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Activists rap mascot, demand cancellation of game with Illinois

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Not everyone on campus is excited about the University of Oregon men's basketball team playing No. 1-ranked Illinois on Saturday.

Student and faculty groups have met with UO officials in recent weeks to call for cancellation of the game because of Illinois' continued use of the Chief Illiniwek mascot, which some American Indians and others view as derogatory or racist.

UO officials say they've agreed to adopt a policy on the scheduling of future games with schools with offensive mascots, but won't cancel the Saturday contest - nor Illinois' return game at the Pape Jam tournament in Portland next December.

Critics say they're pleased the university has committed to such a policy, but remain frustrated that the contests with Illinois will go forward.

"The policy doesn't feel like enough," said Natasha Joseph, director of the Native American Student Union on campus. "Playing these games seem kind of in opposition to a formal policy, when they have the option to make a stance and show some integrity."

Joseph said critics remain committed to seeing next year's contest in Portland canceled if the University of Illinois is still using the Chief Illiniwek mascot.

Those critics include the UO Student Senate, which last week unanimously approved a resolution declaring the use of "indigenous sports mascots" to be a violation of the UO's mission statement and nondiscrimination policies. Student senators hope to raise the issue in the University Senate, which includes faculty, in January.

The Faculty and Staff of Color Coalition, a campus group formed in 2002, has also weighed in, calling the university's decision to proceed with the games "a dishonor and insult" to American Indians at the UO. The most ethical choice is to withdraw from the Illinois games, said coalition co-director Lynn Fujiwara.

Critics first spoke up last spring, saying they were especially troubled by the basketball contests in light of a resolution signed by about 250 students and faculty and presented to the UO administration two summers ago. The resolution urged a ban on UO teams playing nonconference foes with American Indian mascots that aren't sanctioned by a tribe.

Dan Williams, UO vice president for administration, said the university signed contracts

to play the two Illinois games believing that the mascot issue would be resolved by now.

Surprise vote

As expected, the University of Illinois board of trustees took up the issue in June - but voted 9-1 against a motion to abolish the chief mascot. In the face of strong alumni support, the board instead voted to pursue a "consensus approach" to the symbol's future.

Williams said that action caught UO officials off-guard. "We had reason to believe they were going to eliminate (the mascot) well in advance of our games," he said.

In two meetings last month with Joseph and others, Williams said he and Athletic Director Bill Moos made clear that they agree that the Illinois mascot is "quite offensive."

Williams said he's asked the university's Intercollegiate Athletics Committee to propose a policy that can be put in place by the end of the winter academic term in March.

"We set a deadline to let students know we're serious about this," he said. "We don't have any disagreement on this issue. The only point of disagreement is on canceling the games" with Illinois.

Saturday's game is a contractual arrangement between the two universities, while next year's game in Portland also involves a contract with ESPN Regional, the network that broadcasts the Pape Jam contests.

The university's business arrangement with ESPN Regional "has a lot of dimensions that we don't want to jeopardize if we don't have to," Williams said.

UI and UO officials have already decided that the Chief Illiniwek mascot - a white student dressed in Plains Indian headdress and garb - won't appear at next year's game in Portland. But he is scheduled to appear at Saturday's contest in Chicago, said UI Athletic Director Kent Brown.

Williams said the UO did not request that the mascot not appear this weekend. "I'm not sure it's our place to tell a home school what to do and not do," he said. "We would not want them telling us what to do."

Williams said a policy relating to offensive mascots would likely extend beyond American Indian imagery. What if someone objected to the Trojans, or if animal rights activists were to protest the Huskies, he asked. "We have to define what an offensive mascot is," he said.

Greg Vincent, UO vice provost for institutional equity and diversity, is expected to help craft the policy. He said academia's concerns about team mascots is not a case of political correctness run amok.

"Symbols are very powerful, and if symbols are appropriated by a university that claims to be diverse and inclusive, then the symbols need to be as inclusive as possible," he said. Vincent cited the University of Mississippi's decision to ban the Confederate flag from athletic events as an example of eradicating hurtful images.

Policy precedent

At least one campus - the University of Wisconsin - already has a policy restricting the use of visiting teams' American Indian logos and names. The policy was approved in 1993 after students and faculty voiced concerns about a home basketball game against the Alcorn State Scalping Braves (now simply the Braves).

The policy states that Wisconsin's athletic department will not schedule any regular-season game with a team using an American Indian mascot or nickname "unless the team is a traditional rival or a conference member." That escape clause pertains to Illinois, in the same Big 10 Conference as Wisconsin.

The policy also discourages visiting teams from bringing their American Indian mascots to Wisconsin venues, asks that visiting bands and cheer squads not perform war chants or Indian gestures, and says athletic wear or other souvenirs with Indian mascots or logos should not be sold on campus. Wisconsin representatives are also urged to "exert leadership" at Big 10 Conference gatherings by mentioning the policy.

The University of Wisconsin has encountered little if any controversy or backlash as a result of its policy, said David Musolf, secretary of the Wisconsin faculty.

In Illinois, the chief mascot's appearance at home contests is limited to a 4 1/2 -minute halftime show that is respectful of American Indian traditions and culminates in a mass singing of the Illinois alma mater, said Roger Huddleston, a former UI student and activist in a pro-mascot group called Honor the Chief.

The chief mascot controversy has roiled for years, with no end in sight. The UI board of trustees in September passed a resolution to preserve and celebrate the state's American Indian heritage - a move that critics quickly labeled an effort to legitimize Chief Illiniwek.

An accreditation agency report in August, meanwhile, said the university's failure to resolve the debate is evidence of failed leadership. And an appeals court in June upheld a ruling that the university violated the free speech rights of anti-mascot professors when it said they couldn't try to dissuade prospective student-athletes from attending UI without first getting permission from the athletic director.

Survey findings

Despite all the turmoil, Huddleston said he believes the chief will stay because most students, alums and other Illinois residents embrace him as a revered symbol. Most polls

on the subject, he said, show that even most American Indians are supportive of such mascots.

A survey released this fall by the University of Pennsylvania's National Annenberg Election Survey found that 90 percent of American Indians surveyed did not find the Washington Redskins football team's name to be offensive.

The survey was conducted between October 2003 and September 2004 and had a margin of error of 2 percent. More than 65,000 people were polled, including 768 who identified themselves as Native American or Indian.

Younger people, self-described liberals and those with more education and higher incomes were most likely to object to the football team moniker.

Critics say such polls aren't always accurate. "Because of the history of oppression, Native Americans might not be comfortable saying they feel it's wrong," said the UO's Joseph, a junior in psychology and a member of the Klamath Modoc tribe. "It's a lot more comfortable to say, 'I don't have an issue.' "

Renard Strickland, a UO law professor, is the author of "Tonto's Revenge," a book that delves into American Indians' images in film and sport. Because American Indians are the only ethnic group whose lives and culture are controlled by the federal government, via Congress and the Bureau of Indian Affairs, they are more susceptible to offensive stereotyping, he said.

"We think of Indian people in terms of 19th-century warriors, and we lose sight of the fact that there are now more than 3,000 Native Americans trained as lawyers," Strickland said.

Strickland said he believes the university is sincere in wanting to create a policy that distances itself from such mascots. "Twenty-five or 50 years from now, people will be appalled that we did at one time have these caricatures," he said.