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UNIVERSITY YMCA OF THE UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS

Chancellor Charles Isbell, Jr.
University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign

April 2026

We write to ask and strongly encourage the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign to formally adopt a new mascot: the Kingfisher. As a close partner with the University for 153 years, the YMCA of the University of Illinois (University YMCA) has a unique interest in raising this issue: we played a crucial role in both nurturing the adoption and calling for the retirement of the previous mascot, “Chief Illinwek.” Now, eighteen years later, representing thousands of shared alumni with the University, we lend our support to the efforts of students and Native peoples to establish a new tradition with the promise to unify all those affiliated with this great University.

Nearly 100 years ago, one of our student leaders helped to create Chief Illiniwek, a potent but ultimately divisive symbol. Our Association supported this expression of University identity for decades. In 1991, we recognized that such imagery was contributing to a legacy of cultural appropriation, harm, exploitation, and exclusion. We returned historic artifacts related to the mascot in our possession to their creators. We committed ourselves to openly acknowledging and working to heal the scars left behind by our prior support. We also dedicated the University YMCA to elevating the work and voices of those seeking to build bridges that strengthen the campus and community.

After too many years of inaction on this matter, efforts to identify and promote a fitting and unifying new mascot have gained significant momentum. The Kingfisher is amassing support, particularly among current students, faculty, and recent alumni - including the campus referendum led by the Student Council and Faculty Senate actions of 2020. We recognize that some may wish to suggest alternative stylings for the Kingfisher, or even entirely different symbols. Many stakeholders, including our Student Board and twelve affiliated registered student organizations, believe there are strong reasons to favor the Kingfisher. These include its deep connections to Illinois’ natural heritage and history, cultural and ecological importance, and striking colors and appearance.

Your leadership can model and invite the type of sustained and respectful exchange that is required to build bridges not divisions. It is possible to forge a path forward.

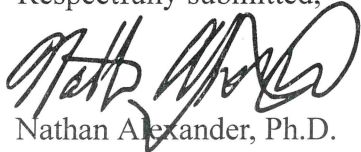
This is a critical moment for that work.

As divisions are sown and fomented throughout many spheres of public life, we should celebrate and heed the students and alumni calling for an embrace of new imagery, language, and traditions that could unite and provide needed positive energy to our University community. Formally adopting a new mascot will galvanize students, alumni, faculty, staff and supporters around a shared identity, solidifying life-long connections to the University.

Your appointment as Chancellor affords you a singular opportunity to deeply engage in the necessary listening to and dialogue with the University's diverse constituents.

Our Board of Governors, Board of Trustees, Student Board, and twelve affiliated registered student organizations ask you to support the Kingfisher. We are ready and willing to assist and collaborate with you in that effort and any you undertake that advances student leadership.

Respectfully submitted,



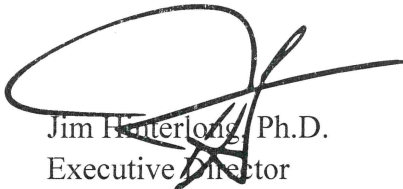
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Chair, Board of Governors
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Student President
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