

TO: University Senate

FROM: Charles E. Kupchella

SUBJECT: American Indian Nickname & Logo

DATE: January 31, 2006

I have your resolution of January 13, 2006, requesting that I seek authority from the State Board of Higher Education to develop and implement an orderly plan for discontinuing use of the American Indian nickname and Indian head logo.

As you are all well aware, I have been dealing with this issue since I began my presidency here in 1999. I formed a commission at the beginning, including American Indian representation, two former North Dakota governors, and other distinguished panelists to examine the pros and cons of the issue. The fact of the matter is, a number of pros and cons were identified, and it was not at all clear that discontinuing the use of the logo would be in the best interest of relations between American Indian people and non-American Indian here on the Upper Great Plains. We were in the process of considering various options at the time, when the Board decided to take for itself a decision to keep the nickname and the logo, apparently believing that it was in the best interest of all of the people of North Dakota that the nickname and logo be retained. Because this is the ultimate authority for higher education, I took my charge from that point to be ensuring that our use of the nickname and logo was respectful, and I have done just that and will continue to do so.

The issue has been made much more complicated by the NCAA weighing in with a new ill-considered policy that would penalize our student athletes if our use of the logo and nickname were in fact deemed to be "hostile and abusive." As President of this great institution, I cannot allow a charge by the NCAA, or anyone else for that matter, to go unchallenged that a nickname we have used with pride and honor for generations is somehow objectively hostile and abusive. While some may not like the nickname, this is in no way a test for/of "hostile and abusive." It can, and has been, not unreasonably argued that we should consider changing the nickname because some do not like it – or because the issue is a distraction. However, the argument that we change it because it is inherently hostile and abusive is another matter entirely. As you know, we are in the process of resolving that question now with the NCAA. We also have been, and

continue to be, engaged in some very productive discussions with tribal leaders. Even if I were inclined to do what you ask, such action would be counterproductive and not at all timely.

As you well know, there are mixed views on this issue, both in the American Indian population and in the non-American Indian population. Some tribes, notably the Seminoles, the Utes, and the Chippewas, as well as our own Spirit Lake Nation, have indicated that they find no problem with the use of our nickname and have put their permission in writing. That being the case, it is hardly the business of the non-American Indian population to declare that Indian tribes who are otherwise content with the use of these logos and nicknames clearly intended to honor their ancestors, are really being subjected to hostility and abuse.

While it is true the debate about the use of the logo has at times gotten overly harsh, I genuinely believe that the logo, itself, is in no way hostile or abusive. Even Stephanie Fryberg (whose as yet, as far as I know, unpublished research indicates that Indian logos can stereotype and can be negative), states that the use of American Indian nicknames and logos is stereotypical and otherwise negative only in settings where there are no other ways in which American Indians are appreciated and depicted. Given we are here in Indian country where the American Indian culture is well illuminated in so many ways, and given that we have 400+ American Indian students on campus, this hardly applies to us.

While I will continue to study the scholarly work done on this topic, I am skeptical of what I have seen thus far because most, if not all, of those who have weighed in on this with a scholarly approach have clearly indicated a personal bias against the use of the nicknames, and, it appears, set out to prove that these nicknames and logos are harmful.

While I will acknowledge that having to deal with this issue and the controversy surrounding it has taken some time that could well have been spent on more productive endeavors, controversy is a normal part of our world, and exposure of students to controversy far from harming them in any way could actually help in their education about the real world with differences of opinion on many issues. Our student leaders report that there is no negative impact on our academic programs as a result of our use of the nickname and logo.

In closing, let me say that I personally believe that, the nickname issue notwithstanding, the University of North Dakota offers American Indian students a better chance for a quality education than they would be able to find at almost all, if not all, other institutions of higher education in America. I pledge to make sure that this continues to be true.

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