

Regarding retention of the term “Fighting Illini” for UIUC athletic teams.

Trustee Plummer’s 1992 report on the Chief Illiniwek controversy suggests a possible compromise solution—to retire the mascot and the logo but retain the name “Fighting Illini.” We anticipate that this subject may arise during the Board’s discussions in the near future and so take this opportunity to document some relevant historical facts and voice some concerns expressed by members of the local Native American community and the UIUC Committee on Native American Programs that we trust will assist and inform the Board in its deliberations.

The proposed compromise will only provide a solution to the controversy if ALL references to Native American imagery can be removed from future uses of the term “Fighting Illini.” The important question is, ‘Is that possible?’ Could future uses of the term “Fighting Illini” come to refer only to UIUC athletic teams and their supporters, students and alumni, without evoking any connections to stereotypical “Indian” imagery?

Trustee Plummer suggests that retention of “Fighting Illini” is feasible because “Illini” was originally coined in 1874 as a new name for the university’s student newspaper and refers to students and alumni of the university. While this is true, his report does not document how the term “Illini” continued to evolve after 1874.

Dateline of development of “Fighting Illini”:

1874. The student newspaper changed its name from *The Student* to *The Illini* (Plummer Report 2002). Why? Because “Illini,” like *alumni*, it had a Latin ending, allowing the U of I to emulate eastern universities like Harvard. Most organizations at the University of Illinois gave themselves Greek or Latin-sounding names in this era, making reference to ancient Greek and Roman civilizations, considered the fount of western knowledge. As the University evolved and grew, however, it began to seek its own unique Midwestern identity. Influenced by the popular romantic imagery of “Wild Indians” in the media at this time, students suggested that their community was like an Indian tribe. University clubs named themselves Sachem and Ma-wan-da; club members held ceremonies in which they wrapped themselves in blankets and smoked “peace pipes;” the athletic teams were often referred to as “Indians.”
1914. “**The Tribe of the Illini**,” was established—an association of athletes who received a letter “I” for their athletic achievements. It replaced an earlier designation “Wearers of the I.” (*The Illio*, 1916, Vol. 22, p. 230).
1916. Coach Zuppke’s team of 1914 referred to as “**the Indians**” (*The Illio*, Vol. 22, p. 234).
1919. “...the **Illini jinx** seemed to haunt **the Indians** through the entire [Football] season” (*The Illio*, Vol. 25, p.246).
1921. “Since the return of the **Illini tribesmen**...on the **old hunting ground**...never have the **war-whoops** of the returning counselors... and greater glory come to **the tribe** than that brought by the **stout hearted young braves** of Zuppke in their

massacre....” (the Illio, Vol. 27, p. 149). “ **Huff’s Indians** followed in second place (*Ibid.* p. 294.)

1923. Zuppke’s **fighting Illini** beat Ohio State.... When eleven **Orange and Blue Indians fought back...** (*The Illio*, Vol. 29, p. 330).

1924. Memorial Stadium built and dedicated to Illinois students and alumni killed in WWI. Analogies were made between “**Old Illini warriors**” and the “loyal sons of Illinois” as “**spirits of departed braves**” slain in the war. (Spindel 2000, p. 77)

1926. Chief Illiniwek begins to perform at football games.

These examples illustrate that long before Chief Illiniwek was created, there was a strong link between the Illinois sports teams and American Indians. When Chief Illiniwek was introduced in 1926, it was because University of Illinois students *already* thought of their athletes as “Indians” and of themselves as a “tribe.” In 2003 many students and alumni continue to believe that the invented term “Illini” is interchangeable with “Illinois Indians.”

Given the explicit associations documented here, we believe a separation of the name from its traditional imagery and stereotypical symbolic associations would be extremely difficult, if not impossible, to achieve. In fact, if the *copyrighted* logo was removed and the name retained, the name could stimulate some athletic fans to create new “Indian” imagery over which the university had no control. This could create even worse problems for local Native American families and students and exacerbate tensions. We might end up with a “solution” that solves nothing.

By far, the preferred solution is a fresh start with a new logo and new name. We believe this course will best serve all parties and the University. We recognize that “Illini” alone is unlikely to disappear and concede its continued use as a term for students and alumni, minus Native American imagery.

However, notwithstanding the inherent shortcomings associated with “Fighting Illini”, should the Board vote to retire the mascot and logo but retain the term “Fighting Illini,” we strongly recommend the following:

1. That the Board of Trustees makes absolutely clear that the retirement of Chief Illiniwek marks a new era in which the UIUC sports programs will be free of Native American imagery or references. This would require an extensive and well-planned public relations campaign. Ideally, this campaign would also stimulate interest in a new logo and halftime performance.
2. That the University will use its full legal rights and resources to block further use of its trademarked and copyrighted property that associates Chief Illiniwek and Fighting Illini with Native Americans and recall all uses presently granted.

3. That a credible oversight committee is appointed on the UIUC campus to ensure that all Native American imagery is removed from UIUC sports programs. If, after two years, the committee determines that substantial progress has not been made, the issue of the name "Illini" would be presented to the Board again for further consideration.

We thank you for your consideration of our thoughts and recommendations on this complex problem and urge the Board to provide the leadership necessary to resolving this issue before further detriment to the University is incurred.

Yours respectfully,