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An Admirable Display of Moral Courage

By Dr. Erich Longie

My newsletters are about Native Americans because after all, the focus of the Tribal Leaders Institute is on Native Americans. The newsletters contain articles that are usually about our (Dakota) values of courage, honesty, perseverance and generosity, and how we Indians can apply those virtues in today's world. In this article, I will deviate from my practice of writing about Native Americans. Instead, this article will be about certain non-Indians and how these individuals who work for the University of North Dakota (UND) displayed an inordinate

amount of moral courage at a State Board of Higher Education (SBHE) meeting held January 21st, 2010 in UND's Memorial Union. Although the newspaper reporters who covered the meeting wrote several articles about it, they did not write about what I saw as a "story within a story." This article will be about that "inside story."



Those who are familiar with **Organizational Theory and Behavior** understand how complex and confusing it is at times. While I don't pretend to be an expert on organization theory and behavior, I have taken a couple courses on the subject. In addition, I have worked for organizations that were governed by a governing board, and I've sat on a governing board off and on for the past 20 years, so I am a little familiar with the concept. To refresh my memory, I did some research on the Internet and read several sites that had information about the subject. On one site, I found an apt description that fits UND:

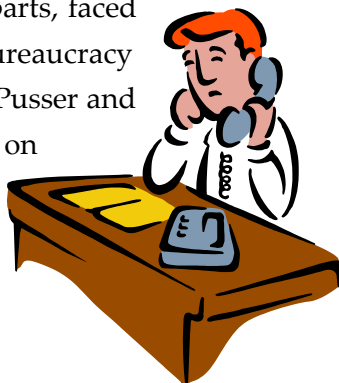
Public and private colleges and universities of all types incorporate key authority structures, including a governing board, a president or chancellor, a cohort of administrative leaders, and an academic senate. In public institutions these core organizational entities collaborate with such external authorities as state and federal political leaders, community

organizations, and members of the public, as well as business interests and philanthropic foundations. These external organizations routinely interact with and shape the policies and procedures of the university's internal organizational structures. (Pusser & Loss, 2010)

Unlike tribal colleges, whose only external authority is a tribal council and to some degree funding and accrediting agencies, the state colleges and universities have a host of external authorities they have to take into consideration whenever they make a high-level decision. This is probably why it takes “forever” when a really important decision needs to be made.



When I was president of our tribal college, I would often tell my counterparts at public institutions of higher education that a policy change at a tribal college can happen, literally, overnight if the president can get the board together for a meeting the next day. My counterparts, faced with an immense bureaucracy (described in the quote by Pusser and Loss), would comment on how they wished policy change would happen just as quickly at their organization.



In order for a complex and immense bureaucracy such as a state university to function efficiently, every level within the organization has to be on the same page. This is especially true at the governing board and the administration levels. If the administration and the governing board have a serious disagreement on an important issue, the issue is usually resolved only when one or the other

entity (board or administrator) is forced out. This is why administrators at state universities very seldom publicly voice their disagreement with their governing board.

However, this is exactly what happened at the SBHE meeting last Thursday held at UND’s Memorial Union. In a public statement, surprising many at the meeting, UND’s President Robert Kelley hinted



UND's Fighting Sioux Athletic Logo

strongly that he was in favor of retiring UND’s Fighting Sioux nickname and logo, and Brian Faison, UND’s athletic director, publicly concurred with everything President Kelley said. This is completely at odds with the stand the SBHE has taken on the issue so far.



To my knowledge, President Kelley is the first UND president to publicly hint at his desire to have the nickname retired. Not resolved, but retired. *“The continuation of a controversy will not be helpful to the University of North Dakota,”* Kelley told the

SBHE. This took moral courage as the majority of the State Board of Higher Education members are in favor of keeping the name. In another fine display of moral courage, the athletic director, Brian Faison, publicly concurred with President Kelley, telling the board members, *“a resolution is needed before the university can pursue membership in the Summit League athletic conference.”* This is a good example of a governing board and its top administrators not being on the same page regarding a controversial issue.

I would not be surprised if Fighting Sioux logo supporters called for the resignation of President Kelley and Brian Faison. And they have some powerful supporters. Former SBHE board member, Bev Clayburg, one of the original board members who caved into Ralph Englestad’s demands to keep the nickname and logo, was at the meeting, as was Earl Strinden, the long time influential North Dakotan who sits on the Ralph Engelstad Arena (REA) board of directors. I am sure President Kelley was aware of their presences prior to making his



public statements, but he made them anyway – again, this speaks for his inordinate amount of moral courage.

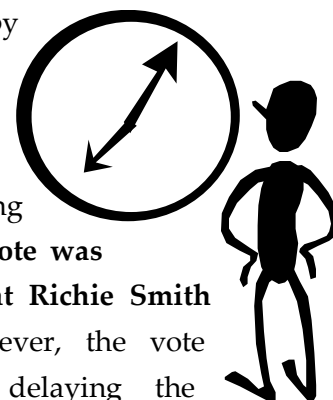
There is strength in numbers however. SBHE board member, Mike Haugen of Fargo, who argued for directing UND to

begin retiring the nickname said, *“We have got to stop the division and go to what higher education*



should be about: respect, understanding and bringing people together, really, instead of dividing.” Haugen said, *“It’s time to resolve the issue, not cover it over.”* And Bill Goetz, Chancellor of the North Dakota University System, spoke at length on his support of President Kelley’s position. According to the Grand Forks Herald, *“The chancellor said he is very concerned about the university system’s reputation nationally because of the nickname”* (Tran, 2010, p. B4). Goetz went on to reinforce Haugen’s argument: *“The bottom line is we need to do what’s right. As far as the timeline elements are concerned, the issue’s going to be before us today; it’s going to be before us two years from now; it’s going to be here 20 years from now unless we do something”* (Tran, 2010, p. B4).

A motion was made to wait to retire the logo until the North Dakota Supreme Court made a decision regarding a court appeal by several Spirit Lake tribal members to force the board to wait until November 30th before acting on the logo. **When the vote was called for SBHE President Richie Smith voted against it.** However, the vote passed 5-3, effectively delaying the



retiring of the nickname for at least another 30 days. According to the Inforum from Fargo, North Dakota, Jon Jackson, the board’s non-voting faculty adviser, said board members are looking to the Supreme Court to make the decision for them. *“It’s timid,”* said Jackson, a UND assistant professor. *“They’re looking for someone else to do their job”* (Dalrymple, 2010, ¶ 10).



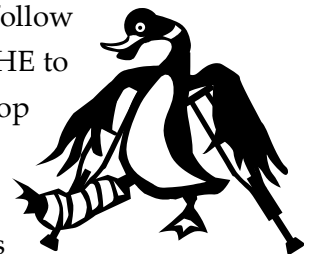
In another surprising turn of events, avid nickname supporter and Grand Forks Herald reporter, Tu-Uyen Tran (2010), whose articles on the subject are always slanted to give the impression that the arguments made by the anti-logo people are frivolous, extreme, and weak, titled his latest article, *NEWS ANALYSIS: Tide Seems to Turn Against [UND Fighting Sioux] Nickname, Arguments point to the change despite vote to delay action.* This honest admission regarding the status of the controversy is rare for Tran. He went on to report, *“One board member, Mike Haugen, argued that he doesn’t see any hope of resolving the controversy – ever. No tribal agreement would end the divisive nature of the nickname and logo, he said, effectively making the same claims that nickname opponents have long made”* (p. B1). And surprisingly, later on, in the same article, he added this quote from Haugen, *“Even if we get an agreement with Standing Rock, that is not going to change the divisive nature of this logo and that is a bigger issue with respect for individuals, for harmony in the state. We see tribal members, family members, divided over this issue”* (p. B4). Tran then emphasizes, *“That’s the same claim many nickname opponents have*



made” (p. B4). I applaud Tran for his accurate reporting. This is what happens when a person displays moral courage. It has a positive effect on those who have witnessed it.

As I stated early on in this article, anyone familiar with **Organizational Theory and Behavior**, as it is applied to an organization the size and complexity of UND, knows it is imperative for a governing board and its administration to always be on the same page if the organization is to function effectively. When the two top levels of an organization the size of UND disagree on a controversial issue, the potential damage it can cause the organization is considerable.

In my opinion, now that President Kelley has spoken out publicly against the name, it will be difficult for the relationship between the board and administration to return to “normal” if the nickname is not retired. President Kelley will be forced into the same role his predecessor (former President Charles Kupchella) had to follow when Englestad forced the SBHE to overrule Kupchella and stop him from retiring the nickname and logo. His (Kupchella’s) leadership was



never the same after that -- he became sort of a lame duck president.

Which side will back down? Will the losing side, whether they are board members or administrators, be forced out and/or resign?

I was glad I attended the State Board of Higher Education meeting that was held at the UND's Memorial Union. My intuition told me that groundbreaking news might occur regarding the retirement of the Fighting Sioux nickname and logo. Although that did not happen, I had an opportunity to witness something just as rare and exciting. Instead of politics as usual, which I had expected considering the circumstances and history surrounding nickname controversy, I was treated to a fine display of moral courage on the part of President Kelley and UND's Athletic Director, Brian Faison.

I was a student at UND off and on for the past twenty years, and I am proud to say I persevered and obtained three degrees from there. Having experienced the Fighting Sioux nickname and logo controversy up close and personal these past 20 years, I hope and pray for the sake of the Native American students currently attending UND and the Native American students who will attend UND in the future, the SBHE will have the moral courage to retire the Fighting Sioux nickname once and for all at its next meeting.



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