

Chiefs, Braves, and Tomahawks: The Use of American Indians as University Mascots

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Many colleges continue to use Native American¹ images as their mascots despite mounting calls to cease this practice. Attempts to change these mascots have not always been successful because of the deep support these mascots and images engender. Using a postcolonial critical framework, the authors discuss the various justifications given for using Native American images as mascots, describe the effect their continued use has, and urge action to effect change that is educationally, politically and culturally sound.

Resolutions to ban Indian mascots and logos have come from (among other organizations) the American Indian Education Association, the National Education Association, United Indians Nation of Oklahoma, National Congress of American Indians, the American Indian Movement, National Rainbow Coalition, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, and the Center for Study of Sports in

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1. The authors recognize the complexity of “naming” and in respect to the many beliefs about the right to self-name, use the terms “Native-American,” “Indian,” “American Indian,” and “Indigenous People” interchangeably.

Society (Pewerardy, 2000). In an editorial the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Minority Opportunities and Interests Committee came out in support of the elimination of Indian names and mascots as symbols for sports teams (Whitcomb, 1998). Additionally, in April of 2001, the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights also called for an end to the use of Indian names. Missing from this list, however, are any college student personnel organizations. Perhaps it is because we, too, accept the argument that these mascots honor Native Americans. Perhaps we do not see the potential damage our lack of action has on our campuses. Or are we hesitant to openly critique our colleagues and our employers? Student affairs offices need to take a more active role in educating people about why use of these mascots and images is inappropriate. First, however, we need to educate ourselves about why this is so. This paper (1) discusses the various justifications given for the use of Native American images as mascots; (2) describes the effect their continued use has on Indians, non-Indians, and universities; and (3) suggests the necessity for support of and action to effect change that is educationally, politically, and culturally sound.

We have entered into this project through a postcolonial theoretical framework. This framework describes how the political, social, cultural, and psychological operations of colonialist ideologies work to maintain hierarchies in society (Tyson, 1999). This lens can help explain the power of mascots as symbols and rituals and more specifically, the implications of using Native Americans as mascots. As McLaren (1999) explains the inherent risks of symbols and rituals:

The most enduring of rituals are able to draw essential symbols into an inclusive totality and self-subsistent whole that can sustain itself while enabling those symbols to maintain their difference from others, yet at the same time harmonizing with them and complementing them. (p. xiv)

In this instance, while mascots can facilitate our “rallying behind” the image, we hope to show that given the disembodiment of Indian-ness from the image of an Indian mascot runs the risk of continuing to “other” a nondominant culture in society and maintains the groups’ status in society.

The Arguments for Indian Mascots

The argument supporting the use of Native Americans as mascots falls into three broad categories—tradition, money, and broader societal support. Those who favor using Native Americans as mascots argue the mascots honor and celebrate Indians (Dawn Marie Neeson, Students for Chief Illiniwek, April 4, 2000; Vanderford, 1996). Supporters feel that their mascot is part of the school's tradition, and changing the mascot is simply giving in to politically correct pressure groups (Students for Chief Illiniwek). However, others argue, and we concur, that mascot support, like other examples of stereotyping, is also linked to emotional and economic arguments and a long history of society-sponsored racism (Pewewardy, 2000; Whitt, 1995; Rouse & Hansen, 1991).

Emotionally, mascots appeal to a sense of “tradition” and the pride in and affiliation with an institution that administrators and faculty work hard to cultivate. A common assumption is that to take a mascot away is to undermine the traditions that have been developed over the years. However, the following cases demonstrate that the origins of these mascots were harmless or unintentional.

In 1926, assistant band director Ray Dvarak of the University of Illinois conceived of the idea of performing an American Indian dance during halftime of the Illinois–Pennsylvania football game in Philadelphia (Students for Chief Illinewek, 2000). The University of Illinois football coach at the time suggested calling the Indian symbol Chief Illinewek. Chief Illinewek ran onto the field “doing a lively Indian dance,” saluted the Pennsylvania rooters and then smoked a peace pipe with William Penn (impersonated by another University of Illinois student). The crowd loved it and a tradition was born. The Chief has appeared at halftime of every home University of Illinois football game ever since.

A second example, at Central Michigan University, the school's mascot appeared in 1925 as a dragon. Then, in 1927 “a drive began to adopt a new and more official name for the athletic teams that could be used in write-ups and cheers” (Central Michigan University, Official Athletic Site, 2000). As a result, the mascot was changed to the Bearcat. However, in 1941, Central's football coach went to the stu-

dent council with an idea he had of changing the mascot to the “Chippewa’s,” for the Indian tribes that were once scattered about the region. He argued that:

The name “Chippewa” opens up unlimited opportunities for pageantry and showmanship for the band as well as athletic teams. The Indian Chief would be an outstanding marker for athletic uniforms, the Indian pow-wow could replace the pep meeting and Indian ceremonies could be conducted on many occasions. School flags could be made much more attractive and finally all types of Indian lore have a strong appeal and could be used to great advantage. (p. 2)

Media depictions and educational misrepresentations are likely to contribute to widespread stereotyping about Native American peoples. The appeal to stereotypical notions in using Indians, Chiefs, Braves, and so forth is evident in these examples. For coaches and players the idea that they could be “braves” or “chiefs” is prominent. Appeals to stereotypes can be seen in the dance, the music, and the symbols used by these mascots. As we have noted, this did not go unnoticed by the individuals in charge.

Economically, these mascots make it easy to sell goods because their stereotypical symbols appeal to alumni, students, and community supporters. The logos and related goods make use of the mascot, and “spin-offs” on the Native American motif are easily manipulated to continually develop new products to sell. The tie-in for other university departments, such as development offices, is clear as well. At Arkansas State University, for example, the booster club is called the “Indians Club” and there is a separate club for kids called the “Lil’ Indians Club.” According to the Indians Club scholarship fund, for \$100 one can become a “Brave” and for \$250 one can become a “Chief” (ASUIndians.com, 2001).

Changing the mascot, according to supporters, has the potential to negatively affect giving. There is no question that any change that can be perceived as having the potential for harming alumni giving must be cautiously approached. Colleges and universities are dependent on alumni giving, so curtailment of giving would harm students, staff, and faculty alike.

Universities are not alone in their racialized representations of indigenous people for profit, and they may be seen as reflecting societal norms. The dominant culture in the United States has long sanctioned racially harmful behaviors towards Native Americans (Pewewardy, 2000; Deloria, 1998). Deloria's work provides many more specific examples throughout the history of America, including the savage Indian image to facilitate the removal of Indians from the east coast in early American times. The Puritan view of Indians as a morally and spiritually inferior people helped justify U.S. expansion and the expropriation of Indian land (Segal & Stineback, 1977). Ethnic identity was (and is) political and economic and defined (defines) boundaries that set groups apart. In times of strife, stereotypical images can arise to help one group gain an advantage over another. By portraying Native Americans as savages or heathens, white Americans established a feeling that Indians were "less worthy" and gained the backing of the majority of Americans. In areas where competition over economic resources is present or in times of conflict or competition, the intentional negative and self-serving stereotyping of Native Americans continues (Boxberger, 1989) and can become exaggerated (Rouse & Hanson, 1991). If the stereotyping is intentional, as Rouse and Hanson (1991), Boxberger (1989), and Segal and Stineback (1977) feel it is, could it be that supporters of these "traditions" feel it is important that the dominant culture think of Native Americans as an extinguished culture/civilization so that they can profit from the marketing of Native America? With this in mind it is important to consider what purpose(s), intended or otherwise, the continued use of Native American mascots serves.

Deconstructing Pleas to Posterity

As stated earlier, there seem to be three major points to the supporters' arguments for maintaining images of Native Americans for mascots. The preponderance of the evidence in this area seems to negate these assumptions. We take time here to rebut the supporters' claims. Given the recent history of some of these mascots, it could be argued that the "tradition" argument is not as solid as supporters would have us believe. At the University of Miami-Ohio (RedHawks Online, 2000), the name "Redskins" first appeared in the school paper in 1928

with little notice. It wasn't until 1931, when the University's lone publicity man announced the new nickname, that it became permanent.

Since many colleges and universities have changed mascots over the years, the precedent for changing mascots has been established. Besides the University of Miami-Ohio, other universities who have changed their Indian mascots include St. John's University (Redstorm), Shippensburg University (Ship), and Stanford University (Cardinals), to name just a few. One can also legitimately question if sports teams (including players and coaches) really need the imagery of a savage Indian to produce a winning team. There are certainly a large number of winning teams who do not use such imagery, and coaches should be sufficiently versed in the psychology of motivation that such appeals to players do not need to be made.

Beyond the appeal to tradition associated with a mascot, there are moral traditions that institutions like to foster and maintain. Among these are the beliefs embraced by the organizations and associations with whom universities affiliate. For example, the NCAA has a commitment to ethnic student welfare. In a guest editorial for the NCAA News, Charles Whitcomb (1998), chair of the NCAA Minority Opportunities and Interests Committee, wrote:

Member institutions with Indian mascots that present Indian caricatures and mimic ceremonial rites do not comply with the NCAA's commitment to ethnic student welfare. . .these mascots are perpetuating negative stereotypes of an ethnic group and diminishing the right and opportunity of Native Americans to appropriately identify their culture. It is simply another form of institutional racism. (p. 2)

One explanation for the continued use of Native American mascots relates to the marketing of Native America—particularly the images, symbols, and spirituality of the culture. This is an example of what Whitt (1995) calls cultural imperialism.

When the spiritual knowledge, rituals, and objects of historically subordinated cultures are transformed into commodities, economic and political power merge to produce cultural imperialism. A form of oppression exerted by a dominant society

upon other cultures, and typically a source of economic profit, cultural imperialism secures and deepens the subordinated status of those cultures. (p. 3)

Whitt argues that it is inconsequential if the behavior is unconscious or intentional since the results are the same: extending the political power, securing the social control, and furthering the economic profit of the dominant culture.

The reasons for the initial selection of Native Americans as mascots appear to be as much an economic and marketing gimmick as anything else. There is no doubt that now, under a G.W. Bush administration, more than ever higher education institutions will be facing budget constraints. Every dollar is important to colleges and universities. We do not want to under-represent the importance of fiscal concerns, or the high-stakes nature of these concerns. In this regard two recent incidents involving Indian mascots stand out.

At the University of North Dakota, an alumnus threatened to withhold a \$100 million contribution he had pledged for the purpose of building the school a new hockey arena, if the school changed its “Fighting Sioux” mascot (Brownstein, 2001). The president of the University of North Dakota, responding to concerns about the mascot, had formed a committee, which met for five months, to look into the controversy. It appeared that the president was open to phasing out the name but, when the supporter threatened to withhold his pledge, the schools’ board of trustees unanimously voted to keep the mascot. Here the lack of action appears to have yielded at least a short-term economic benefit for the institution.

On the other side, the University of Miami-Ohio did take action to change their mascot and does not appear to have suffered from a decline in alumni support and giving—which some schools explain is a reason not to drop their Indian mascots. According to Senior Communications Director Richard Little, the University of Miami-Ohio trustees decided to change the mascot so that their incoming president would not have to contend with what had become a contentious issue (personal communication, March 3, 2000). In the fall of 1996, the University of Miami-Ohio changed their Redskin mascot to the RedHawk. One trustee resigned over the issue, but Mr. Little con-

tended that there is no data to support the contention that the change has hurt the institution financially.

Given the problems of using Indian mascots as outlined in this article, why would anyone select them as mascots and why do we as spectators and fans support them? One explanation may be that those who created the mascot symbol did not see it as stereotypical or racist in nature. It is only now, with the advantage of years of knowledge and experience, that people are beginning to see these symbols as wrong (Delgado & Stefancic, 1992). Dennis (1981) contends that people engage in racist behavior because they are reasonably sure that there is support for it; and since many of these mascots were created when overt racist acts were common in this country, it should not be altogether surprising that no one spoke up against the use of Indian mascots at the time. In many ways, this reinforces Davis (1989), who says that humans categorize other humans to make sense of their world. Those who initially chose the American Indian mascots were responding to the category they had placed Native Americans into as a result of their own experiences vis-à-vis popular culture and traditional education. Their experiences were rarely firsthand interactions with Native Americans. Little concern was given to whether the mascots selected were portraying a stereotype that could fan the flames of racism or discrimination.²

Although some people who support Indian mascots claim that the mascots honor Indians, with little appreciation given for tribal customs or reality, schools have created their own image of the "Indian." That it is a false image never penetrates the mind of the halftime spectators, since it simply reinforces the mascot they learned in the classrooms and textbooks (Trimble, 1988). Spectators who witness the mascot accept the mascot unconditionally since it reinforces their categorization. Further, since this categorization is subconscious, attempts to un-learn it and confront it are met with defensiveness, hostility, and an unwillingness to consider the possibility that the categorization may result in racist or biased behavior.

2. In the United States alone there are currently 556 federally recognized 'tribal entities' eligible for federal funds (Department of the Interior, 2000).

Risks in Doing and Not Doing

According to the documentary “In Whose Honor” (Rosenstein, 1997), the national protest movement against the use of Native American mascots began at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign in 1987 by Charlene Teeters. Teeters, a Spokane Indian, was a graduate student at the University of Illinois and attended a football game where the University’s mascot, Chief Illiniwek, was present. Teeters was so appalled by the depiction of Native Americans by this mascot—and by the other fans acting as Indians—that she decided to return the following Saturday to protest Chief Illiniwek.

The bastardization of traditional and sacred practices is not limited to Chief Illiniwek. Flutes, whistles, and drums are important in Native American ceremonies and are even considered to be spiritual in nature. The use of these instruments and the music that accompanies a mascot performing at a halftime show trivializes their importance and is out of place on the playing field. The wearing of feathers, buckskin, and war paint all lend themselves to an imagery that degrades Native Americans and their culture and distorts people’s perceptions. The symbols mascots use—tomahawks, spears, war whoops, and headdresses—also are a stereotyped vision of Native Americans as savages—and certainly not as a people who are among us today (Pewewardy, 1992). All of these images prevent the dominant culture from understanding the historical and current culture of indigenous people. Since the mascot image simply reinforces or affirms our stereotype, the image must have been implanted earlier in our lives. The films we watch and the books we read have grouped Indians into four groups: the noble savage, the generic Indian, the living fossil, and the savage. While serious efforts have been made to raise our collective consciousness, many of these efforts have been undermined by the superficial treatment they receive in school (Charles, 1993).

In their study among college students at the University of Texas, University of Wisconsin-LaCrosse, and University of North Dakota, Rouse and Hanson (1991) sought to determine if students at the University of North Dakota and University of Wisconsin had more factual knowledge about Native Americans due to their relative close proximity to Indian Reservations, than students at the University of Texas, which is not near a reservation. Their study showed no statisti-

cal differences among the students' factual knowledge of Native Americans or in the cultural stereotypes they held about Native Americans. These stereotypes were not always negative, but they were inaccurate. Further, the University of Wisconsin and University of North Dakota students held greater negative personal stereotypes (Indians are lazy, weak, undependable, unpatriotic), felt that Indians were to blame for their own problems, and were less likely to favor self-determination for Indians. This study also showed that all three samples received most of their information about Native Americans from TV and movies, and that their high school curriculums had, on average, 1.46 books on Native Americans. What this study shows is that while a lack of visibility may contribute to ignorance about a minority group, higher visibility may not dispel these biases. Native American mascots contribute to the problem by playing to the stereotypes that people hold about Native Americans.

It is our belief that given the educational mission of colleges and universities, people who work at them cannot ignore this use of oppressive images. The costs are too high.

Conclusion

There are several ways that student affairs professionals can protest the use of Indian mascots. First and foremost, we as student affairs professionals can educate ourselves and then act as educators of students, faculty, and staff about the developmental, community, institutional, and antipluralistic effects of using Native Americans as mascots. As individuals, we need to stop lending our support to their continued use. We should not wear clothing with Indian images as logos, displaying these mascots in our offices or using them for publicity. Rather than referring to teams as "Redskins" or "Warriors," we can refer to them as "the Florida State team" or the "University of Illinois team." We should not participate in culturally demeaning actions such as the tomahawk chop or "war chants." At a recent conference of the Southern Association of College Student Affairs (SACSA), a major speaker from Florida State University led the crowd in the tomahawk chop—and many participated enthusiastically. We can each show our disapproval through letters to the president, the board of trustees, the director of athletics, and alumni, informing them that we do not sup-

port the use of Indian mascots. Those of us who are responsible for educational programming on campus can make use of resources like “In Whose Honor?” (Rosenstein, 1997) or invite guest speakers to teach students about this issue. These are steps all of us can take whether or not we work at a school with an Indian mascot. Those of us at school without these mascots, have a responsibility to a broader community, which includes lending our support to organizations addressing the mascot issue. It is not inappropriate for universities to take a leadership role in this oppressive practice. NASPA and other student affairs organizations should weigh in on the issue as well by passing a resolution urging all colleges and universities to discontinue the use of Indian mascots. The use of school mascots is an issue that needs to be addressed by student affairs; and with a new millennium upon us, now is the time.

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