

Illinois' leaders must step up, get rid of Chief

September 7, 2004

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Embarrassment. Divisive. Hypocrisy. Damaging. Troubling. These are just some of the words that have been directed at the University of Illinois by a major accreditation organization for higher education. And no, the subject was not the Illini football team. The subject is Chief Illiniwek, the school's mascot (or symbol, if you prefer).

You already know how I feel about the Chief. But take a look at a few excerpts from the North Central Association accreditation committee's report, which the university received Aug. 25:

"The [Chief] controversy ... interferes with the educational climate and with the institution's stated goal of creating an inclusive community."

"The [committee] is concerned by the divisive forces that are increasingly vocal and meddlesome in the university's academic mission. Some of these forces are marked by intolerance, parochialism, isolation and what many would consider to be racism. The [university] does not appear to have strategies to address this situation."

You get the drift. The Chief must go.

Ideally, colleges assume leadership roles on and off the playing field. But while most schools dumped their racist nicknames and mascots long ago, Illinois remains stuck in the 18th century. Marquette, St. John's and Stanford are just a few of the universities that have made the change. At last check, they're all doing fine. Illinois? Not so fine.

"Because this issue is so important, I believe it is essential that we obtain full and comprehensive information concerning it," interim chancellor Richard Herman remarked in a statement released by the university.

That's leadership, eh? The information gathering has been going on for more than a decade. The school has heard extensive public comment on the issue. It has heard from the faculty, from the student body, from Native Americans. And the accreditation report was more than clear. There is no more information left to gather.

When an accreditation committee makes a "focused visit" to his school regarding the issue of the Chief and subsequently releases an extremely critical report, a chancellor must realize he has a problem. And he must fix it.

When Illinois trustees meet in Springfield on Thursday, they will consider a resolution to "publicly celebrate" Native Indian culture. I don't know exactly what this means. Neither,

apparently, does the university.

"To predict or guess what this means for the Chief is premature and speculative right now," university spokesman Tom Hardy told Champaign's News-Gazette.

If Illinois wants to "celebrate" Native American culture, it must start by retiring the Chief. But the school already knows this. Illini sports fans know this. Goodness knows the accreditation committee knows this.

"In summary, [the Chief] is an embarrassment to many of its most distinguished constituents," the report says. "It creates a situation in which expressions of opinions by students, faculty, leadership or applicants for positions at the institution may be stifled or lead to harassment. ... [F]aculty and staff do not want to attend national meetings, especially meetings dealing with diversity issues, because of the hypocrisy they sense in the institution's continued use of the symbol."

Too bad the committee didn't have the guts to make the Chief an accreditation issue. That would have made the decision to retire him a simple one for the university. But, as the interim chancellor was quick to point out, Illinois will not lose its accreditation as a result of the Chief. The committee's report, then, was just another slap in the face to Illinois, which has shown itself to have thick skin when it comes to its mascot.

The trustees began an "open dialogue" on the Chief issue in 2000. At the time, Francis Boyle, a professor of international law at Illinois, told me the trustees will have dialogue "until hell freezes over." In the absence of a lawsuit, Boyle said, they'll still be debating the subject "in another 10 years."

We're nearly halfway there.

The university likes to say the Chief is a tradition. Need I point out that not every "tradition" is worth maintaining? Try as some might to dignify the Chief, he is nothing more than a degrading caricature. When he's retired, there will be a brief outcry by a few. The majority will cheer.

"The real issue here is a troubling failure of enlightened leadership and shared governance by the board of a major world-class research university," the report says. "The list of institutions which have dealt successfully with similar issues is long, and all have moved forward as a result. The list of those institutions still attempting to defer or avoid the obvious solution is very short."

Translated: The Chief's gig is up. We're just waiting for Illinois to realize it.