



Nov. 3, 2020

Jeremy Haefner, Chancellor of the University of Denver
Denise O’Leary, Chair of DU’s Board of Trustees and Board Members
Mary Clark, Provost
University of Denver Students, Faculty, Staff, and Alumni

Dear University of Denver Community,

The faculty participants of the Native American Inclusivity Task Force offer this statement in strong and unambiguous support of DU student leaders organized as Righteous Anger! Healing Resistance! (RAHR) and the Native Student Alliance, along with student, faculty, staff and community allies engaged in ongoing efforts in opposition to the continued use of the name and image of “Pioneer” as a representative figure for the University of Denver community.

We are impelled to express our views because much of the work accomplished thus far, along with the ongoing initiatives put forth by the Task Force on which we served is pertinent to the Chancellor’s statement of October 21, 2020. We voice our opposition to the name and figure of “Pioneer” because its ongoing use is antithetical to the spirit and substance of the original charge of the Task Force and an affront to the most fundamental goals of our committee—to develop and cultivate an academic community and set of supporting institutional structures to transform the University of Denver into a truly inclusive community for Native and Indigenous students, faculty and staff, as well as for the Denver Native community and communities of the greater Rocky Mountain region and beyond, which the University of Denver seeks new collaborations and partnerships with.

The realization of our primary goals surrounding Commemoration, Education and Recruitment and Retention of Native and Indigenous students (as shared in our Task Force report) is simply impossible as long as our institutional leaders continue to cling to the outmoded and tattered vestments of the past as represented in the figure of the pioneer. Regardless of any purported positive qualities that one may selectively cite as associated with this deeply fraught figure, it remains a name, image and signifier that is inextricably linked to acts of oppression and violence perpetrated against Native peoples, including at the infamous Sand Creek Massacre—an atrocity to which the University of Denver will be forever linked.

The reaffirmation of the continued use of this moniker as stated in the Chancellor’s letter threatens to undermine much of the work that has been accomplished, while seeming to signal a distinct lack of consideration for the value of informed and thoughtful decision-making and democratic principles. It also suggests a disturbing disregard for the thoughts, feelings and concerns of members if the DU community most affected by its continued presence, signaling and inexplicable indifference to the very initiatives and goals that are articulated in the rest of the letter. As faculty who have been deeply involved and who have shown a demonstrated commitment to help the University of Denver achieve the promise of its professed commitments to diversity and inclusivity, along with the bold aspirations asserted in our mission to be a “great private university dedicated to the public good,” it is difficult to see how such a decision can be made to harmonize with such lofty aims.

Further, the decision expressed in the statement acts to increase perceptions of tokenism, undermines institutional commitment to diversity and inclusion and projects an attitude of disrespect to DU's most vulnerable populations, while simultaneously celebrating a figure that is crude and insulting to so many at DU. One that DU's Native and Indigenous communities have explicitly stated they cannot make peace with.

As faculty with extensive involvement and participation in so many of the efforts and strategic initiatives cited and promoted in the Chancellor's letter, we worry that this decision will diffuse the momentum that we have built while causing serious harm to the communities our recommendations and ongoing initiatives are intended to help sustain and strengthen. The announcement also threatens to do irreparable harm to our institutional image at a time when so many other universities are making their own long-overdue decisions on mascots, associations with controversial historical figures, and the broader issues related to commemoration and naming in the interest of justice and right. Taken as a whole, the stand currently being taken exacerbates what is felt as a persistent sense of isolation that results from vacillating and hesitant institutional support for members of this committee and others similarly engaged. Further, the decision to retain the Pioneer name undermines the work we and others have invested significant amounts of time, effort and mental labor to move forward. All within an institution where the burden for success and progress is so often placed on those of us with little power or access to resources to ensure the sustainability of the structures in question, as well as their broader long term goals of increasing of the recruitment and retention of Native and Indigenous students, faculty and staff.

The sentiments expressed in the statement supporting the Pioneer name are dubious at best and certainly not what inclusive excellence looks like. Instead such words seem to replicate a continuation of an obstinate pattern of shortsighted and faint-hearted decision making that has been allowed to flourish as a norm at DU and other universities. The burdens for achieving change and progress on issues of diversity and inclusion at such institutions are all-too-often placed onto the backs of faculty, staff, students of color and other marginalized identities, as well as their similarly disempowered allies. At the same time, what hard-fought advances can be won are celebrated as an accomplishment of the whole—but usually only after it is perceived as safe and acceptable to the dominant majority. At DU, efforts to grow and strengthen structures associated with diversity and inclusion have consistently been pushed off onto discrete and isolated pockets of activity and silos, while other units not directly associated with DEI efforts proceed without being asked to assume the risks and burdens of such work. This can create a form of de facto institutional segregation. It is incumbent on a university that proclaims to be committed to being a leader on diversity, equity and inclusion to ensure that all units and divisions within DU are given the necessary resources to address such issues, while being expected to fully contribute to advance them in ways appropriate to their areas of activity and disciplinary approaches.

In contrast, unilateral decisions, such as the recent assertion that the Pioneer question has been “decided,” are incompatible with our stated institutional mission, values and principles. Such a position, if continued to be supported by those in whom we invest our trust and look to for leadership that we expect to be guided by those selfsame values, only reinforces inconsistent and contradictory messages that directly harm Native and Indigenous students, staff and faculty, while being harmful to our wider community. It is when such issues are ignored, perhaps in hopes that they will simply go away, that they become more deeply entrenched as an accepted

reality and norm in which divergent conceptions of a word, idea and image can persist, and with all the irrefutable harm they carry. At the same time, such a stance reinforces dangerous anti-intellectual assertions that meaning and facts are irrelevant. We offer this statement in strong support of the DU Native and Indigenous communities, their allies, and all of those who struggle to bring our institutional and community ever closer to its higher aspirations—and a true realization of what is expressed in the word OneDU.

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