

Chief Illiniwek was officially retired 13 years ago. University of Illinois is still trying to remedy his 'painful impact' on Indigenous people.

✉ **Elyssa Cherney and John Keilman, Chicago Tribune**

Wed, December 9, 2020, 4:28 AM MST

In its latest step to confront the controversial legacy of Chief Illiniwek, the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign's long-retired mascot, the school has announced new efforts to make amends, saying it will grow its American Indian Studies program and repatriate sacred artifacts to Indigenous people, among other reforms.

The wide-ranging initiative, shared Friday by Chancellor Robert Jones, follows years of intense dialogue about the use of Chief Illiniwek, whom opponents consider a racist mascot and supporters call a revered symbol.

Though U. of I. [officially banned the chief in 2007](#), his image is often spotted on apparel and a network of unsanctioned supporters has continued to don the costume of feathers, face paint and buckskin clothes at sporting events.

"It is time to implement a plan to create new traditions that reflect and include all members of our 21st century university community," Jones said in [a campus-wide email](#). "The implementation plan provides a bridge from the past to the present — to fully remember the complex intent of the tradition while also accepting responsibility for its painful impact — and a vision for the future."

In the message, Jones outlined a number of reforms that will be implemented over the next three years.

They include offering in-state tuition to students from federally recognized tribal nations, returning cultural items, artwork, human remains and funerary objects in university collections to Native people, hiring additional faculty members for the American Indian Studies program, tapping a campus historian to develop an accurate history of the school's use of Native American symbols and creating a council to develop new traditions for the student body.

The so-called "Implementation Plan on Native Imagery," however, does not address a key question at the heart of the issue: When will U. of I. adopt a new mascot? It also doesn't respond to complaints from those who consider it inappropriate to call athletic teams the Fighting Illini, a reference to a confederation of American Indians who once lived in the state.

Attempts to reach the school's American Indian Studies program for comment were not successful, though several faculty members participated in committees that devised the plan.

Several U. of I. instructors who are members of tribal nations also did not respond to inquiries. In the past, American Indians who spoke out against Chief Illiniwek received violent threats, a former professor said.

Fawn Pochel, education coordinator at the American Indian Center in Chicago, said the university's plan "does the bare minimum" and fails to denounce historical and modern-day use of Native imagery.

"It doesn't provide any firm statement from the university itself that they want to depart from folks identifying them with that imagery, which is disheartening to say the least," she said.

Pochel, who is of Saulteaux-Cree descent, said the new scholarships fall short because they don't benefit in-state students who are members of federally recognized tribes or descendants who aren't enrolled in tribal nations.

She said she was not contacted by the university for input despite sitting on an education committee for the Chicago American Indian Community Collaborative, a consortium of organizations that includes the Native American House at U. of I.

Cheryl Crazy Bull of the American Indian College Fund, a Denver-based organization that supports Native students in higher education, applauded the university's plan and said she was impressed by the breadth of its approach.

Other schools have recruited Native American students or acknowledged that their buildings were built on Native lands, but few have gone so far as to appoint a campus historian or hire someone to streamline repatriation efforts, she said.

"It's really good when these things happen," she said. "I think they make Indian people feel like the fight can have good consequences, and you've just got to hang in there."

But Crazy Bull said the school could go further still by putting Indigenous scholars in leadership positions and, as public universities in Maine, Michigan and Massachusetts have already done, waiving tuition altogether for Native students.

Starting this fall, U. of I. began offering scholarships to members of the Peoria Tribe of Indians of Oklahoma, who were displaced by the university, to cover all costs of attendance. Any student who is a member of a tribal nation recognized by the Bureau of Indian Affairs is also now eligible for in-state tuition, [a move the university's Chicago campus enacted last year](#).

The chief of the Peoria Tribe did not respond to requests for comment, and his community was busy setting up for a children's Christmas party, his office said on Tuesday. The U. of I. plan says the school should develop a deeper relationship with the Peoria Tribe, strengthen ties to other federally recognized tribal nations and explore ways to honor their history on campus.

As recently as 2018, the Peoria Tribe issued a statement calling Chief Illiniwek a "degrading racial stereotype" [after two U. of I. trustees met with the tribe's chief](#). The NCAA pressured the school to abandon the image, which it concluded was "hostile and abusive," but supporters of Chief Illiniwek have sought to preserve his use as a school symbol.

The Honor the Chief Society, an organization "dedicated to the preservation of positive Native American symbolism" that has supported the continued use of Chief Illiniwek, declined to comment.

Despite dragging on for 13 years, the school hasn't chosen a new mascot, and this new initiative won't change that.

The Native imagery plan calls for a council of students to develop new traditions, but the group "does not intend to take on the selection of a new university image or mascot, unless delegated by the chancellor."

Students voting in campus elections in March narrowly approved the adoption of the belted kingfisher, a blue and orange bird, as the school's new mascot, and [the faculty senate approved in an advisory vote too](#). Previously, students considered Alma Otter as a new mascot but the measure [failed to garner enough support](#).

The imagery plan recommends that an outside party help stakeholders identify new traditions such as music, symbols and possibly a mascot that "do not rely upon Native American images or traditions," but said it cannot make any hires because of budget concerns from the coronavirus pandemic.

Stephen Kaufman, an outspoken critic of Chief Illiniwek and a professor emeritus in the School of Molecular and Cellular Biology, said the new plan fails to acknowledge the chief's racist roots and instead seeks to justify its use in the past.

"The Illiniwek tradition was racist from the start, just as slavery, blackface, the KKK, and anti-Semitism always have been," Kaufman said in an email. "Since when is intent an excuse for racism? ... Jones again appears to be placating supporters of Chief Illiniwek."

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