

Crisis Opinion Paper:

University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and “The Chief”

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### Abstract

The following essay details the controversy surrounding the usage of an American Indian mascot at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. “Chief Illiniwek” represents to some an honored and revered symbol of bravery, courage, and strength; to others, he represents a racist and hostile school of thought insensitive to the experiences of American Indians on campus and off campus. The author illustrates the nature of the controversy, describes campus response, and analyzes administrative response to this ongoing crisis of identity.

Keywords: *Chief Illiniwek, mascot, crisis, American Indian*

The retiring of Chief Illiniwek at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC) represents a crisis of identity and institutional pride with multiple stakeholders and political influences, including students, faculty, staff, alumni, Big Ten conference schools, and the American Indian population across the country. When the university was forced to retire its mascot or risk significant financial impact through the National College Athletic Association (NCAA), it had no choice but to end a decades-long tradition that instilled pride and community throughout the UIUC family. Despite mounting evidence supporting the decision to retire a racially offensive and hostile university symbol, some UIUC students and alumni are still fighting to return the Chief to his “rightful” role as honored and revered symbol of the Fighting Illini.

### **Background**

UIUC, founded in 1867, is a public land grant research institution with roughly 30,000 undergraduate and 10,000 graduate students. As a predominately and historically White institution, UIUC is home to only 0.13% of students who identify as Native American/American Indian; due to limited representation and historical oppression of American Indians in the United States, this ratio is not uncommon among higher education institutions. UIUC is also home to four cultural houses, including the Bruce D. Nesbitt African American Cultural Center (BNAACC), the Native American House, the Asian American Cultural Center (AACC), and La Casa Cultural Latina.

Located in a small urban community in central Illinois, the university boasts 10 men’s and 11 women’s NCAA Division I athletic programs; sports and school pride are a uniting force throughout the institution and the state. With a prideful alumni network and local community, UIUC’s mascot and symbol, “Chief Illiniwek,” seemingly represented the ideals that the

institution valued: a fighting spirit and respect for the natural surroundings. “The Chief” began performing at athletic events in 1926, donning “traditional” Native attire including a feathered headdress and fringed buckskin and dancing during halftime. The persona of the Chief is adopted each year by a member of the UIUC student community, who has always been a White male.

After anti-Chief protests at athletic events in 1989, the University of Illinois’ Board of Trustees passed a motion affirming Chief Illiniwek as the symbol for athletic teams at the Urbana-Champaign campus; formal dialogue was not renewed until 2000, when the Chief Illiniwek Dialogue Report was released to the public. In 2005, the NCAA announced its policy to ban institutions from hosting post season championship tournaments as a result of the usage of American Indian imagery. In 2007, the Chief was officially retired from performance and the name and logo were discontinued, reinstating UIUC’s eligibility to host NCAA post season championship tournaments. The Board of Trustees voted to end the use of the Chief Illiniwek name, image and regalia, shifting decision-making authority on the remaining issues to the UIUC Chancellor, Richard Herman. The decision to retire the Chief occurred in the wake of a national conversation about the appropriateness of using Native American imagery and/or caricatures as either a symbol or mascot for university or professional athletic teams.

### **Campus Response**

Retiring the Chief directly led to two distinct and opposing perspectives, dividing the campus and alumni to this day. One perspective supports the decision made by the Board of Trustees, arguing that the intent of “honoring” the Native tradition in Illinois does more harm than good: research has shown that universities with racialized mascots contribute to a hostile campus climate for students of color, but particularly for students who identify as American

Indian (Baca, 2004; Fryberg, Markus, Oyserman, & Stone, 2008; Neville, Yeung, Todd, Spanierman, & Reed, 2011). Additionally, the Peoria and Oglala Sioux tribes who were closely tied to “the tradition” have passed resolutions asking the university to end the use of the Chief (Reese, 2010). The Chief fundamentally misrepresents the very people he in theory represents: the Chief’s “dance” is inauthentic to the Illini tribe, which no longer exists, and is also inauthentic to the Lakota tribe which it sought to represent. Instead of honoring, the Chief reinforces racialized stereotypes of American Indians: “it required no vigorous research or burst of wanton creativity to prescribe that the Chief would don the clothing of the pre-twentieth century Plains Lakota, stand stoically and dignified at the center of the sports arena, wear war paint...and dance wildly to a fanciful drumbeat during halftime. Each of these defining characteristics of the Indian stereotype has been spoon-fed to the American public for over a century” (Gone, 2002, p. 277).

Many students and alumni who feel deeply connected to UIUC pride and traditions reacted with anger and frustration, claiming that the Chief was not simply a mascot, but a symbol of our state intending to honor and respect native tradition. According to the Honor the Chief Society, “Chief Illiniwek embodies the attributes we value as alumni, students, and friends of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. The tradition of the Chief is a link to our great past, a tangible symbol of an intangible spirit, filled with qualities to which a person of any background can aspire: goodness, strength, bravery, truthfulness, courage, and dignity” (Honor the Chief Society, 2008). Students responded by forming a Registered Student Organization called “Students for Chief Illiniwek,” which hosted “The Next Dance” in 2010, a performance by Chief Illiniwek on campus, provoking protests in response. University administration could not

act to prevent this occurrence due to students' right to assemble and right to freedom of expression, and since it has become an annual event.

Institutional response to the aftermath of the retiring of the Chief varied across campus. One can find information about the Chief controversy through the UIUC website, which lists a chronology of events and documentation (See Appendix A). Student affairs professionals from across campus, including the Native American House, the Women's Center, AACC, BNAACC, the Counseling Center, the Office of Inclusion and Intercultural Relations, and the Office of Minority Student Affairs issued statements supporting the decision to retire the Chief; some academic departments, such as the Psychology department, Anthropology department, and the English department, have followed suit:

we strongly believe that such stereotypical, oversimplified, and inaccurate representations are out of place in a university environment, where they miseducate the wider public and the members of our own university community, perpetuating a distorted cliché of Indian people and perpetuating the notion that Indian cultures are a plaything for the dominant culture (Department of English, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2008).

The Chief's retirement and subsequent controversy led to threats of violence to American Indian students on campus in the form of Facebook posts to a pro-Chief online group. In January of 2007, Chancellor Herman responded to these threats via an official email to all university community members, in which he stated "I do not know the motives of the students who posted the threats, but I do know that their words are dangerous and racist. The threats have been forwarded to the Office of Student Conflict Resolution for investigation and action" (American Indian Studies Program, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2007). In 2009, the Native American House reported vandalism to an art exhibit, a crime ultimately designated as a hate crime by the Department of Justice; students called for further action from Chancellor Herman, stating "Yes, he sent out a mass email on this issue, but obviously that's not enough. The attacks

continue and the campus climate remains unsafe for us and anyone who wants to see the campus move Beyond the Chief” (American Indian Studies Program, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2009).

Chief Illiniwek is a divisive figure across campus, yet still invokes significant school pride even six years after his retiring. It is still common to see students walking across campus wearing Chief t-shirts and sweatshirts. The Marching Illini, UIUC’s marching band, still plays the “Three-in-One” at athletic events, a name affectionately given to an arrangement of music including “March of the Illini,” “Pride of the Illini,” and “Hail to the Orange.” According to a statement posted through the American Indian Studies website, “Herman refuses to end the use of the half-time music...to which the mascot would perform his ‘crazy dance.’ Thus, since its retirement, the UIUC marching band continues to play the mascot's music while many in the crowd perform their homage to ‘The Chief’” (American Indian Studies Program, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2009). With the Chancellor’s intent behind supporting the retiring the Chief and all associated imagery still unclear to some constituencies, students are still able to “honor” the Chief at athletic events.

### **An Analysis of University Response**

The Board of Trustees conducted an open and transparent assessment of the use of the Chief as a university symbol and mascot through continued reports and structured dialogues with key constituencies. Chancellor Herman, who was charged with making all further decisions regarding the Chief and his legacy on campus, missed an opportunity to partner with student affairs to respond in a productive and educational way by doing nothing proactive to affront the dissenting views of students.

One lesson of moral leadership, as illustrated in Brown (2005), is that when confronted by crisis, one must seek ways to ensure that the institution is not defined by the crisis itself, but by the leader's response to it (DuBois, 2005, p. 45). Chancellor Herman's missed opportunity resulted in UIUC being known for the crisis, not for his response. As a result, both parties feel unheard and frustrated to this day.

In Brown's *University Presidents as Moral Leaders*, Cowen addresses four archetypes of leadership, both in times of crisis and stability (2005). His description of political leadership is most applicable to the issue of the Chief and the leadership's response to the campus and community. According to Cowen, "it seems to me that that is a very frightening and dangerous form of leadership where our institutions are run as if they are strictly political systems in the absence of other kinds of leadership" (p. 58). Because there were so many political forces at play in the decision to retire the Chief, including state governmental influence, the NCAA's pressure, and American Indian tribes, it is possible and probable that the decision resulted because of these political pressures, not because of any sense of responsibility for respecting Native cultures. Chancellor Herman apparently focused more on his political leadership during this controversial time instead of acting congruently with his morals. As a UIUC alum, I suspect that Chancellor Herman regretted the decision to retire the Chief, as his actions do not reflect those of a person morally opposed to the damaging effects of a racist mascot. He could have done much more to create a culture of inclusivity on campus, and instead acted in a reactionary manner to instances of campus threats of violence and vandalism.

In reflecting upon the role of leaders in our higher education institutions, "we expect them to coalesce and focus our concerns and dreams and inspire us to action in pursuit of this collective vision. But more important, we want to trust our leaders, to have faith in them, to be



assured of their virtue and know they will make the right choices. Viewed in this way, virtue really becomes the basis of trust and, thus, of leadership” (Yates, 2005, p. 109). A collective vision and hope for the future was notably absent in the aftermath of the retiring of the Chief, contributing to the frustration and anger felt on both sides of the argument; as such, the UIUC community found that they could not trust Chancellor Herman to act in their interests because they did not know the true nature of his opinion.

Even if Chancellor Herman did not agree with the retiring of the Chief, if he had been open about his true opinion, it would have fostered more trust among the university community whether or not they agreed with him. According to one university president, “I think it is important to be *honest, candid, and human*. I can think of too many times when an attorney has said to me, ‘You can’t say that.’ Well, folks, real people have pretty good sensors for legal-speak and they tune it out. If you talk like a lawyer, you just do not connect. People are a lot more understanding and forgiving if you are real” (Farrington, 2005, p. 61). In a situation like this crisis, no one is going to agree, and political leadership comes across as insincere; instead, leadership should have focused on reparations and relationship-building across difference.

In conclusion, the retiring of the Chief elicited subpar response from university leadership, and continues to suffer from this lack of adequate response. Because the decision is so political, and the dialogue is taking place on a national stage, there is no quick fix. Time will hopefully heal these wounds, creating an even stronger community of alumni and students across the country dedicated to furthering UIUC’s reputation as a distinguished research, teaching, and public engagement university.

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Appendix A: Chief Chronology<sup>1</sup>

**1926:** Chief Illiniwek begins performances at athletic events.

**1989:** Anti-Chief protests occur on campus.

**1990:** University of Illinois Board of Trustees at a meeting hears arguments on both sides of the Chief issue. The Board passes a motion to affirm Chief Illiniwek as the symbol for athletic teams on the Urbana-Champaign campus.

**1997:** A documentary entitled "In Whose Honor?" appears on PBS, giving rise to increased debate about the Chief.

**February 2000:** A plan for renewed dialogue on Chief Illiniwek is announced by the Board of Trustees.

**October 2000:** The Chief Illiniwek Dialogue Report is released.

**May 2001:** The Board of Trustees appoints board member Roger L. Plummer to further explore the Chief Illiniwek issue to determine if a compromise was possible.

**March 2002:** Board of Trustees member Plummer reports that reaching a compromise is doubtful.

**November 2003:** Board of Trustees is set to consider a resolution to honorably retire the Chief but maintain the name "Fighting Illini" for athletic teams on the UIUC campus. Proposed resolution is withdrawn for further consideration.

**June 2004:** Board of Trustees adopts resolution for "consensus conclusion" to Chief Illiniwek issue.

**September 2004:** Board of Trustees adopts resolution that consensus conclusion process shall preserve and recognize the state's American Indian heritage.

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<sup>1</sup> Retrieved from <http://www.uillinois.edu/chief/Chronology.pdf>

**July and August 2005:** Board of Trustees adopts resolution spelling out total of eight guiding principles of the consensus conclusion process.

**August 2005:** NCAA announces policy to ban certain institutions—including U. of I. at Urbana-Champaign—from hosting post season NCAA championship tournament competition because of use of American Indian imagery.

**November 2005 through January 2006:** University files appeals of NCAA policy. NCAA agrees names “Illini” and “Fighting Illini” not subject to policy but retain U. of I. on list of institutions subject to the policy because of Chief Illiniwek name, portrayal and logo.

**April 2006:** NCAA issues “final decision” to reject U. of I. appeal and decrees University will be subject to policy and sanctions.

**May 2006:** NCAA site selection committee for men’s tennis championship passes over U. of I. as host site for opening rounds of competition despite Illini men’s tennis team having a high national ranking and recent tradition of Urbana-Champaign campus hosting early round of championship tennis competition.

**November 2006:** Ranked Illini women’s soccer team sent on the road for opening rounds of NCAA tournament; eliminated in 1-0 game vs. Florida State Seminoles on Seminoles home field (Florida State exempted from the NCAA policy in 2005).

**February 2007:** University of Illinois announces Chief Illiniwek will no longer perform and use of the name and logo will be discontinued; the NCAA announces that Illinois will be removed from the list of institutions not compliant with the policy.