



STUDENT SENATE

UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS AT URBANA-CHAMPAIGN

CA.2016.19
April 3, 2016

ILLINOIS STUDENT SENATE
TWELFTH ASSEMBLY

AUTHOR: CO-CHAIRS OF THE AD-HOC COMMITTEE ON THE EXPLORATION OF A UNIVERSITY MASCOT ALEX VILLANUEVA AND MARK SCHAER

SPONSORS: Treasurer Rahul Kalluri, Senator Rahul Raju

APPROVAL FOR ACTION: Recommendation to pass with a vote of 7-0-1.

The Illinois Student Senate Supports the Findings of the Ad-Hoc Committee on the Exploration of a University Mascot

Whereas, the Ad-Hoc Committee on the Exploration of a University Mascot reached out to students, faculty, staff, alumni, and the local community, to gauge their opinion on the potential of choosing a mascot for the University of Illinois, and;

Whereas, the committee synthesized the views of these different stakeholder groups to fully understand the benefits and costs of adopting a mascot, and;

Whereas, the Ad-Hoc Committee has found that it would be most beneficial for the University of Illinois at this time to move forward with the process of picking a mascot, and;

Whereas, the Illinois Student Senate is the official voice of the student body,

Therefore, let it be resolved, the Illinois Student Senate supports and agrees with the findings in the Final Report from the Ad-Hoc Committee on the Exploration of a University Mascot, and;

Let it finally be resolved, a copy of this resolution and the Ad-Hoc Committee's report be sent to the Office of the Chancellor, the Office of the Dean of Students, the Campus Senate, the University of Illinois Board of Trustees, Illini Media Company, WDWS Newsroom, *Chicago Tribune*, and *The News-Gazette*.



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Ad-Hoc Committee on the Exploration of a University Mascot Twelfth Session of the Illinois Student Senate

Final Report

I. Introduction

In September 2015, Student Senators Alex Villanueva, Mark Schaer, Glen Nemitz and Rahul Kalluri discussed the idea of a first-ever mascot for the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Over the course of the next few months, the four of them developed their ideas and decided to form an Ad-Hoc Committee within the Illinois Student Senate (ISS) to investigate this matter. The Committee was created after a vote of the Student Senate on October 10, 2015 and Alex Villanueva and Mark Schaer were appointed as co-chairs.

In January, applications for the Committee were sent out and in February, twelve other members were appointed to the Committee. Ivan A. Dozier, Rahul Raju, Jacob Sigmon, Ariana Wilson, Karen Chen, Joshua Manning, Alex Riley, Amorita Antoine-Falcon, Virupaksh Agrawal, Andrew Rudolph, and Krish Patel were appointed as voting members and Rahul Kalluri, the Student Body Treasurer was appointed as an *ex-officio* non-voting member from the executive board of the ISS. The Committee held its first meeting on February 26, 2016 as an organizational meeting. Five other meetings were held through April 8, 2016.

The following report will outline the methods through which the Committee conducted its meetings, the issues that were analyzed, and the Committee's decision of whether or not the University should put in place a process to select a mascot.

II. About the Process

Each meeting was open for public comment by any member of the community. Following public comment, Committee members were given the opportunity to speak, but were asked to refrain from expressing their personal opinions. Each meeting was geared toward specific stakeholder groups, listed below in the next section of this report. The stakeholders' speaking time was limited based upon attendance, however, there were no restrictions on topic or content, besides maintaining relevance to the purview of the Committee. The focus of each meeting was to see how members of each stakeholder group felt about the question(s): "Do you believe the University should put in place a process to select a mascot? Why or why not?". Stakeholders who were unable to speak at the meetings were invited to provide written testimony via e-mail, which was directly conveyed to the members of the Committee.



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Committee members stressed that meetings were in order to hear individual opinions and were not to debate with others in the room. As such, direct targeting of other speakers or arguing against specific points of previous comments would not be allowed. Each stakeholder group was encouraged to express and share their thoughts on the issue. A conscious attempt was made to create an environment where those belonging to a wide range of viewpoints were welcome.

The former symbol of the University of Illinois, Chief Illiniwek, was addressed, but the Committee stressed that Chief Illiniwek should not dominate the conversation. It was the official interpretation of the Committee that Chief Illiniwek was a symbol, as opposed to a mascot. Furthermore, the Committee's goal was to determine whether the University of Illinois and the relevant stakeholders were ready for their first-ever mascot.

The Committee also stressed that it is outside the purview of its mission to debate the school's nickname of "Fighting Illini". In addition, traditions such as the "Three-in-One," as well as the University's production and retail of Native imagery were deemed outside the scope of this Committee.

III. Stakeholder Comment

- a. *Students*: Meetings focused on current students at the University of Illinois occurred on March 4th and April 8th. The first meeting was held in the Student Services Arcade Building Conference Room at 5pm. There were over forty students in attendance. Notable representation included individuals affiliated with the Native American and Indigenous Student Organization (NAISO) and the Marching Illini. On April 8th, in the Illini Union Room 314A, over 80 students were in attendance. Many individuals who gave testimonials were affiliated with NAISO, Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlan (MEChA) and members of the LGBT+ community. Members of Students for Chief Illiniwek (SFCI) and local Greek organizations were present as well, including the current unofficial Chief Illiniwek portrayer and assistant portrayer.

For those who were in favor of the process for moving forward in selecting a mascot, general sentiment suggested that without a mascot, the imagery of the Chief was perpetuated, instilling a sense of hostility and hurtfulness, particularly against a majority of those who identified as Native American. Many students voiced that they were empathetic towards students who felt uncomfortable seeing this imagery because of their identities. Without an official mascot, students described a void in which they were targets of racial discrimination. These students voiced that a mascot could bring students together and increase enrollment and presence of minority students by making it a more inviting environment for current and future students. One student expressed that she wants a mascot that would appreciate the rich tradition, legacy, and greatness of the University and that it would be possible to capture all of that without being offensive.



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Other comments included that it was a good time for this discussion, since there have been many other changes, including a new athletic and academic administration. Additionally, individuals expressed concern that students are currently experiencing acts of discrimination. Although a mascot cannot fix these issues, it could be a step toward creating a safer environment for all students. One speaker said, “It would be nice to have something to gather behind so no one has to feel hated or unsafe.” Students also affirmed that a mascot would be critical to building a strong brand for the University of Illinois and in enhancing the University’s global reputation. Additionally, some students suggested that having a mascot would be a potential for marketing as it “would appeal to fans and bring people to University of Illinois events”.

Those against the process did not believe the University needed a mascot. For the nine years since Chief Illiniwek has been retired, the lack of a mascot was acceptable, and it was their opinion that fans would rather not be forced to adopt a mascot at all. “What we need is a compromise...there are people on both ends of the spectrum and right now this [not having any sort of physical representation of a mascot or symbol] is the closest to a middle ground that we will find” said a senior in the College of ACES. Additionally, members of the Marching Illini - including some who were in favor of a mascot search process - were concerned about possibly opening the door for more drastic changes to other game-day traditions. Others thought that introducing a mascot could worsen the current situation, exacerbating the divide experienced by fans and stakeholders of the University. Some expressed a feeling that those against the Chief did not understand the culture behind the former symbol. Further students mentioned that the voices of previous student initiatives were being consciously ignored. Finally, many felt that a mascot would trivialize the proper spirit and dignity to which the University should be held.

The overall impression from student stakeholders is that a majority of those who testified were in favor of the initiative, though there was a substantial student presence against the idea as well.

- b. *Faculty & Staff:* The meeting focused on faculty and staff was held on March 11, 2016 in Illini Union Room 407. Over forty individuals were in attendance. For those who were in favor of the process for moving forward in selecting a mascot, a strong emphasis was placed on the exclusionary nature of the prior symbol of the University and the offensive nature it was associated with by members of the campus community. Research by the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) and American Psychological Association (APA) regarding the negative effects of Native imagery was cited several times. The research stated that the use of Native American symbolism can be disturbing, insulting, and affirming of negative stereotypes. That symbolism has also been linked to counterproductivity in education surrounding Native American culture. In addition, multiple staff members expressed hesitation to expose their children to the divisive environment on campus. Several noted their frustration at the length of the process of getting a mascot and called for urgent action. The recent changes within the Division of



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Intercollegiate Athletics (DIA), as well as the upcoming sesquicentennial were mentioned as further arguments for the timeliness of this process. Some faculty and staff pointed out the success of re-branding at other universities following the retirement of similar Native American imagery and believed that a mascot could provide a unifying emblem for the University. One specific faculty member stated “campuses use symbols [as a] primary function to bring people together and create unity” and it was a mistake “to not immediately move to a new symbol...to rally around.” A University Housing staff member also referred to their experience at a national conference, where Illinois was referred to as “the University with the mascot issues.”.

Those that testified against the process expressed a need to recognize the influences of Native peoples, especially in a state that bears a Native-based name. Furthermore, the recent court decision made in regards to Washington D.C.'s National Football League team was highlighted as a possibly relevant precedent. One particular professor wrote a letter to the *News-Gazette* about how a mascot is not needed here at the University of Illinois, saying that any “physical instantiation...cheapens our experience and narrows our imagination.”

The overall impression was that the faculty and staff are overwhelmingly in favor of a process to select a mascot. It should be noted that many faculty acknowledged their mission of supporting students and their decisions.

- c. *Alumni & Community:* The meeting that focused on alumni and community members was held on March 18th, 2016. The meeting was held in the Illini Union I-Room B. Those who were in favor of the process for selecting a mascot included recent graduates who wished that they had a mascot to increase school spirit and have something to rally behind. One 2015 graduate expressed that he was disappointed in his experiences of attending athletic events due to the lack of a mascot. He referenced alumni describing high attendance at games and significant school spirit which he wished to have seen during his time at Illinois. Many alumni in favor of moving forward requested that the mascot should be something that is representative of the exceptional qualities of the University and that it should not be offensive to any people or group of peoples. Some alumni that emailed the Committee in support of selecting a mascot wanted to move on, in belief that the return of Chief Illiniwek is not an option. One alum said, “I urge you to find a mascot that can delight children and fans - one that amuses us rather than divides us.” Another said, “The Chief provided alums with many wonderful memories, but he is no longer around. Think of all the memories we are not having without a mascot.” Retailers including affiliates with T.I.S. Bookstore and the Illini Union Bookstore stated that sales and revenue would both increase should a mascot be selected and that it would benefit not only their businesses but also the University, who would receive income from these sales as well. As one employee of T.I.S. Bookstore put it, “Everyone wins when there is a well-thought out mascot. Fans have additional clothing options and can get behind the mascot, retailers have additional sales, and the University increases income.”



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Additionally, a student from a local middle school suggested that having a mascot figure for younger fans would be fun and interactive.

For those against the process, some expressed disappointment in the way the Chief's retirement was handled and that many community members felt underrepresented and unsatisfied in regards to the Chief's retirement. Additionally, one Native alum described the Chief's retirement as a "missed opportunity" to reach and subsequently educate members of the community who felt strongly about the former symbol. He also expressed concern for the first amendment implications of attempting to eliminate associated symbolism and music. Another local member expressed concern for how pro-Chief students were treated on campus, saying that there was a limited support network to students who were unwilling to accept a first-ever mascot. Several alumni felt concerned that moving forward with a mascot could open the door for other longstanding traditions to be challenged. Alumni were concerned about their representation in the decision making process: One community member commented: "I find that the loudest voices we've seen are for a new mascot, however I don't believe this is representative of the community. I say this with utmost confidence that those that honor a tradition lasting nearly a hundred years are abundant on this campus and don't feel a need to comment further what they have already expressed time and again."

Overall impressions from these stakeholders is that a majority of alumni and community members are opposed to the initiative, while a substantial portion including the retailers who gave testimonials, would like to see a process begin. Of those that were in attendance at the meeting, opinions appeared to be split. However, the large majority became apparent through e-mail testimonials, though not observed directly at the stakeholder meeting.

- d. *Athletes, Band, & DIA*: The meeting focused on athletes, band members, and DIA affiliates was held on April 1st, 2016 in Illini Union Room 104. The student in favor of the process for selecting a mascot believed that the University is at a crossroads in athletics and that a lot of change is happening. He affirmed that the campus community must be included with the process and given a chance to provide input. He also conveyed that some believed existing imagery, including the Block I and the Victory Shield, needed to be incorporated or related to a new mascot if one is chosen.

No one present testified against the process to select a mascot.

The co-chairs of the Committee also attended the Student Athletic Advisory Committee (SAAC) meeting in the Varsity Room at Memorial Stadium on April 4, 2016. The SAAC includes two members of each varsity athletic team. After discussing what the Committee had been working on and posing the question of a mascot to the athletes present, all of them were in favor of a process being put in place. Although no athletes present opposed the proposal, one member raised the concern that the mascot needs to be representative



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and meaningful to the University. The individual also voiced concerns about a mascot being chosen that might be trivial or uninspiring and that the difficulty of making a choice that would be relevant to our state and school history.

The overall impression from these stakeholders is that the student-athletes and DIA would be supportive and excited for a process to find a mascot that would reinvigorate the gameday environment, but were concerned about a mascot that could trivialize the University's image or worsen the current campus atmosphere rather than heal it.

IV. Committee Deliberation

After hearing testimony from the aforementioned stakeholders on April 8th, the Committee deliberated on reactions and thoughts being taken into account. Committee members discussed the following thoughts, concerns, and impressions:

- a. *Public Response:* The Committee stressed that any mascot selected should be as inoffensive as possible and special care should be taken to ensure the mascot works to foster an open and safe environment for all students and campus community members. Concerns were raised about potential fan and alumni reception of a mascot and all were in agreement that alumni engagement, as well as the engagement of each of the stakeholder groups, should be an integral part of the future decision making processes. The Committee acknowledges the difficulty in finding a mascot that can support community members who want to see a fun and light-hearted mascot, while at the same time pleasing fans who wish to see a respectful reflection of the University.
- b. *Education:* Opinions were expressed during testimonials and by the Committee members describing the need for education of the student body on issues surrounding the mascot, the former symbol of Chief Illiniwek, and the Native American history of Illinois. Concerns were raised about the availability and prevalence of unbiased information and how it may influence student and Committee opinion. The Committee believes that paired with the process to find a mascot, information representing differing sides of current and former opinion should be provided.
- c. *Marketing and Advertising:* The Committee recognizes that there would be a considerable marketing and branding advantage to selecting a mascot. First and foremost, there would be a rise in merchandise sales of University of Illinois branded products. Though not an endorsement of future adoption, discussion was held on imagery such as Sassy the Squirrel and Harold 'Red' Grange. Sassy, used by University Admissions, is meant to excite students and potential recruits. Shirts with Sassy's image have recently been sold out at the Illini Union Bookstore. Harold 'Red' Grange, used by the football program, has become a rallying point for athletes and fans. Marketing was also discussed



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as a potential tool in combating offensive imagery seen during events such as “Unofficial St. Patrick's Day”. Furthermore, marketing of a mascot would especially appeal to and make an impression on younger fans and future generations.

- d. *Campus Atmosphere:* The Committee discussed how a potential mascot might affect the atmosphere on campus and what effect it might have on school spirit, particularly surrounding athletic events. Comparisons were made to a mascot such as Bucky the Badger at the University of Wisconsin at Madison and to other schools without a mascot such as the Indiana Hoosiers. Just as Chief Illiniwek brought many alumni together and created memories and nostalgia for them, perhaps a mascot could do the same for current and future students. However, former students who attended while the Chief was active may not unite around a new image, and the lack of a mascot could stand as a veritable compromise between differing opinions. The Committee also noted the large number of students, on all sides, who felt unsafe due to the charged and divisive tone of conversation on the issue and stressed the importance of ensuring a lasting commitment to promote safety and open discourse.
- e. *Symbolic History:* The Committee recognizes the integral history and traditions of the University and that its former symbolism should be acknowledged in the discussion moving forward. The Committee realizes the reverence with which the Chief is held by some stakeholders and that any future representations should not serve to explicitly eliminate or replace the former symbol. The Committee believes that in order to allow for a respectful process, there should be an official recognition of Chief Illiniwek, its history, the affection for it, and the story of its retirement.

V. Recommendations for Moving Forward

The committee recommends that - in light of the testimony and discussions in Sections III and IV - the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign put forth a process to select a mascot. The search and implementation should consider the following points:

- a. *Inclusivity:* The Committee recognizes that moving forward with this process does not have a unanimous following. There are those stakeholders, particularly a majority of the alumni, who do not want a process to be put in place to select a mascot. If administration moves forward with putting a process in place, all stakeholders identified in this report including, but not limited to, students, alumni, faculty and staff, local community members, athletes, and Marching Illini members must be involved with the search process. This group of stakeholders should consider student representatives from different areas of campus to ensure that every side of the conversation is equally represented. The Committee also suggests that appropriate resources, such as the Counseling Center, be available to support students who may be affected by any response.



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- b. *Transparency:* Given the concerns of transparency at the University of Illinois in decision making processes, the Committee feels it is extremely important to be honest and publicly available with as much of this process as possible. If a process is to be put in place, the administration, as stated above, must include everyone while being transparent. It is critical to the coherence of the fan base of the University of Illinois and mitigates mistrust that may be present within the community.
- c. *Education:* The Committee recognizes that in moving forward, there is an opportunity and necessity for education and discussion surrounding the issues addressed. A concern was raised that the current campus environment does not provide adequate resources for students regarding Native imagery, and these inconsistencies should be addressed in moving forward, while still acknowledging the history of Illinois and the University. Education was voiced as a further opportunity for all individuals from within the Native American community to be heard, who are too often silenced and stereotyped.

VI. Conclusion

The Ad-Hoc Committee's final recommendation -approved by a vote of 9 in favor, 1 against, and 3 abstaining- is that the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign put forth a process to select a mascot. The Committee believes that such a process must be transparent and involve the input of all relevant stakeholders. In addition, the Committee urges the administration to provide for the safety of those on all sides of the issue and to provide for education and discourse on the history of those concerns, allowing for input from various sources.

Respectfully Submitted,

Alex Joseph Villanueva
Chair

Mark Schaer
Chair

April 10, 2016