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Chief Illiniwek, the mascot at the University of Illinois, has been controversial for many years and it seems like his days spent rallying sports fans may be numbered. Despite attempts by campus officials to keep the Chief Illiniwek around, the National Collegiate Athletic Association has waded into the matter on Native American mascots, forcing colleges to make changes by 2008 or face penalties.

But as the mascot's demise may be imminent, the controversy has gotten uglier, and Native Americans on the Urbana-Champaign campus are demanding protection after discovering threats and racist jibes against them on a Facebook group.

"With all the volatile discussion about the mascot, while we do want people to express their views, we have to take this seriously," said Wanda S. Pillow, director of the Native American House, whose members first noticed the page last Friday. From dates on the page, it appears to have been posted since November. Pillow said that several Native American faculty members contacted Facebook and the administration over the weekend about the threats. On Tuesday, after Pillow and others circulated an e-mail to faculty members demanding an investigation, the university announced that it would conduct one.

Inside Higher Ed obtained a copy of the page which has been removed from Facebook. The page carries three postings, apparently by two students at the university. Neither student responded to an e-mail request for an interview.

With over 110 members, the group is titled "If They Get Rid of the Chief I'm Becoming a Racist" One posting 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."

Pillow confirmed that a female student who has been outspoken against Chief Illiniwek is of Sioux descent. "From the description, it's pretty obvious who this person is, and she does not want to be identified," Pillow said. She added that faculty members have contacted William Riley, dean of students and associate vice chancellor for student affairs.

Riley did not respond to numerous phone calls for comment. Tuesday night, Chancellor Richard Herman released a statement: "I do not know the motives of the students who posted the threats, but I do know that their words are dangerous and racist. The threats have been forwarded to the Office of Student Conflict Resolution for investigation and action."

Stephen Kaufman, emeritus professor of cell and developmental biology, said that he found the Facebook page offensive, especially because it targeted a specific student who happens to be a descendant of Sitting Bull. "We have an atmosphere of intimidation on this campus," he said.

Kaufman became the target of campus protest last fall when a student started an online petition rallying students to get him to resign for sending letters to high school athletes that the university was seeking to recruit. The petition against Kaufman received over 3,300 signatures.

In the letters, Kaufman and other professors apprised the recruits of the ongoing controversy with Chief Illiniwek. "[W]e ask you to take this into consideration as you make up your mind where you will pursue your college goals," stated the letter.

Robin Kaler, associate for public affairs, said that the Board of Trustees makes decisions about the mascot.

— Paul D. Thacker