

ATHLETICS

'Exhaustion, Confusion, and Anger': U. of Illinois Finds a Community at Odds Over Old Mascot

By Chris Quintana | SEPTEMBER 13, 2018



Warren Wimmer, Getty Images

Supporters of Chief Illiniwek, the U. of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign mascot that was retired in 2007, hold up signs at a game that year. Support for Illiniwek has persisted even a decade later, and left the university struggling to move on.

The University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign has a problem. Its long-retired mascot — an image of a fictional Native American leader known as Chief Illiniwek — continues to divide the community. Almost anyone in the small Midwestern town could have told you as much, but a new report commissioned by the university's chancellor, Robert J. Jones, confirmed that fact again.

"That there is still a need to have these conversations so many years later could be seen as a deficit of resolve or an unwillingness to act, as some have suggested," the report says. "There is undeniably a shared sense of exhaustion, confusion, and anger that we are not further along in the process."

The report is the distillation of a series of "critical conversations," convened by Jones, that involved more than 600 people. They were meant to "lead us to solutions that improve the climate for everyone in ways that lead to a cohesive, collaborative, and welcoming community."

The report, among other things, calls on the university to:

- Consider adopting a new mascot or set of traditions.
- Educate students, faculty, staff, and alumni about the history of Native Americans in Illinois.
- Document the history of Native American imagery on the campus.

It also notes, in conclusion, the conversation participants' pride in the university and their willingness "to come together in community."

Chief Illiniwek for decades was the official image of the university. But in 2005 the National Collegiate Athletic Association started pushing universities to retire their use of "hostile or abusive" Native American mascots.

The NCAA decided Illiniwek fell into that category, and the university retired the chief in 2007 at a packed stadium of crying fans. Not surprisingly, fans of Illiniwek didn't move on.

Some even took it upon themselves to wear a mock-up of the chief's attire at basketball games. He is often greeted with cheers. And at many sporting events in Champaign, you can spot fans in traffic-cone-orange T-shirts or jackets emblazoned with the feathered-headaddress image of Chief Illiniwek.

The image is also periodically the subject of protest. In October 2017, Illiniwek critics rallied to disrupt a homecoming parade. Activists have protested outside basketball games and started campaigns that offer new university memorabilia in exchange for old gear featuring the chief. Despite the support for Illiniwek, Jones has again and again said the image will not be coming back.

The report describes a community at odds with itself. And often the only thing the chief's critics and defenders agree on is that the university's response was and remains lacking.

"Most people familiar with the issue felt alienated by the institution's response over the past 11 years," the report says. The committee in charge of reviewing the Illiniwek issue, which prepared the report, used it to again suggest that the university adopt a new image to represent itself. That's been a common cry from critics who say the institution's failure to choose a new symbol after retiring Illiniwek has prevented the community from moving past the chief.

The committee said that "exploration of advantages and disadvantages of a variety of new traditions, potentially including a mascot, must be seriously undertaken — as one piece of the larger response to Native imagery at the University of Illinois."

That is familiar talk to members of the university community. In 2016 the interim chancellor, Barbara J. Wilson, talked about starting the selection process for a committee that would pick a new mascot. That still hasn't happened.

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