

George Bengé

Gannett News Service

On the eve of Martin Luther King Jr. Day, open season has been declared on Native Americans and other people of color at settings where intolerance and hate might least be expected — at some of our foremost American colleges.

"I have a dream that one day little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers. I have a dream today."

Sadly, Dr. King's message of equality and love for all races has not connected with some students at the University of Illinois, Tufts University and Dartmouth College.

At Massachusetts' Tufts University, deemed "one of the premier universities in the United States," a vile Christmas carol titled "O Come all Ye Black Folk" ("Sung to the tune of 'O Come all Ye Faithful'") was published in The Primary Source, a "Journal of Conservative Thought."

At Dartmouth College in Hanover, N.H., loftily described by its president as "at the forefront of American higher education since 1769," a recent cover of The Dartmouth Review featured a large and offensive illustration of a Native American warrior holding aloft a grisly human scalp. A tasteless, clichéd headline with the illustration said, "The Natives are Getting Restless."

The most dangerous climate for people of color exists at the University of Illinois/Urban-Champaign, where the mission is to "serve the state, the nation, and the world by creating knowledge, preparing students for lives of impact, and addressing critical societal needs ..."

A Native American student, whose name is not being used here to protect her safety, is starting spring semester at Illinois fearful and anxious after her life was gruesomely threatened in a posting by another Illinois student on Facebook, a popular social-network Web site.

University of Illinois athletic teams have a controversial and demeaning mascot named Chief Illiniwek, and the threatened student has been an activist in the fight against the Illiniwek mascot.

On Dec. 2, 2006, on a page titled "If They Get Rid of the Chief I'm Becoming a Racist," an Illinois student wrote: "Apparently the leader of this movement is of Sioux descent. Which means what, you ask? The Sioux Indians are the ones that killed off the Illini Indians, so she's just trying to finish what her ancestors started. I say we throw a tomahawk into her face."

The hate-mongering Facebook page was yanked from the Web site after the threats were made public.

Campus police are investigating. University Chancellor Richard Herman castigated the Facebook threats as "dangerous and racist" and said he "will not tolerate such violent threats."

In an ideal world, the campus police and chancellor would steer their investigation and outrage toward the true source of the tension and intolerance — the university's powerful Board of Trustees.

I placed a phone call to trustees chairman Lawrence C. Eppley to get his reaction to the Facebook threats and to ask him if, and when, the trustees were going to dispatch Chief Illiniwek to mascot hell.

Instead, Thomas Hardy, executive director of university relations, returned my call. He answered my question in quintessential university-speak:

"The board of trustees is the entity that is going to make a determination one way or another about the future of the Chief Illiniwek tradition. The board has a consensus process under way and will continue. There is no timetable affixed to that process. At some point, the board will make a determination about what to do with the Chief Illiniwek tradition."

Let us pray that the board of trustees concludes its foot-dragging, mind-numbing, politics-driven "consensus process" in the very near future.

Doing so before an innocent Native American — or anyone else — is injured or killed at Illinois would be just fine.

George Bengé, a member of the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma, writes commentary on American Indian issues and people for Gannett News Service.

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