisive. Some sport symbols have received attention due to their potential to be controversial or potentially offensive (Eitzen, 2016). Examples of such controversy and division revolve around images including Native American imagery, Confederate imagery, and gender-biased/sexist imagery. A fun class activity could involve breaking student into groups and have them identify three potentially divisive symbols of sport. They could identify three symbols and explain why each is potentially divisive. Next, they can explain how their example relates to the notion human rights and respect for others. As each group provides personal reactions to these situations, students can discuss differences in perspectives

Additional Readings

- Lee, J. W., & Alessandri, S. (2018). *Brand identity in sport*. Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press.
- Lee, J. W. & Gregg, E. A. (2017). A cause without a rebel: The rebranding of Forrest high school. *Strategies: A Journal for Physical and Sport Educators*, (30)6, 15-19.

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