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Trustees add guideline for resolving Illiniwek debate

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Associated Press

URBANA, Ill. - The University of Illinois board of trustees on Thursday added to its guidelines for resolving the debate over Chief Illiniwek but took no action on the future of the contentious mascot.

The new guideline, approved without debate, joins seven others adopted in July that are intended to help the university reach what it calls a "consensus conclusion" to the years-old debate over the school's American Indian imagery.

The new guideline says the board should "recognize the university's goals of having high integrity athletic programs, winning teams and athletes who are successful students and who have the opportunity to compete at the highest levels."

It comes after an Aug. 5 decision by the NCAA's executive committee to bar schools that use "hostile" and "abusive" American Indian imagery, including Chief Illiniwek, from hosting postseason events.

Thursday's meeting was the board's first since the NCAA's ruling and opponents told the trustees to retire the Chief and the "Fighting Illini" nickname immediately.

Wanda Pillow, the director of the Urbana campus' Native American Studies program, also scolded the trustees for failing to talk to anyone in her program or visit the Native American House on campus for input.

"The continued use of Chief Illiniwek and Fighting Illini severely compromises the academic integrity of NAS (Native American Studies)," she said. "I know the excellent American Indian studies faculty we have recruited here will not stay" if the Chief isn't retired.

The Chief, actually a student who dances at sporting events, has divided the campus for years, with supporters arguing that his appearance honors the state's American Indian heritage and opponents countering that the Chief is nothing more than a racist stereotype.

"The guidelines, all they are is simply, if you'd imagine them as dots on a circle, the solution's got to be inside of that," said trustees Chairman Lawrence C. Eppley. "This eighth one just says there's an athletic focus of this that we also have to consider."

The board has set no timetable for reaching the consensus it seeks, Eppley said.

Trustees also decided Thursday to ask the Illinois Board of Higher Education and the Legislature to approve an \$83.7 million operating budget for the fiscal year that begins July 1, 2006.

The request seeks an additional \$61 million to hire new faculty, increase salaries and expand academic programs; \$9.5 million more to address a maintenance backlog on the three campuses; and an additional \$13.1 million to meet inflationary increases in utilities and other costs. The university also will ask for \$335 million for capital improvements at the three campuses and their satellites around the state, officials said.

"The campuses are looking very deeply and carefully at what their needs are in terms of academic programs," said Chester Gardner, UI's vice president for academic affairs. "What you see here are what we like to term unassailable needs."

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