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Native Americans: Mascots or Human Beings?

Thump-dump-dump-Dump! Thump-dump-dump-Dump! Thump-dump-dump-Dump, is heard when the mallet hits the deer skin head of the big drum. A white man comes running onto the field dressed in the most beautiful deer hide and is wearing eagle feathers to denote his superiority. With some fancy footwork, leaps and bounds, and war cries, this pseudo Native American has just entertained thousands of fans at many of our nation's colleges. To many Native Americans shows like these are stereotyping, disrespectful to their culture, and even racist. They have started a campaign to extinguish such uses of Native American traditions, clothing, and names; however they are met with opposition who believe that using Native Americans in these instances shows honor and respect for the Native American culture.

Activists believe that Native Americans are being stereotyped. They are depicted as wearing buckskin and eagle feathers and vicious fighters. Native Americans no longer (on a daily basis) dress in deer skin and eagles feathers, but because of mascots they are being seen as non-progressive and still stuck in their ancestral ways. University sports teams that have names like the Fighting Illini and the Fighting Sioux, imply that Native Americans are vicious fighters (King). Stereotyping also plays a role in how Native Americans are viewed and treated. Anti-activists argue that even though Native Americans no longer dress in traditional garb, the universities are honoring the Native

Americans traditions and past ways of life (Rosenstein). The idea of a fighter is meant to be seen as someone who is brave, heroic, and determined to win (King).

When the University of Illinois' mascot, Chief Illiniwek steps out into the spotlight dressed in traditional Native American gear and dancing a traditional Native American dance, he is not even in the appropriate traditional clothes of the tribe he is supposed to be representing. His dance is nothing more than what previous mascots have put together for the sake of entertainment. Activists argue that communion is not served at intermissions of sporting events so why are sacred Native American ceremonies be replicated, and incorrectly at that. Those who are extreme activists believe that Native American dances and traditions are "...given to the Indian people by our Creator." (Churchill 279-280). These precious dances and traditions are being stolen and made mockeries of at universities.

Anti-activists argue that having Chief Illiniwek as the school's mascot is a way of honoring the Illini and all Native American people and their culture. This is a similar practice at many other institutions as well, to say that their mascots are honoring the Native American tribe they are representing. The University of Illinois officials also say that the mascot and its dance are seen as "inspirational" to many of the viewers. Out of respect for the Native Americans the University of Illinois has stopped calling the dance performance "traditional" and "a form of art" (Rosenstein). But despite that, these institutions do not see these mascots as mascots, but more of a tradition.

Native American mascots are traditions not only to the universities that they represent, but also the communities from which they come. When Native Americans were bounty hunted, stores would put a picture of a Native American head in the front

window to let customers know that they would pay for the head of a Native American. Today stores also display the logos of these Native American logos out of support for the teams and the university. However, Native Americans find great offense with this action. It brings forth many devastating and heart wrenching recollections of their ancestors and what they had to endure (Rosenstein). These universities are so embedded within their communities that activists have a hard time being heard.

Also deafening the universities' ears are the harsh whispers of alumni who donate substantial funds to the universities. These funds often go towards scholarships and other programs within the institution. A lot of the big donators have threatened to withdraw their funding if these long time traditional mascots are replaced (Rosenstein). This makes the universities less than cooperative with the activists' pleas.

Even the cries of racism are falling on blocked ears. Activists believe that racism is the underlying cause of all these arguments. The Native American community argues that there is no longer any other ethnic group that is being paraded around as mascots, and therefore they should no longer be subject to this ridicule (King). They also see racism when these teams travel to other universities where they are subject to racial slurs that come along with school spirit (Rosenstein).

To help try and curb this racism, the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) has started to require universities with Native American mascots and logos to abandon and replace them. Some institutions are putting up a fight, they feel that they have had these mascots for years and have not caused a problem. The University of North Dakota has been fighting the change saying that they have broad support of the name, "The Fighting Sioux", but despite that, the university still must change or they will

lose "postseason rights" (Haga). The university has fought back first with a letter to the board of directors and most recently a lawsuit. There has even been some support by local Native Americans to retain the name, but others have spoken out against it.

The NCAA has allowed a select few schools to maintain their Native American names, mascots, and logos as long as a strong connection between the Native Americans and the institution is present. There must also be support from the surrounding Native American community. The Florida State Seminoles were allowed to keep their name because they provided the NCAA with support from the Native Americans, and they were able to demonstrate a strong connection between the university and the Native Americans (Haga). This is what the University of North Dakota is trying to accomplish.

Native Americans and other activists have been fighting to have universities change their mascots, logos, and names from Native Americans, Native American symbols, and traditions. Is this really worth making universities and other sports teams change their names and mascots? Activists believe that it is important for these institutions to make the change. They feel that they are being stereotyped, disrespected, and racist actions are being taken against them. Anti-activist refute these claims by saying that they are only stereotyping the past lifestyles of Native Americans and honoring their traditions.

Works Cited

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Reflection of Peer Reviews

Corey Hentig's critique of my paper was not very helpful. He completed the questions, but when there was a discrepancy between the questions and his opinion he was very vague in what was wrong and in any suggestions to make it better. He did not ask me any questions in order to clarify anything that he did not understand, nor did he explain any of his comments that I had questions of. Corey's most valuable advice came at the sentence structure level. I believe Corey should receive about 3 percent of the available 5.

Ryan Perlt's review of my paper was helpful. He was kind of vague on some of his suggestions. He was able to point out some of my weaknesses within the paper that I already knew existed. He also was able to help make some suggestions, but was not really able to expand on them. The biggest asset to having Ryan read my paper is that he is in my sociology class where this topic was discussed in great detail, so he was able to provide me with some ideas that I had not thought about. He put some effort into this proof reading, and deserves 4 percent.