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Feb. 19

## More Than a Mascot

Last summer, Vernon Burton gave lectures on history and the use of computing in humanities research at meetings in Britain and France. When he finished each talk, the first question wasn't about his research, but about Chief Illiniwek, the mascot at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, and why the university would keep a symbol that is offensive to American Indians.

“What people knew about the university was the chief, not the research and teaching here,” said Burton, a critic of the mascot and president of the Faculty Senate. On Friday, the university announced that Chief Illiniwek would make a final appearance at a men's basketball game Wednesday — and then [would be retired](#). “It's a long nightmare that has ended at last,” Burton said.

For supporters of the chief mascot, of course, Friday was the nightmare, and the two sides dueled in press events, in court, and in the court of public opinion. But Burton and some others said that the issues for Illinois — by any academic measure a top public university — are much broader than the question of whether a student pretending to be an Indian dances for a few minutes at football and basketball games. The debate at Illinois, many say, has consumed time and attention of university leaders, influenced who is a university leader, hurt the institution's reputation, and led to doubts about the role of shared governance.

“It's long past time for this issue — and Illiniwek — to go away,” said a *Chicago Tribune* [editorial on Saturday](#). “Over the years, the debate has occupied the time and energy of students, university administrators and trustees, alumni, the Illinois General Assembly, the U.S. Senate and at least two governors. All of them have more important things to worry about, such as studying for finals or running the country. The squabble over the chief is a distraction and a poor reflection on the state's flagship academic institution.”

[The announcement from the university](#) — rumored for months to be imminent — walked a fine line between blaming the National Collegiate Athletic Association for the shift, and saying it was an independent decision. In 2005, [the NCAA stunned Illinois and a group of other colleges](#) by announcing that institutions that continued to use Native American symbols or imagery in ways that were hostile to American Indians would be barred from being the hosts of postseason tournaments or from participating in NCAA championships if such images appeared on



U. of Illinois  
Chief Illiniwek  
performs at an  
athletic event.

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uniforms worn by athletes or others involved in athletics when they participated.

Illinois was among the institutions that blasted the NCAA, and appealed its findings — winning a limited victory when the NCAA said that the name “Illini” was not problematic (it could refer to the state, not just a tribe). But the NCAA rejected the contention of Illinois (as well as some other colleges that use Native American imagery) that Chief Illiniwek was an honor for Native Americans.

Much of the Illinois announcement stressed that the decision to end the use of the chief removed the university from NCAA sanctions. But at the same time, the university statement said that the decision was the natural result of a “consensus process” that the Illinois board had pledged to use to resolve the chief issue. And an FAQ released by the university answered the question “Did the university cave to the NCAA?” with the answer No, and yet the same answer went on to note the penalties paid by the university for not being in compliance with the association’s rules.

The official statement also included much praise for the Chief Illiniwek tradition, and didn’t include any acknowledgment that the NCAA or American Indian groups might have had legitimate reasons not to want pretend Indians entertaining largely white crowds with Indian imagery. “The Chief Illiniwek tradition inspired and thrilled members of the University of Illinois community for 80 years,” said Lawrence C. Eppley, the board chair, in a statement. “It was created, carried on, and enjoyed by people with great respect for tradition.”

The chief first started performing at Illinois athletic events in 1926, and is best known for appearing during the halftime shows at football games. Students are selected to play the chief and many of those who have done so consider it a high point of their college experience. But while some colleges with Indian names have accused the NCAA of making an issue where none existed, that would be hard to claim at Illinois. Protests have been taking place on the campus since 1989, the chief’s role has been the subject of [a critical PBS documentary](#) and a scholarly book. At Illinois, criticism of the chief has been as strong as at any institution with an Indian name, but so too has been the activity of defenders of the tradition. (The University of North Dakota and Florida State University may have rallied with equal intensity, and the former is now in court with the NCAA while the latter won an appeal from the association.)

Carol Spindel, an adjunct in English at the university, has studied the Illinois mascot issue as much as anyone. [Her book](#), *Dancing at Halftime: Sports and the Controversy Over American Indian Mascots*, focused on Illinois, but also covered many other institutions. (It was originally going to be published by the University of Illinois Press, but the topic was too hot to handle there, and the work landed at New York University Press and won strong reviews upon publication.)

Spindel said that she wasn’t certain why the issue became so divisive at Illinois, while other places were able to work through the issue with relative civility. She said that there has been politicization of the issue and “inept leadership.” She particularly faulted the university’s board for letting pro-mascot groups appear to be speaking for the university over the years, in opposition to Native Americans and their supporters. People who are associated with the fight against the chief have received fairly constant insults on campus, and sometimes far worse, Spindel said.

[Southeast Missouri State University](#) is among the many institutions that retired Indian names and Spindel attended a ceremony that marked the 2005 switch from “Indians” to “Redhawks,” and was struck by how many people mentioned the Illinois tensions. At the ceremony, Spindel said, “people were very upbeat and very positive about the future of their program, and they sad to me, ‘we’ve looked up the river at you, and we can’t afford to have our community divided and we can’t afford the lawsuits.’ “

[Using the Bully Pulpit — or Bullying?](#), May 1

- [Keeping the Choctaws](#), Feb. 20, 2006
- [The Mascot Mess](#), Aug. 8, 2005

While Spindel said that she was very pleased with the decision announced Friday, she wished there could have been more acknowledgment of the problems created by the chief over the years. “It’s too bad the University of Illinois couldn’t have used the retirement as a teachable moment to stress the importance of respect for all. This would have been especially valuable for non-Native students and might have helped to establish the atmosphere of respect the campus lacks,” she said.

The backlash against critics of the chief has been “very real” and has frequently reached the point of harassment, Spindel said, noting [the recent furor over Facebook entries](#) involving university students. One Facebook group that attracted over 110 members is titled “If They Get Rid of the Chief I’m Becoming a Racist.” One of its postings reads, “[W]hat they don’t realize is that there was never a racist problem before ... but now I hate redskins and hope all those drunk casino owning bums die.”

Another post states that one of the leaders of the movement to remove Chief Illiniwek is of Sioux descent. “I say we throw a tomohawk [sic] into her face.” The university is investigating the comments and — in an escalation typical of many of the Illiniwek debates — that inquiry has set off its own controversy. [The Foundation for Individual Rights in Education](#) is calling on the university to end its inquiry, saying that the Facebook threats were “hyperbolic” but not real threats since it is unlikely that those writing them intended to actually attack Native American students “with an antiquated weapon.”

Many faculty members believe that Nancy Cantor, who left the chancellor’s position at Urbana-Champaign in 2004 after only three years in office, was in an untenable position at Illinois because of the chief issue. By the time she arrived, the chief issue was firmly in the control of the board and she did not speak out on the chief specifically. But Cantor is known for speaking regularly about the importance of inclusiveness and equity and outreach to minority students — values that were taken by some of the chief’s supporters as some kind of disloyalty. Some of those supporters put up anti-Cantor billboards around town. (Cantor has attributed her departure not to the chief issue, but to her desire to take the position as chancellor of Syracuse University.)

Burton, the Faculty Senate president and director of the director of the Illinois Center for Computing in the Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences, was on the search committee that was created when Cantor left, and he said that some candidates who were approached declined to be considered because of the chief issue.

He also saw damage to the system of governance. The Faculty Senate repeatedly passed resolutions urging the board to drop the chief, but was largely ignored and moves for board action were aborted. “Shared governance fell down on the issue,” Burton said, although he also noted that he and other faculty leaders mentioned the question at meeting after meeting of the university board.

In the end, he said, the NCAA gave cover to the board to do the right thing, without fear of offending pro-chief alumni donors. “I know that there are many trustees who are great fans of the chief, and I appreciate their moral courage” in acting now, he added.

The chief has become a symbol for all kinds of things having nothing to do with education, Burton said. Many of those rallying around it saw the fight against the mascot as an issue of political correctness. “There is so much going on in society. People feel that their lives are being controlled by other people,” he said. “So to people who are upset about affirmative action or other issues, the chief becomes a symbol to hold onto,” he said. “I think we have to be sympathetic to understand that other people will not see this as a moral decision and an important educational decision.... People have given up something that is very dear to them and that they care very much about.”

But while Burton is sympathetic to their feelings, he is also worried about the lack of effort to put the chief in the context of history, and about the university not accepting the responsibility — even after ending the chief’s role — to do more to recruit and welcome students of all kinds.

“Let’s not fool ourselves. This nightmare for the university is over, but there is a reality that is much more important,” he said. White Americans have decided how Native Americans (and other non-white Americans) should be seen (and controlled) since Columbus, he said, and that history isn’t understood as it should be. At a university, “we need to focus much more on diversity of all kinds — of having people with different points of view, on freedom of speech, and providing access for people from different groups, both minority groups and white with less income,” he said.

Burton wants chief critics to be “very cautious” now, and to avoid thinking they have won some great victory when what they have really won was the most visible, but not necessarily the most important, battle.

Native American groups — at Illinois and elsewhere — took a similar approach. [A statement from the Native American House at Illinois](#) praised the decision, but added that “we know that retiring the performance of the mascot does not solve campus climate issues, and we will continue to work with the campus and the community to address misinformation and miseducation about indigenous peoples, histories, and cultures.”

The Oglala Sioux Tribe also praised the decision, but [reiterated its demand](#) that the regalia used by Chief Illiniwek be returned. The university has said that it purchased or was given various Sioux items used in the mascot’s performances, but tribal leaders say that they originally thought the university was borrowing items for use in historically accurate portrayals of their tribe, not for what the tribal board has called “the antics of persons playing ‘Chief Illiniwek’ ” in a way that “perpetuates a degrading racial stereotype that reflects negatively on all American Indian people.” (The university says that it hasn’t decided what it will do with the regalia.)

Supporters of the chief are not giving up their fight. Students who portray the chief were in state court on Friday trying to obtain an injunction to prevent the university from ending use of the mascot or the NCAA from pressuring it to do so. The students won sympathy, but not their desired injunction. [An account of the hearing](#) in a local paper quoted Judge Michael Jones as saying that the university had the option of suing the NCAA and made a decision not to. “Right or wrong, this is their call,” he said.

Where Jones was most sympathetic to the students was on their charge that the NCAA is hypocritical in permitting some institutions (such as Florida State University) to keep Indian mascots because they have backing from tribal leaders, while forcing Illinois and others to change.

“It’s an easy sell that enforcement of the policy is arbitrary and capricious,” the judge was quoted as saying. “They don’t wish to associate with members who use Native American imagery, unless, of course, they do.”

Supporters of the chief are studying additional legal options and standing by their tradition.

Pal Schmitt, a sophomore who is vice president of Students for Chief Illiniwek, grew up in central Illinois, coming to sporting events as a child and growing to love the tradition of the chief. “It’s something that outsiders of the university or people who aren’t of the state don’t understand,” he said. “Seeing the performance, you get the sense of dignity, of bravery, spirit, honor. It does really embody those things.”

Asked if the feelings of Native Americans should come into play, he said “of course,” but he said that “this is much bigger than race” and that both sides of the debate have ignored the issues raised by the other side. “Both sides are very guilty,” he said. “Those who are against it instantly brand anyone who would support it as a racist, and those who support it shrug off those concerns.”

Schmitt said that his message to an American Indian would be: “I’m sorry we can’t get the same inspiration out of it, but you need to look at the greater good that it is doing.”

Supporters of the chief stress that they love Native Americans and their culture. Jean Edwards, who graduated

in 1953 and is treasurer of the [Honor the Chief Society](#), has been working on the issue for 18 years, ever since opposition to the mascot started to grow. She said Friday that she was “heartbroken” and didn’t understand how supporters of the chief were seen as insensitive to American Indians.

The chief “has been giving something to the Native Americans that they haven’t had before — all these people who were interested in learning more” after seeing a performance. She said that she and her colleagues all feel great respect for Indian culture. “I’ve always like Native Americans. I have lived in Illinois all my life. Every summer growing up I went to Wisconsin and lived next door to a wonderful Native American couple. I bought a lot of jewelry. We went to a lot of pow-wows together,” she said. “I never thought of anyone not accepting them at all.”

She blamed the controversy on efforts to recruit Native American students. “There was this professor who wanted to get more Native American students to come to school here, so every year it got more and more important” for faculty members to talk about the chief, she said.

Edwards predicted that many alumni will stop giving. “I think the impact will be financial. There are people who honest to goodness believe that they will not give again,” she said.

That belief is shared by many at Illinois, even some critics of Chief Illiniwek who have said over the years that the university needed to find a way to prevent an alumni revolt. The irony is that most available evidence suggests that universities that move away from Indian names or mascots end up doing well. At Stanford University, [the name Indians was replaced with Cardinal](#) (the color, not the bird), in 1972, and officials are proud of having made the change early, based on complaints from a small group of Native American students, but not having been forced by the NCAA or anyone else.

[The general pattern](#), according to officials at Stanford and institutions that made similar decisions, is for the noise and anger to quickly subside, except for very small groups of alumni. Richard Little, a Miami University spokesman who organized a mascot switch in 1996 (from Redskins to Redhawks), noted in a 2005 interview that the university sells more clothing now than it did with the old name, notwithstanding those fans who were upset about the change. He said that there is at least once sure way to win over most alumni: “You’ll get support for any name if you win.”

— [Scott Jaschik](#)

## Comments

### Illinois Retires Mascot for the Wrong Reasons

Lawrence Eppley, chair of the University of Illinois Board of Trustees, referring to the university’s mascot Chief Illiniwek, stated, December 2003, “Logically and historically, it is really tough to build a case for having it.” It’s likely a Boy Scout dance, at best.” ”It’s a matter of when, rather than if...Illiniwek will be retired.”

More than 3 years later, Mr. Eppley finally did what is clearly in the best interest of the university; he ended the Chief Illiniwek tradition.

However, the way the university handled the mascot issue until now has been shameful. For sixteen years the Trustees denied the singular truth at the heart of this issue: “Indians are People Not Mascots”. Appeasing those who believe otherwise and perpetuating racial stereotyping was immoral and represented a gross failure by the Trustees.

The key now is how Mr. Eppley and the university Trustees will execute this long awaited decision. The educational, moral and ethical grounds have been clear for more than a decade. Will Eppley, the Trustees and university administration have the courage to acknowledge these as the legitimate motivation for removing Illiniwek, or will they hide behind the NCAA sanctions and posit blame elsewhere? Will they demonstrate the leadership and integrity this moment calls for, or will they promote further animosity and racial polarization? For certain, ending the university's racial stereotyping of Native Americans is a huge positive act, but doing so for the right reasons could also foster a much-needed, respectful racial climate on the Champaign-Urbana campus. Unfortunately, thus far they have not taken the high road.

**Stephen Kaufman**, Professor Emritus at University of Illinois, at 8:45 am EST on February 19, 2007

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