
Mascots and Imagery

The use of Native school mascots, such as “Chiefs” or “R--skins,” has long been a concern for tribal communities. WHIAIANE has gathered much information from students and other advocates who oppose these mascots. Numerous testimonies during the listening sessions illustrated how stereotypical imagery and symbolism harm all students, especially AI/AN



Young student prepares testimony.

students, by interfering with self-identity, perpetuating negative stereotypes, encouraging bullying and teasing, and creating unhealthy learning environments. Often, students may not even be aware of or able to articulate the subconscious influence such images and symbolism can have on their psychological development. These harms have spurred many schools, colleges, and boards of education to eliminate such mascots, and have led many associations and civil rights organizations to call for ending their use.²⁸ Though a considerable number of institutions

have changed their mascots, over 2,400 schools have yet to do so. Listening session participants indicated that the federal government must do more to help schools and institutions understand the harmful effects that stereotypes, including imagery and symbolism in the form of mascots or logos, have on all students, particularly AI/AN students.

Harmful stereotypes, including via imagery and symbolism in the school environment, impact many vulnerable populations, including those identified on the basis of race, ethnicity, and disabilities. During the listening sessions, WHIAIANE heard concerns that the continual presence of stereotypes in schools also psychologically damages the students who perpetuate them. Research supports this idea, indicating that perpetrators experience increased self-esteem while engaging with stereotypes at the expense of Native students.²⁹ However, perpetrators of these stereotypes are not developing holistic and multi-dimensional understandings of other people, which can result in lower levels of empathy and hinder cross-cultural communication skills.

Many tribes and tribal councils have issued formal statements and resolutions urging the removal of Native mascots. The Inter-Tribal Council of Five Civilized Tribes asserts, “Negative images and stereotypes about American Indians as mascots contribute to a hostile learning environment that affirms the negative images and stereotypes that persist in America about American Indians.” Over 40 other tribes and councils have issued similar formal statements opposing Native mascots, including the 20 tribes of the Inter-Tribal Council of Arizona, the Juaneño Band of Mission Indians, the Peoria Tribe of Indians of Oklahoma, the 12 tribes of the Great Lakes Inter-Tribal Council, the Menominee Indian Tribe of Wisconsin, and the Oneida Tribe of Indians of Wisconsin.

In addition to issuing formal statements and resolutions, many tribes and tribal organizations have publicly supported efforts to eliminate Native mascots. The United South and Eastern Tribes, Inc. have affirmed their support of the Oneida Indian Nation's "Change the Mascot" campaign. In 2011, the Great Plains Tribal Chairman's Association (GPTA) testified before the U.S. Senate Committee on Indian Affairs on the stereotypical representation of Native Americans as mascots. In its testimony, GPTA asserted, "We find the use of Native American mascots to be dehumanizing and disrespectful."³⁰ Executive Director Scott Vele of the Midwest Alliance of Sovereign Tribes has also spoken out on multiple occasions against Native mascots and imagery.

Likewise, in 2013, the National Congress of American Indians (NCAI) stated,

*When exposed to these images, the self-esteem of Native youth is harmfully impacted, their self-confidence erodes, and their sense of identity is severely damaged. Specifically, these stereotypes affect how Native youth view the world and their place in society, while also affecting how society views Native peoples. This creates an inaccurate portrayal of Native peoples and their contributions to society. Creating positive images and role models is essential in helping Native youth more fully and fairly establish themselves in today's society.*³¹

The listening sessions gathered numerous testimonies that validated NCAI's concerns regarding mascots and imagery.

The American Psychological Association issued a statement in 2005 affirming that

*the continued use of American Indian mascots, symbols, images, and personalities ... is a form of discrimination against Indigenous Nations that can lead to negative relations between groups ... [and] has a negative impact on other communities by allowing for the perpetuation of stereotypes and stigmatization of another cultural group.*³²

The U.S. Commission on Civil Rights similarly commented,

*The stereotyping of any racial, ethnic, religious or other groups when promoted by our public educational institutions, teach all students that stereotyping of minority groups is acceptable, a dangerous lesson in a diverse society. Schools have a responsibility to educate their students; they should not use their influence to perpetuate misrepresentations of any culture or people. Children at the elementary and secondary level usually have no choice about which school they attend. Further, the assumption that a college student may freely choose another educational institution if she feels uncomfortable around mascots and imagery is a false one. Many factors, from educational programs to financial aid to proximity to home, limit a college student's choices. It is particularly onerous if the student must also consider whether or not the institution is maintaining a racially hostile environment for Indian students.*³³

Recommendation

States and local school districts should consider the historical significance and context of Native school mascots and imagery in determining whether they have a negative effect on students, including Native American students. OCR should explore providing guidance to schools, districts, states, and institutions of higher education regarding civil rights compliance when hostile environments are created by the potentially harmful Native imagery and symbolism, including school mascots and logos. OCR, states, and school districts should work with schools to develop and implement actions to change potentially harmful imagery and symbolism.

Testimony

“In high school, my mascot was the ‘Redskins’ and I had to watch my classmates make posters saying we are going to ‘skin’ our sports opponents. The other teams would make posters that said they are going to send us home on a ‘trail of tears.’

I’m now in college, and I recently had to write a peer-review paper, and I wrote on the mascot issue. I had a classmate say that Natives don’t exist anymore, so no one should be upset by the mascot issue. I asked, ‘Well, am I real?’ He said, ‘You don’t live in a teepee, so no.’ It’s still a slap in the face every time. I thought I had moved on, but it still hurts every time.”

Amanda Anderson (Choctaw), College Student
Oklahoma City Listening Session

“We are not token Indians. We are people. We are important.”

Katsitionni Fox (Mohawk), Artist and Documentarian
Troy Listening Session

“We should be worried. We should be more than worried. We should demand that our school systems at the department of education ... at the local, state, and national level[s] take these issues up with diligence. We know that the promotion of mascots, logos, and nicknames has a very negative effect on students of all races. We also know anti-education has to be deep. It has to deal with stereotypes. It also has to deal with accurate history.”

Bob Peterson, Then-President, Milwaukee Teachers Education Association
Franklin Listening Session

“One of the public schools in Oklahoma City did change their mascot name from Redskins. ... They are getting ready to vote on a new mascot. They wanted to know how they could work better with the tribes.”

Edwina Butler-Wolfe, Governor, Absentee Shawnee Tribe
Reno Tribal Consultation

“We need to build allies — allies who are non-Native, to introduce [the issue of mascots]. Whenever I was talking to someone, they would say that, for Natives, it is too sensitive. It is not that they are too sensitive. It is overly offensive.”

Roderick Cook (St. Regis Mohawk), Director,
Mohawk Higher Education Program, SUNY Fredonia
Troy Listening Session

“I’ve been in many schools with Native mascots. The kids I work with around that subject come and talk about how hurtful that is. It’s hard for them to go into school rallies because of all the war cries and whooping.”

Michael Folsom (Choctaw), School Psychiatrist
Los Angeles Listening Session

“I think there’s a disconnect between tribal leaders and youth. ... You don’t get a lot of complaints [about the mascot issue] because we’ve been taught that that’s just how things are, and we’ve just accepted that.”

Mahgan Miles (Cheyenne and Arapaho), State Tribal Education Partnership (STEP) Program
Coordinator
Oklahoma City Listening Session

“[My grandsons] have long hair, and last spring, I got a call from my youngest grandson, and he said, ‘I want to come home. Some of the kids are teasing me because we are ‘braves,’ and they say I’m the mascot.’ They are the only Native kids there, and so they are alone. That’s exactly why I have been an advocate for change all these years because of kids [who] have to endure this type of discrimination. Seemingly harmless kidding can have a lasting impact.”

Jacob Tsofigh (Kiowa), Grandfather
Oklahoma City Listening Session

“I am afraid to attend any football games in the community I live in because I’m not sure how I would react toward those expressing derogatory remarks or behavior toward my race. ... I do not feel honored or respected and fear for any young indigenous [people] still finding themselves.”

Tosawi Saddler (Chippewa/Cree), Cofounder, Indigenize, Inc.
Oklahoma City Listening Session

“Some people say that we have more important issues to worry about. I believe that the dehumanization caused by the use of derogatory mascots is a major contributing factor as to why we have more important issues to worry about.

It is a dehumanization tactic, born of institutional racism, similar to the derogatory terms and imagery ... used by Hitler to usher in the Jewish holocaust. ... The use of derogatory and stereotypical caricatures used to falsely depict Native Americans ... hold an eerie resemblance to the caricature-like pictures of people with exaggerated facial features ... used in old Nazi propaganda newspapers, ... which were used to influence and incite negative public opinion, and thus the dehumanization of Jewish people. ... It seems to me that we allow those who profit from its offensiveness to lead the discussion. It’s dangerous because it ignores atrocities. ... We are not just offended. We are scared.”

Alecia Onzahwah (Kickapoo), Cofounder, Indigenize, Inc.
Oklahoma City Listening Session

“The use of Native American imagery not only harms [those] students, but contributes to the enhanced ... self-image of non-Native students. This ... results in the widening of the opportunity gap. It is only those who have the power — those in the majority — [who] have the ability to caricaturize, symbolize, or create a mascot of another group of people. Hence, the equality gap. ... It is not about what is offensive or who finds something offensive, but how the presence of that ‘something’ impacts the learning environment, alters the climate, and negatively influences how a student can participate in it and benefit from it.”

Melissa Claramunt, Native American Liaison, Michigan Department of Civil Rights
Lansing Listening Session

“[School mascots represent] bullying at its worst because it is done openly ... and our youth, who face some difficult challenges and often struggle to find a reason not to exit this world by their own hand, see that an entire school, an entire community, an entire nation, allows it. ... When will this nation accept our word as truth for how derogatory mascot[s] and imagery affects us and our children? When will the truth be admitted that the ‘redskins’ term was historically used as a reference for the outright genocide of our people by the offering of

monetary rewards for the bloody scalps of our men, women, and children? When discussions occur that reference historical atrocities, Native people are often told, ‘get over it; it’s in the past,’ but the belief that it is in the past is erroneous. It is not in the past when we are reminded of the brutal genocide on a daily basis. ... How is a ... Native child supposed to feel safe in a world where a term once used to offer monetary rewards for the bloody scalps of children is so acceptable?”

Sarah Adams-Cornell (Choctaw), Parent
Oklahoma City Listening Session

“[After complaining about the school mascot], our country mailboxes were destroyed, two windshields in our cars were smashed, and I received anonymous letters and phone calls calling me scurrilous names. ... Comments in the news articles locally, statewide, and even nationally were unbelievable. Much hatefulness and untruth was printed. A pickup truck filled with people drove past my house shouting ‘Indians forever.’ Four years later there are many, many local residents who refuse to speak to me, even to just nod. ... Although many residents have moved on to a healthier place with a non-racist name, a few continue to remind me through their actions of their extreme unhappiness because I ‘took away their Indians.’ As a 67-year-old white woman, I feel able to remain in my home. I can live with those poor, sad, uneducated adults who continue to be angry with me. Can you imagine what life would have been like and would continue to be like for a First Nation adult, or worse, a student? I can’t.”

Marsha J. Beggs Brown, Former Teacher
Written Testimony

Access and Equity Challenges

During the listening sessions, WHIAIANE heard that, both inside and outside school, many AI/AN youth lack access to the resources they need. Homelessness, a significant issue among this student population, directs a student’s attention to his or her fundamental needs rather than academic success. Lack of Internet access at home or the lack of college advisors in school are other common issues that interfere with AI/AN students’ abilities to succeed academically.



Students prepare testimony.

Some Native students may also need to travel or work during certain weeks of the year. Schools should accommodate student schedules when they pertain to cultural activities and responsibilities.