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Society of Indian Psychologists

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We the members of the Society of Indian Psychologists of the Americas, write this letter in support of "retiring" all Indian personalities as the official symbols and mascots of universities, colleges or schools (and athletic teams). We support doing so because of a variety of concerns related to the ethical practice of psychology. As a professional society of psychologists we operate under these professional ethical guidelines.

We are concerned that the continued use of Indian symbols and mascots seriously compromises our ability to engage in ethical professional practice and service to the campus (delete campus if addressing all mascots) community. We believe that it establishes an unwelcome academic environment for Indian (students, staff, and faculty) and contributes to the miseducation of all members of the (campus) community regarding the cultural practices and traditions of an entire ethnic group. In our view, the use of an historically and culturally inaccurate, stereotypic image undermines the educational experience of all members of the (University) community. It seems especially problematic for those who have had little or no contact with Indian people and their cultures.

Stereotypical and historically inaccurate images of Indians in general interfere with learning about them by creating, supporting and maintaining oversimplified and inaccurate views of indigenous peoples and their cultures. When stereotypical representations are taken as factual information, they contribute to the development of cultural biases and prejudices, (clearly a contradiction to the educational mission of the University.) In the same vein, we believe that continuation of the use of Indians as symbols and mascots is incongruous with the philosophy espoused by many Americans as promoting inclusivity and diversity.

We understand that some affiliated with the institutions having a long history of use of these symbols may have a special attachment to them. We also understand and believe that this attachment may not have been formed out of maliciousness or negative intentions. To the extent, however, that tradition and/or economic issues are major obstacles to change; they should not usurp the principles of a society struggling to put an end to racism. What once may have been unifying symbols for the various bodies using these symbols has become a source of cross-cultural conflict. In light of all of these factors, we strongly support and encourage the all such entities to develop a new symbol consistent with and contributing to the positive realization of national principles (our educational mission.)

In support of our concern about the ethically problematic nature of this issue for the professional practice of psychology, we cite relevant portions of the "Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct" (American Psychological Association [APA, 1992]) and the "Guidelines for Providers of Psychological Services to Ethnic, Linguistic and Culturally Diverse Populations" (APA, 1992).

Principle D (Respect for People's Rights and Dignity) states:

Psychologists accord appropriate respect to the fundamental rights, dignity, and worth of all people. They respect the rights of individuals to privacy, confidentiality, self-determination, and autonomy, mindful that legal and other obligations may lead to inconsistency and conflict with the exercise of these rights. Psychologists are aware of cultural, individual, and role differences, including those due to age, gender, race, ethnicity, national origin, religion, sexual orientation, disability, language, and socioeconomic status. Psychologists try to eliminate the effect on their work of biases based on those factors, and they do not knowingly participate in or condone unfair discriminatory practices.

Principle E (Concern for Others' Welfare) states:

Psychologists seek to contribute to the welfare of those with whom they interact professionally. In their professional actions, psychologists weigh the welfare and rights of their patients or clients, students, supervisees, human research participants, and other affected persons....

When conflicts occur among psychologists' obligations or concerns, they attempt to resolve these conflicts and to perform their roles in a responsible fashion that avoids or minimizes harm. Psychologists are sensitive to real and ascribed differences in power between themselves and others, and they do not exploit or mislead other people during or after professional relationships.

Principle F (Social Responsibility) states:

Psychologists are aware of their professional and scientific responsibilities to the community and the society in which they work and live. They apply and make public their knowledge of psychology in order to contribute to human welfare. Psychologists are concerned about and work to mitigate the causes of human suffering. When undertaking research, they strive to advance human welfare and the science of psychology. Psychologists try to avoid misuse of their work. Psychologists comply with the law and encourage the development of law and social policy that serve the interests of their patients and clients and the public..

In addition, several of the "Guidelines for Providers of Psychological Services to Ethnic, Linguistic and Culturally Diverse Populations" also address our concerns on this issue.

5. Psychologists respect client's religious and/or spiritual beliefs and values, including attributions and taboos, since they affect world view, psychosocial functioning, and expressions of distress.

a. Part of working in minority communities is to become familiar with indigenous beliefs and practices and respect them.

7. Psychologists consider the impact of adverse social, environmental and political factors in assessing problems and designing interventions.

b. Psychologists work within the cultural setting to improve the welfare of all persons concerned, if there is a conflict between cultural values and human rights.

#8. Psychologists attend to as well as work to eliminate biases, prejudices, and discriminatory practices.

a. Psychologists acknowledge relevant discriminatory practices at the social and community level that may be affecting the psychological welfare of the population being served."

We applaud the current efforts across the nation to have this crucial issue raised and addressed in a responsible and productive way. It is our hope this letter contributes to that effort.