



April 3, 2026

A Statement From the University YMCA Student Board In Support of a New Mascot for the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign

To University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign Chancellor Isbell Jr.:

The University YMCA Student Board is writing in support and encouragement for the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign to adopt a new mascot. For the past two decades, the University, a flagship institution and world-renowned leader in education, has operated without a unifying symbol encompassing the significance of our community. In the absence of such a symbol, our campus community has lacked a shared point of connection capable of uniting generations of students, alumni, faculty, staff, and community members who proudly call Illinois home. A mascot represents and means more than school spirit, it is an emblem of collective identity that reveals our values, mission, and impact on our world.

Having been on our campus for over 150 years, the University YMCA has witnessed generations of culture on campus including that with a mascot. The University YMCA catalyzed the adoption of the previous mascot, the chief, and served as the home for the original mascot costume. Recognizing its controversies, the YMCA first sought reparations by being one of the first voices to seek out retirement of the chief. We do not hide but instead acknowledge and learn from our history in relation to the previous mascot. While it does not correct our history, supporting the efforts of the Kingfisher allows us to continue to use our voice to take accountability for our actions and uplift student voices.

Mascots are an unforgettable part of campus life. They are a unifying symbol for students and faculty on campus. However, our Illini teams are divided without a unifying symbol among them. Given the momentum of our athletic teams, this gap in our campus spirit has become extremely visible. At the institutional level, an official mascot serves as a relational piece that other universities and community members can associate with Illinois. Apart from perception, it reinforces our stance about the removal of the past mascot. The University of Illinois no longer supports that symbol and takes ownership of our past by officiating a new symbol and moving forward for the collective good.

The University of Illinois is an exemplary institution not only as a R1 institution but also for our Division 1 sports teams. We think it is time to also become a leader in student culture, starting with an official school mascot. The unity our campus would experience under a banner of an official mascot would be a significant source of Illini pride. Such a mascot would offer intergenerational and cross-cultural connections between past, present, and future students,

together, as one team. It is both a fiscal and social investment towards our campus becoming complete in campus traditions once again.

As such, we endorse the belted Kingfisher to be that sense of community that we have been looking for. This project sustains a decade's worth of intentional and purposeful planning. The Kingfisher traces its roots to our campus. The Kingfisher is native to this region, making our campus a natural sanctuary for the very symbol that can bring new life and unity to our traditions. Its presence in the local environment roots this mascot deeply in our shared sense of place.

The Student Board is a Registered Student Organization (RSOs), and our members are drawn from twelve other RSOs representing hundreds of students: Alternative Seasonal Breaks, Amnesty International UIUC, Engineers Without Borders, I-CAUSE, Interfaith in Action, La Colectiva, Philippine Student Association, Project for Less, Rural Area Student Initiative, Save the Children Action Network, Students for Environmental Concerns, and Vis-a-Vis. United through our work in advocacy and grounded in community, we understand the power of collective action. As such we've come together to address you in this necessary step for the University to move forward.

Since September of 2019, the Illinois Kingfisher initiative has steadily grown through democratic engagement and collaboration with Tribal Nations and advocacy groups. It has earned overwhelming support through two campus-wide student votes (2020, 2024), a 105–2 vote by the Faculty Senate, endorsement by the Graduate Employees' Organization (GEO), and widespread support from campus departments and students. This level of unity makes clear that the desire for a replacement mascot is both widespread and enduring.

We join the following organizations in supporting the immediate planning towards and prompt official adoption of a new mascot for the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign:

- National Congress of American Indians
- Nottawaseppi Huron Band of the Potawatomi; Native American Heritage Fund (NAHF)
- American Indian Science and Engineering Society (AISES)
- Native American Rights Fund (NARF)
- National Indian Education Association
- Association on American Indian Affairs
- American Indian Center of Chicago
- Illinois Education Association (IEA) Higher Education Council

We encourage both current and incoming university leadership to honor this moment for our state, the work of its students, and most of all for our University, by completing the transition toward a new, unifying mascot for UIUC.

In solidarity and with Illini spirit,

University YMCA Student Board

Alternative Seasonal Breaks

Amnesty International - UIUC

Engineers Without Borders

Illinois Coalition Assisting Undocumented Students' Education

Interfaith in Action

La Colectiva

Philippine Student Association

Project for Less

Rural Area Student Initiative

Save the Children Action Network

Students for Environmental Concerns

Vis-a-Vis