From Tridents to Feathers: Cal State LA's 1981 Mascot Transformation

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Figure 1 - 1960s Diablo Logo (California State University, Los Angeles)

Tridents, capes, and horns once decorated Cal State LA's student campus facilities. The campus bookstore sold souvenirs and supplies with images of devils printed on them.[1] Facilities on campus exhibited devil-themed names such as Diablo Stadium, Diablos Den, and the Trident bookstore.[2] Before 1981, Diablos was the symbol that represented the Cal State LA community. However, the warm temperatures of Southern California and its Spanish language were not enough for Diablos to sustain a connection with the school's identity. After faculty and students voiced disapproval of the mascot, a controversial student election replaced Diablos with the symbol used today, Golden Eagles. The mascot that called the flaming pits of hell home transformed into one that soars its golden wings across the heavenly skies. The administration and a large group of students felt Golden Eagles represented the university better than Diablos. The 1981 mascot change at Cal State LA demonstrated the administration and students' determination to establish a symbol that represented the school's genuine identity.

Researchers have examined distinctive motives for college mascot transformations. Some have focused on religious sensitivities. Court Burkhart examined the mascot altercation that occurred at Wheaton College in 2000. Wheaton College adopted the name Fighting Crusaders in 1927 and received backlash beg-

[1] Kay Shishima, "As Stanford Continually Tries, CSLA Changes Mascot Easily," *University Times,* August 27, 1981.
[2] Patricia Lopez, "Diablo was Disliked in '57, too," *University Times,* January 27, 1981.

inning in the 1970s. Activist groups spreading cultural and religious sensitivity awareness initiated the discourse. Crusaders historically terrorized communities with religious wars in the name of Christianity. Although crusaders are more associated with the Roman Catholic church, the irony was that Wheaton College is a Protestant institution with an image associated with Catholicism. Burkhart argues, "The college holds firmly to its orthodox Protestant Christianity with an evangelical ethos. The change also reveals Wheaton's perception of itself."[3] As a result, Wheaton transitioned to "Thunder." This transformation occurred because students and staff considered religious differences and how the mascot reflected their Christian values.

Appropriation of culture and race can also be a possible motive for replacing a mascot. The Fighting Sioux, University of North Dakota's (UND) long-time mascot, generated significant discourse within the college and the Native American community until it transitioned to Fighting Hawks in 2015. Raul Tovares examines the university's demographics and history by challenging an official statement made by UND in 1999 regarding the Fighting Sioux logo. Tovares finds that the statement had many assumptions and speculations about the Native American comm-unity within the UND population. He focused on the concept of myths; UND created a myth that they were honoring the Native people of the region and did not see it as cultural appropriation. As Tovares notes,

> Examples of how the Fighting Sioux logo contributes to an uncomfortable environment for tuition-paying Native American students who come from tax-paying families are fairly easy to come across. This uncomfortable environment includes everything from uneasiness about seeing Native American images on decals, pencils,

[3] Court Burkhart, "Thunder Stops the Fighting Crusaders: Changing the Wheaton College Mascot, 1978-2000," *American Educational History Journal* 30 (2003), 169–179.

> notebooks, and shot glasses to exposure to verbal abuse at athletic events.[4]

UND belittled the appropriation of Native American imagery by the continued use of the offensive Sioux logo from 1999 to 2015. Similarly, Cal State LA's use of Diablos appeared to disregard potential cultural differences after a failed attempt to replace the logo in 1957. The possibility of religious, cultural, and racial issues indicated the need for change. This article focuses on school identity and how mascots represent it. Cal State LA did not have one specific reason to replace its mascot, but rather a combination of factors that led to the Golden Eagle.

A mascot should serve as an image that represents its school's identity. It should also incorporate historical and emotional background. John R. Thelin argues that California colleges do not usually have a "single symbol which matches the emotional and historical state identity of the 'Hoosiers,' 'Cornhuskers,' 'Buck-eyes,' 'Longhorns,' or 'Cowboys,' the nicknames of the state universities in Indiana, Nebraska, Ohio, Texas and Oklahoma."[5] Although UC Berkley Golden Bears and UCLA Bruins utilize the state flag's bear with their mascots, Cal State LA's Diablos reached further for a historical or emotional connection. Besides the Spanish translation, Diablos appeared



Figure 2 - Los Angeles State College Yearbook, *Pitchfork*, 1966 (Cal State LA Special Collections & Archives)

[4] Raul Tovares, "Mascot Matters: Race, History, and the University of North Dakotas 'Fighting Sioux' Logo," *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 26, no. 1 (2002), 76–94.

[5] John R. Thelin, "California and the Colleges," *California Historical Quarterly* 56, no. 2 (1977), 140-163.

far from California's history. Diablos contradicted the state's evangelical past. City names associated with Christianity blanket California. Many cities named after saints like San Diego, Santa Barbara, and San Francisco display a direct connection to Catholicism. Further, one city in Southern California named after a Quaker poet, John Greenleaf Whittier, shows a connection to Protestantism. Los Angeles, more specifically, connects with an evangelical theme as it directly translates to "The Angels." Making the contradiction more apparent, "Los Angeles Diablos" translates to "The Angels Devils." Al Silver, 1981 basketball coach, stated, "The 'Devils' was a paradox considering this is the City of The Angels."[6] However, similar to Wheaton College, Christian imagery may have come off as offensive. The California Missions, established by the Spanish in the late eighteenth century to convert California's indigenous peoples to Catholicism, comes with controversy regarding the inhuman methods of forcefully imposing the Christian faith on Native tribes. Regardless of a potential Christian-themed proposal, Diablos did not match the city of Los Angeles nor the state. California and Los Angeles's rich history and landscapes make the adoption of a symbol full of possibilities. Nevertheless, Cal State LA's mascot transformation endured numerous obstacles.

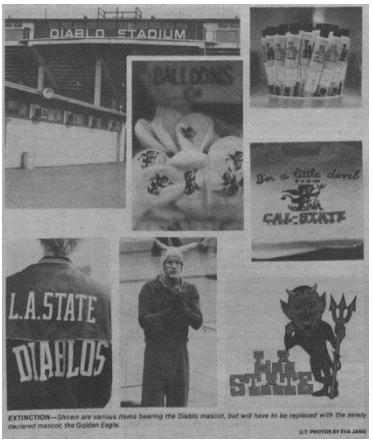


Figure 3 - Clipping from *College Times*. Photographs by Eva Jang (Cal State LA Special Collections & Archives)

The Diablos was a controversial issue ever since the schools founding in 1947. In 1957, Cal State LA attempted to rid itself of the "diabolical image" with a significant push to adopt a more dignified symbol.[7] In a 1958 *College Times* article, managing editor of the newspaper Les Pollack wrote, "Satan does not

[6] Gary Camponia, "The Diablo is Dead; Long Live the Golden Eagles," *University Times*, January 20, 1981.
[7] Lopez, "Diablo was Disliked."

live here anymore!!! At least this will be a complete truth when a delegated name-finding committee comes up with a new nickname for L.A.S.C."[8] Students in 1958 could not come up with a replacement for Diablos. Some suggested names, such as Rats, Mice, Rodents, or Eagles, never gained traction. That same year an election held by the Associated Students put a mascot preference on the ballot. Unfortunately, only 16 percent of eligible voters turned out, and Diablos remained the mascot for another twenty-three years.[9]

For years following the 1957 attempt to replace Diablos, disapproval lingered. Marge Callahan, the 1981 women's athletic director, stated in the *University Times,* "I don't think a devil represented the type of image that we wanted. Let's have something positive, something attacking like an eagle, not something that runs around with horns and whatever that spear is that he carried."[10] In addition, students felt the mascot gave the impression that the school's athletes play against the rules. Others believed Diablos struck a religious nerve, 1981 news editor Patricia Lopez of Cal State LA's *University Times* wrote, "Devils and devilry have had a negative image throughout history. Condemned in most religions, worshipped by others, devils arouse strong feelings in many people."[11] Students and staff thought negatively of the Diablos image, leaving many disconnected from the school while offending others. Over time, the disapproval of Diablos turned to action.

A breakthrough emerged at the start of the 1980s after multiple polls by the University Programming Organization Spirit Committee and the Associated Students resulted in majority of disapproval of Diablos as the official mascot. In response, the Associated Students held an election to choose Diablos' successor in January of 1981.[12] Students submitted their write-in ballots over the course of two days.[13] The Associated Students revealed the

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[8] Les Pollack, "Satan Palace," *College Times*, February 28, 1958.
[9] Marv Jacobson, "Diablos Remains Nickname Ok Constitution Overwhelmingly," *College Times*, May 2, 1958.
[10] Camponia, "The Diablo is Dead."
[11] Lopez, "Diablo was Disliked."
[12] Camponia, "The Diablo is Dead."
[13] Patricia Lopez, "Ballot Box Stuffers Reply to Reprimand," *University Times*, January 27, 1981.

results at the homecoming basketball game, declaring Golden Eagles as the winner.[14] Although this received a mixed reaction initially, most students and staff approved of the results. For example, Ernie Mynatt, a 1981 Cal State LA senior, stated, "I prefer Golden Eagles. It's more prestigious for a university. It also presents a more macho image for sports."[15] The college had finally settled on a mascot that many felt represented the school in a positive manner. Golden Eagles are majestic creatures that have a composed and distinguished demeanor. For the same reason, the United States and Mexico use eagles in their symbols. They signify pride, inspiration, and victory. However, controversy accompanied the results of the election.

The election received backlash from some students. Only 931 ballots were cast, resulting in a victory for Golden Eagles with 360 votes. Oysters came in second with 290, and Diablos came in third with 157. However, some students were caught and admitted to ballot stuffing for the election. One student admitted to turning in two hundred votes for Oysters as a joke.[16] After the reveal of the mascot, Patricia Lopez stated "Even on a campus known for apathy, students at Cal State L.A. have roused themselves to express their opinions on the election of a new school mascot."[17] Students perceived this vote as undermining their opinion and wanted a fair mascot election.



Figure 4 - 1980s Golden Eagle logo. (California State University, Los Angeles)

Members of the Associated Students appeared to have already decided regardless of the election results and student opinions. Yvonne Terrell made changing the mascot one of her personal goals as President of the Associated Students. Additionally, University President James Rosser disapproved of the name

[14] Camponia, "The Diablo is Dead."
[15] Patricia Lopez, "Students Speak Out on Mascot Election," *University Times*, January 29, 1981.
[16] Camponia, "The Diablo is Dead."
[17] Lopez, "Students Speak Out."

Diablos.[18] Therefore, students felt the election had predetermined results. Lopez wrote, "If A.S. didn't like the outcome, they'd call it a poll. If they did, they would call it an election." The A.S. was clearly motivated to replace the mascot. However, their elections' true intentions did not slip past students. Bill Lathan, a grad student at the time of the election, told the *University Times*, "I think it was an abuse of discretion on the part of the A.S. to uphold the election results." A 1981 psychology student added, "The election sounds like a big farce to me. I say let's petition and put it to a general vote."[19] The A.S. conducted the election to obtain their preferred outcome. This created frustration with the A.S. and administration amongst students who believed that their opinion did not matter. The students seemed more upset about the election process than the mascot selection.

Golden Eagles became the college's new mascot, but the change left students unclear about the decision. In the months following the election, *University Times* Staff writer Kim Miles revealed the election acted as an advisory, "a non-binding opinion of the student body." President Rosser held power to accept the decision, but his office referred the matter to Public Affairs Officer Frank Wylie.[20] The final result became clear five months after the election, once an official ceremony revealed the Golden Eagle as the approved mascot in May of 1981. During the Golden Eagle revealing ceremony, Joan Levin, the designer of the Golden Eagle logo, stated, "the eagle is supposed to represent striving to attain the ultimate goal."[21] The Golden Eagle also has a geographical connection to Los Angeles as they once populated the area until their numbers declined.[22] Despite the backlash of the election, Golden Eagles held as an uncontroversial symbol that represented the university.

The 1981 Cal State LA mascot transformation signified progression in awareness. Taking cultural sensitives into account, Diablos seemed to offend more than inspire. Growth in cultural

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[18] Camponia, "The Diablo is Dead."
[19] Lopez, "Students Speak out."
[20] Kim Miles, "No One Seems."
[21] Elizabeth Love, "New Mascot Announced in Ceremony with Mayor, Golden Eagle, Much Pomp," *University Times*, May 27, 1981.
[22] Camponia, "The Diablo is Dead."

awareness has led many schools and professional athletic teams to transform their mascots. The MLB's Cleveland Indians stopped using their Chief Wahoo logo in January 2018, while Washington's NFL team dropped the Redskins mascot altogether in July 2020. The images used by the two professional athletic organizations culturally appropriated Native Americans. In September 2018, Cal State Long Beach announced the retirement of their 49ers name and Prospector Pete mascot. Students felt the Gold Rush theme glorified an era of genocide against indigenous peoples.[23] With shifts from offensive logos and names, it has become evident that modern athletic teams and institutions do not want racist and culturally inappropriate imagery to represent their identities. Similarly, Cal State L.A.'s decision to move on from Diablos exemplified their awareness of cultural sensitivities. As mentioned before, many religions condemn any images associated with the Devil. Also, students did not want the malicious imagery associated with devils. Diablos have a negative reputation for its connection with sin and causing havoc, an image many students felt unsuited for their school.



Figure 4 - Present Golden Eagle Logo (California State University, Los Angeles)

Golden Eagles became the university's mascot through the AS and administration's determination to establish a mascot that represents the school's identity. For thirty-four years, attempts to replace the Cal State LA mascot failed. However, the 1981 administration and Associated Students showed initiative. They believed Diablos misrepresented the essence of Cal State LA. Although the mascot election was controversial, the administration established the Golden Eagle as its new symbol. The transformation is an example of conflicts over control of the images that represent a community. Today, some professional sports teams and other schools still utilize mascots that misrepresent their communities' true identities. In these situations, team owners and school administrations must take responsibility for the images representing their communities.

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[23] Julia Turbeche, "Prospector Pete Removed from the Center of Campus," *Daily Forty-Niner*, June 26, 2020.