

National Congress of American Indians
Position on American Indian Sports Mascots

April 20, 2009

It is our understanding that the Spirit Lake Dakota Nation will soon hold a referendum on the question of whether to support or oppose the “Fighting Sioux” mascot used by the University of North Dakota sports teams. This is an important question for the Tribe to consider. The National Congress of American Indians (NCAI) has taken a position generally opposing the use of American Indian mascots for sports teams, while supporting the ability of American Indian Tribes and Nations to work collaboratively with universities and athletic programs in a manner that is respectful to tribal culture and the right of each tribe and tribal community to decide for itself how to protect and celebrate its heritage.

The National Congress of American Indians (“NCAI”) was established in 1944 and is the oldest and largest national organization of American Indian tribes and nations. In recent years, every Dakota, Lakota, and Nakota Tribe (commonly referred to as “Sioux”) has been an NCAI member.¹

The NCAI is dedicated to protecting the rights and improving the welfare of American Indians, and has a history of involvement in educational, cultural and policy issues affecting American Indians communities. The NCAI has campaigned to discontinue the use of American Indian sports nicknames and imagery since 1968, and numerous colleges across this country once using such nicknames and imagery have since then successfully terminated their use.² In recent years, the NCAI, with the unanimous

¹ From 2001 to 2008, the following Great Plains Lakota, Dakota, and Nakota Tribes have been members of NCAI: (1) Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe; (2) Crow Creek Sioux Tribe; (3) Flandreau Santee Sioux Tribe; (4) Lower Brule Sioux Tribe; (5), Oglala Sioux Tribe; (6) Rosebud Sioux Tribe; (7) Santee Sioux Tribe; (8) Sisseton-Wahpeton Oyaté; (9) Spirit Lake Tribe; (10) Standing Rock Sioux Tribe; (11) Yankton Sioux Tribe. Various Lakota, Dakota, or Nakota Tribes within the Bureau of Indian Affairs Rocky Mountain and Great Lakes Regions also held membership.

² See *American Indians And Sports Team Mascots: A Timeline Of Change*, available at <http://www.ncai.org/ncai/resource/documents/governance/mastimeline.htm>.

support of its member tribes, has adopted three resolutions calling for an end to the remaining use of disparaging American Indian nicknames and imagery by a handful of prominent sports teams, specifically calling on UND to end this use, and specifically supporting the NCAA's 2005 policy.³

Resolution to Prevent Negative Use of Native American Mascots, Logos and Symbols in Sports.

In June 1998, the NCAI expressed its consensus view that the use of “Indian” mascots, logos and symbols in athletics is hurtful to American Indians and should stop. NCAI Resolution No. GRB-98-034. Through this resolution, the NCAI's member tribes explained the harm such stereotyping names and images cause: “[T]he use of Native American mascots, logos and symbols depicting American Indian people are offensive to us, and such depictions are inaccurate, unauthentic representations of the rich diversity and complex history of the more than 560 Indian Tribes in the United States and perpetuate cultural and racial stereotypes[.]” The resolution further identifies the insidious manner in which the use of these names and images affect even how Native Americans see themselves: “[S]ports teams with ‘Indian logos’ influence the images we see, the clothing we wear, and the standards we set, thereby encouraging us to tolerate racism.” When it adopted this resolution, the NCAI joined the increasing chorus of voices from Native American Tribes condemning the use of such names and images.

Resolution Opposing UND's “Fighting Sioux” Name and Logo. In November 2001, the NCAI specifically resolved that the imagery employed by UND, whether intended or not, is “demeaning by its very nature” to the Native American people. NCAI Resolution #SPO-01-046. The resolution urged that the “Fighting Sioux” name and logo are “stereotypical symbols [that] create an environment in which degrading acts become more acceptable and promote practices that trivialize and demean Native American culture, traditions and spirituality[.]” The resolution further expressed concern for Native

³ All NCAI resolutions are available on our website at www.ncai.org. NCAI resolutions are the mechanism used to express the NCAI's position on policies that affect Indian Nations and Native American people. Resolutions are vetted and discussed by both a committee and a subcommittee, and are adopted by a General Assembly following *Robert's Rules of Order*. During the resolutions process, any member of NCAI has three opportunities to raise objections or make a motion to table or amend a resolution.

Americans attending UND, where pervasive use of such name and logo creates a hostile educational environment that “limits the ability of all Native students to learn and take part in campus and community activities.”

This NCAI resolution spoke for all NCAI members across the country, and in particular reflects a concurrence of the North Dakota and South Dakota Lakota, and Dakota Indian Tribes. Seven of the eight major Lakota and Dakota tribes in North and South Dakota have adopted standing resolutions opposing the “Fighting Sioux” name and imagery, including: the Yankton Sioux Tribe, Oglala Sioux Tribe, Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe, Standing Rock Sioux Tribe, Rosebud Sioux Tribe, Sisseton-Wahpeton Oyaté Tribe, and Crow Creek Sioux Tribe. These Lakota and Dakota tribes have themselves described the “Fighting Sioux” name and logo as:

- “racially insensitive” (Standing Rock and Oglala Sioux Tribes);⁴
- “showing complete disrespect” (Rosebud Sioux Tribe);⁵
- “demeaning and derogatory” (Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe);⁶
- “degrad[ing]” (Yankton Sioux Tribe);⁷
- “totally unacceptable and only leads to dehumanizing ” (Sisseton-Wahpeton Sioux Tribe);⁸ and
- “most offensive” (Crow Creek Sioux Tribe).⁹

⁴ Standing Rock Sioux Tribe Council Resolution No. 356-92 (Dec. 3, 1992) (asking for UND to discontinue the use of the “Fighting Sioux” nickname); Oglala Sioux Tribes Resolution of the Executive Committee No. 99-07XB (Feb. 3, 1992) (same) UND Ex. R. *See also* Standing Rock Sioux Tribe Council Resolution No. 438-05 (Sept. 15, 2005) (reaffirming Standing Rock Sioux Tribe’s official opposition to the “Fighting Sioux” name and logo).

⁵ Letter from Rosebud Sioux Tribe President to UND President Dr. Kendall Baker dated Feb. 16, 1999, UND Ex. R.

⁶ Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe Council Resolution No. 287-97-CR (Oct. 8, 1997) (requesting that UND discontinue the use of the “Fighting Sioux” name), UND Ex. R.

⁷ Letter from Tribal Chairman to UND President Dr. Kendall Baker dated Feb. 19, 1999, UND Ex. R.

⁸ Letter from Sisseton-Wahpeton Sioux Tribe Council to UND President Dr. Kendall Baker dated Feb. 19, 1999; *See also* Sisseton-Wahpeton Sioux Tribe Council Resolution No. SWST-99-015 (Feb. 12, 1999) (requesting that UND ban the use of the “Fighting Sioux” nickname), UND Ex. R.

⁹ Letter from Crow Creek Sioux Tribe Chairman to UND President Dr. Kendall Baker dated Feb. 18, 1999, UND Ex. R.

The NCAI resolution further cites for support the North Dakota Indian Education Association and the Minnesota Indian Education Association, which found the name and logo “demeaning” and encouraging of practices that “trivialize our traditions, culture, and spirituality.” NCAI Resolution #SPO-01-046.

Resolution Supporting the 2005 NCAA Policy. In November 2005, the NCAI adopted a resolution “strongly support[ing]” the NCAA policy on hostile or abusive mascots in postseason NCAA activities. NCAI Resolution No. TUL-05-087. This resolution is consistent with previous NCAI resolutions *and* mirrored the September 2005 resolution of the United Tribes of North Dakota in support of the NCAA policy.¹⁰ The November 2005 NCAI Resolution reiterated that the use of Native American sports mascots, logos, or symbols perpetuates stereotypes of American Indians that are very harmful. “The ‘warrior savage’ myth has plagued this country’s relationships with the Indian people, as it reinforces the racist view that Indians are uncivilized and uneducated and it has been used to justify policies of forced assimilation and destruction of the Indian culture.” Further, the NCAI stated that such stereotypes foster ongoing discrimination against Native Americans, including employment in fields that require education and sophistication.

The NCAI continues to promote the position that universities and athletic programs must work collaboratively with American Indian Tribes and Nations in a manner that is respectful to tribal culture and the right of each tribe and tribal community to decide for itself how to best protect and celebrate its heritage.

¹⁰ See United Tribes of North Dakota Intertribal Summit Resolution No. 05-06 (Sept. 8, 2005), UND Ex. R, No. 3. The United Tribes of North Dakota is an association of the five federally recognized tribes in North Dakota: (1) Spirit Lake Tribe; (2) Sisseton Wahpeton Oyaté Tribe; (3) Standing Rock Sioux Tribe; (4) Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa, and (5) Three Affiliated Tribes. The resolution urges that UND change its “Sioux” nickname “as quickly as possible out of simple respect and sensitivity to the concerns and desires of the Native Americans everywhere ... to be free from negative images and stereotypes” and points to the allowance of an atmosphere of hostility at UND that has resulted in “numerous ugly incidents, including beatings, vandalism, death threats and other incidents directed towards Native American students and others who have advocated for a change in nickname.”