

September 5, 2005

Dear UIUC Faculty, Staff, Students, and Community Members,

On Tuesday of last week, a sophomore student in my Introduction to American Indian Studies class said to me “I know you want the mascot retired, but I don’t know why. All we hear is the pro chief reasons, but we don’t hear your reasons. And what about Illini?”

The student is interested in my reasons because of my identity. I am a tribally enrolled Pueblo Indian. I grew up on our reservation at Nambe Pueblo, in northern New Mexico. I dance at our ceremonies. Pueblo dance is one aspect of our traditional way of worship. Acting on an assumption that many of you like the student in my class want to hear directly from a Native person on campus why Chief Illiniwek, the logo, and the name must be retired, I prepared this letter and ask that you read and share it with others, regardless of their position on this issue. It effects all of us, whatever our position---even if it is one of neutrality. The letter is long because this is a complex issue.

Local and national media tends to cast the mascot issue as “pro-Chief” or “anti-Chief” and for the most part, Native people are not quoted. Instead, reference is made to the survey’s conducted by Sports Illustrated and the Annenberg Center that said Native Americans are not bothered by the mascots. The surveys are flawed in many ways. I provide two here.

- 1 Who are the Native Americans they talked to? Our UIUC campus lists over 100 Native American students. The majority of them, however, are not tribally enrolled or otherwise connected to their tribal nation. Their identity as Native American is significantly different in experience than someone whose life experience is immersed in Native ways of being as a citizen of a Native community. Many of them have spoken on our campus, saying they find nothing wrong with Chief Illiniwek. I do not question or denigrate their claim to Native heritage, but I do question the degree to which they can appreciate or understand this issue.
- 2 How informed were the people they talked to? Prior to coming to UIUC in 1994, I was living on our reservation. I was teaching at an Indian school in Santa Fe. I was asked by the professor recruiting me if the mascot issue here would be a problem for me. I dismissed it then, saying it was unimportant and that mascots are not a problem. Within a few months of living in Champaign Urbana, I changed my mind. Conversations with people on and off campus revealed that most people’s knowledge of who Native people are is based on romantic and stereotypical images encountered from childhood through adulthood from books and movies to programs such as Y-Indian programs and scouting that provide the opportunity to dress and behave in ways they believe are Native. The emotion and strength with which people hold these images dear would, seemingly, make them welcome Native people in their midst, but I and others across the country have found otherwise. If we do not affirm their flawed ideas, they lose interest in us. They dismiss us as radical, or “PC.”

Last year, the NCAA asked institutions with Native mascots to respond to a set of questions. UIUC submitted their report near the end of last semester. That report was highly flawed. We, at the Native American House, responded to their report with a strong statement denouncing the report. You can read our statement here:  
<http://www.nah.uiuc.edu/mascot-news.html>

The NCAA's announcement regarding mascots and names gave the Board of Trustees the opportunity to end this situation. Statements in the media from Trustee Chair Eppley suggest that the BOT will appeal the use of Illini and Fighting Illini. There are indications that "Chief Illiniwek" and the logo will be retired, but the names will be retained. I am concerned that you will welcome this compromise and view it as an acceptable solution.

I am on record in opposition to that outcome. I have stated that position to the Board of Trustees, President's Stukel and White, and Chancellor's Cantor and Herman. My statements and letters were provided in my role as president of the Native American student organization; more recently I speak as a member of the faculty in American Indian Studies.

There are many reasons why Illini and Fighting Illini should not be used in the sports venue. I offer some of my thoughts here.

It is highly unlikely that fans of UIUC's rivals will go along with UIUC's plan to recast Illini and Fighting Illini as nicknames void of any association with Native Americans or imagery. Fan behavior is emotionally charged, with fans invested in coming up with clever ways to skewer their opponents. I expect that UIUC's administration and fans will spend a lot of time and money in their effort to recast the name. They will be frustrated by rival fans who will do what they want to with the names. UIUC administrators will spend more and more money to counter what they view as a mis-use of the name. And, rival fans will dig in harder. That is the nature of the sports arena.

Moreover, I expect Illini fans of the mascot will continue to use Native imagery. There might be a different mascot, and there may be an attempt to disassociate the names with Native imagery, but there are many fans who will be opposed to such a move. Like rival fans, they will use Illini and Fighting Illini as they choose. During the basketball season, the local newspaper ran stories calling the UIUC fanbase the "Illini Nation." Many of you may not know much about the history of American Indians, but please know that such casual appropriation of Native nationhood by a group of fans who refuse to acknowledge the harm done by the mascot is an affront. The history is such that there were multiple efforts by private and public and governmental agencies to destroy Native peoples and their tribal nations. Our leaders fought hard to retain our status as sovereign nations, and we have persevered.

Meanwhile, caught in the midst and furor of this mess will be Native students, staff, and faculty, whose cultures will still be the stuff of sports play. Instead of relying on Sports Illustrated or the Annenberg Center, I urge you to consider the statements issued by national, regional, and local Native American political, social, educational, and

professional organizations that have called for an end to the use of Native imagery in sports programs. A list of them is included at the end of this letter.

Many of you are wondering about the Florida Seminoles and other tribes who have recently given endorsements to Florida State, Central Michigan University, and the University of Utah. I respect the decisions of those tribal leaders, especially given their sovereign nation status, but I wonder if they might change their minds, as I did, when I became immersed in the campus with an Indian mascot.

Many of you may wonder where these efforts at use of Native imagery will end. There are suggestions that those who work on this effort also want the name of the state to be changed. That is not the case. State leaders don't have symbols, mascots or imagery that is used the way that they are used in sports arenas. My efforts are limited to the use of such symbols, mascots, imagery, and names in sports programs.

UIUC has spent far too much money supporting and defending the use of the mascot, logo, and name. It has cost the institution in other ways, too. The University's reputation is not what it should be. I encourage you to consider the costs we all bear, and if you feel our sports team should change the name in addition to Chief Illiniwek and the logo, please write to President White, Chancellor Herman, and the Board of Trustees.

Sincerely,  
Debbie Reese  
Assistant Professor  
American Indian Studies

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## AMERICAN INDIAN ORGANIZATIONS WITH STATEMENTS REGARDING THE USE OF AMERICAN INDIAN MASCOTS/IMAGERY

### **National Congress of American Indians**

Peoria Tribe of Oklahoma [formerly Kaskaskia, Peoria, Piankesaw and Wea Indians known by Europeans as Illinois/Illini]

National Indian Education Association

Society of Indian Psychologists of the Americas

American Indian Movement

Advocates for American Indian Children (California)

The Affiliated Tribes of Northwest Indians

American Indian Language and Culture Education Board

American Indian Mental Health Association (Minnesota)

American Indian Opportunities Industrialization Center of San Bernardino County

### **American Indian Student Services at the Ohio State University**

Association on American Indian Affairs

BRIDGES - Building Roads Into Diverse Groups Empowering Students  
Buncombe County Native American Intertribal Association (North Carolina)  
Cincinnati Zapitista Coalition  
Committee to End Cultural Genocide (St. Cloud State University)  
Concerned American Indian Parents (Minnesota)  
Council for Indigenous North Americans (University of Southern Maine)  
Eagle and Condor Indigenous Peoples' Alliance  
Governor's Interstate Indian Council  
Fontana Native American Indian Center, Inc.  
Greater Tulsa Area Indian Affairs Commission  
Great Lakes Inter-Tribal Council  
HONOR - Honor Our Neighbors Origins and Rights  
Illinois Native Bar Association

Inter-Tribal Council of the Five Civilized Tribes  
(Composed of the Choctaw, Chickasaw, Muskogee (Creek), Cherokee, and Seminole Nations)

Institute of American Indian Arts, Santa Fe, New Mexico  
Juaneño Band of Mission Indians  
Kansas Association for Native American Education  
Maryland Commission on Indian Affairs  
Mascot Abuse San Francisco Bay Area  
Medicine Wheel Intertribal Association (Louisiana)  
Menominee Tribe of Indians (Wisconsin)  
Minnesota Indian Education Association  
Morning Star Institute  
NAES College, Chicago (Native American Educational Services)  
National Coalition on Racism in Sports and the Media  
National Indian Education Association

**Native American Caucus of the California Democratic Party**  
Native American House, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign  
Native American Indian Center of Central Ohio  
Native American International Caucus of the United Methodist Church, Inc

**Native American Journalists Association**  
Nebraska Commission on Indian Affairs  
North Carolina Commission of Indian Affairs  
North Dakota Indian Education Association  
North Dakota State University Student Senate  
Ohio Center for Native American Affairs  
Oneida Tribe of Indians of Wisconsin  
San Bernardino/Riverside Counties Native American Community Council  
Society of Indian Psychologists  
Southern California Indian Center

St. Cloud State University - American Indian Center  
Tennessee Chapter of the National Coalition for the Preservation of Indigenous Cultures  
Tennessee Native Veterans Society  
Unified Coalition for American Indian Concerns, Virginia  
The United Indian Nations of Oklahoma  
Virginia American Indian Cultural Resource Center  
Wisconsin Indian Education Association  
WIEA "Indian" Mascot and Logo Taskforce (Wisconsin)  
Youth "Indian" Mascot and Logo Taskforce (Wisconsin)