

October 26, 2020

Re: Chancellor Haefner's Oct. 21, 2020 Email "Response to students; commitments to Native and Indigenous communities"

We are writing, as University of Denver (DU) alumni and more importantly as alumni of the Native Student Alliance (NSA) leadership, in deep concern for the Native students on DU's campus. During our time at the University, we have all been active members of this group and were in leadership during our undergraduate career. We have seen first hand the culmination of microaggressions, macroaggressions, discrimination, inaction, and much more that has led to NSA demanding for more action from DU to directly support Native students currently on campus, as well as those who come to DU in the future. That is why we write to you today.

We want to acknowledge that the Native American Graduate Student experience differs drastically from that of a Native American Undergraduate Student who have lived on campus 24 hours a day for four years, which is why this letter was written by those who have been in NSA leadership. We also want to highlight that this is not a new phenomenon for Native American and Indigenous students on campus. We speak from three generations of NSA leadership and 12 years of experience and institutional knowledge that has been pushing this issue consistently, just to be given the same answer by the Board of Trustees (BOT) and the Chancellor since 2008. We are writing to bring attention to the continued pattern of cycled violence directed at Native American students on campus for the past 12 years that needs to be addressed and confronted at the core.

Chancellor Haefner's email addressing the demands of Righteous Anger Healing Resistance (RAHR) and NSA was performative and toned deaf to actual demands of NSA and other demands RAHR made were not addressed clearly. This email, while seemingly diplomatic in nature and may have had good intentions, shows that the years in which students have taken the emotional toll to educate were for naught, and that students throughout the years have not been listened to thoroughly. It shows that the words of the Indigenous community on a campus that stands on stolen land, and in fact has a legacy of genocide, are not being heard, and are instead being actively ignored. It also shows the interests of the University lean towards the side of money and power over marginalized students on campus who do not possess the capital to make the decision for the University.

We cannot deny that the "Pioneer" nickname will hold different meaning to those whose ancestors were not harmed by the historical definition of the word — ancestors who were not murdered and assaulted by Pioneers. However, stating that the word has a dual meaning will always disunite the campus body and place Native and Indigenous students as the "other side" and in a position of "marginalization" within the conversation. This consistent divide will label Native American students as "the reasons we have to have this discussion" and "the reason *they* don't like the term Pioneer." We argue that this has and will automatically separate Native students from fully participating in their education experience and with the greater campus body.

We have outlined how we have personally been “othered” on campus, and how being this voice of the “other side” has been met with trauma, campus safety brutality, racism, and campus violence. At the same time, we have NSA Alumni who are still paying their debt to DU. We want to take a step back in advocating for Native American students to come to DU until we confront the cycled violence within the campus environment.

Simply put, there is no way to reconcile the history of the word Pioneer. In the Chancellor’s email, he tried to say that the way DU uses the word is separate from its history — but as a university that is literally founded upon the genocide of Cheyenne and Arapaho people, that is not possible. By keeping the Pioneer moniker, DU is telling its Native students, alumni, staff, and faculty that they are not willing to reconcile its violent legacy, and that in fact, they want its legacy of genocide and harm to continue. Pioneers killed Native people and stole Native land. That is the beginning and end of the word. And it is not on non-Natives to claim that they are reappropriating a word that continues to harm Native people. It is not their decision, so any justification that the word can be reconciled is simply not okay and continues to harm DU’s Native community.

This harm against Native people is not unusual for DU. Besides their violent legacy, there is a consistent pattern of anti-Native rhetoric that has circulated within the DU culture for the past decade. The NSA co-chairs have felt the brunt of this harm and labor the most institutional trauma. We want to remind the BOT and DU community this has been a long time conversation that NSA has been laboring for the campus community for “educating the other side”.

Why We Stand with Current Native Students and Their Demands

We know that NSA has been met with continued hostility, through using intellectual theory, we know Settler Colonialism and Settler Society will always continue to see Native peoples as “**in the way**” because it is our land that is being sought after and desired for control (Deloria & Tuck). Our experience at DU as undergraduate students stayed with us, and it is why we stand with Native students today. We affirm every single one of their demands, and we believe that each demand must be completed in order for DU to be a safe and healthy place for Native students and other marginalized students. As a group, we address that the opinions on the Let’s Go DU site do not speak on our [stance](#). We completely agree that more work needs to be done beyond a name change but considering how many years of harmful and violent encounters that surround this conversation that is supposed to occur on an intellectual campus, we ask how will you protect our Native Students?

While we appreciate the intentionality for bringing new faculty, raising the Native American task force back up, and providing full tuition to Native American students moving forward, we question if cycling colonial trauma inflicted by the campus environment is ethical for our Native American students and community to be welcomed on campus. We see little recognition of past and present inaction and harm towards the Indigenous community on campus. It is difficult to be heard on a predominately white institution that caters more to the majority as opposed to the minorities for which allows you to use your “inclusion and equity”

terminology to describe DU. We also know a memorial site dedicated to Sand Creek, within Pioneer Nation, will not bring justice to our community as we will continue to be reminded each day of a painful past without first healing or visioning a hopeful future. We ask that you reevaluate your dedication to upholding your violent legacy of colonialism, and to create true healing from past harms for your former and current Indigenous students. Most importantly, we ask that you create a safe space for Native students currently attending DU, and for the Native students to come.

Part of learning is also through activism and larger dialogues. We also know realistically under the structures of capitalism and settler society, in order for the University to change the mascot name, money will have to follow. Given the structure of inequality we do not possess this capital. However, it is within the right of an individual to protest, which is a fundamental right within American society and is our constitutional right. [For alumni](#) who do not understand that this is part of what conversations of different opinions will look like, in fact, it is not about bashing or condoning students for having a different opinion than you. It is also not about suggesting that Dr. Ramirez or faculty who don't agree with you should be fired. Facilitating greater conversations and educating through activism is a form of learning and is part of academic learning. Which is a role an educator and intellect should do. Social change in America has been accomplished through social movements and collective voices. Students have the ability to learn these skills which is imperative to the realities of today's social climate. We stand by Dr. Ramirez.

We want to contextualize our timeline experiences in the following letter. There is a reason the NSA has consistently gone to the front lines of these discussions not trying to be confrontational but there has been no other way we have been heard by administration. Our No More Pio Campaign Powerpoint was given in front of USG, and been told to Administration has been met with inaction. We are the smallest body on campus therefore, our voices are restricted and we have consistently been told that not enough of us will make a difference. Higher Administration always argues that Native Students are a small population of students whose voices don't matter because of numbers. They have used this argument to weaponsize their power over NSA and dismiss anything our group has to say because we are insignificant in numbers and in money to support the University. That argument alone shows where the power lies in the University and where the value of Native students are within the University. We ask that if you continue to read from here to understand and learn about the history of DU from an NSA perspective.

2016-2020 — NSA Elk Era: #NoDALP and #NoMorePios

We were encouraged by former Vice Chancellor Lili Rodriguez at one point that the only thing NSA can do to change the Pioneer name is to graduate and come back as Alumni to continue this conversation where it needs to happen. As the recent undergraduate alumni of DU, having graduated in 2019 and 2020, we have experienced trauma after trauma for our entire four years attending the university. We are here to tell those stories today.

In the same year as the protests against the Dakota Access Pipeline in Standing Rock in 2016, DU agreed to host the annual [Pipeline Leadership Conference](#) on campus — a conference that included the company responsible for the Dakota Access Pipeline, [Energy Transfer Partners](#) (ETP). This was a slap in the face to Native students on DU's campus, and Native students had to take time from their studies to quickly plan a protest against the event.

At this protest, DU Campus Safety and the Denver Police Department (DPD) threatened students with arrest, and labeled the group as “out of control.” Community members and DU students were [met with riot gear, mace guns, and other weapons](#) used to intimidate students. Yet in the same light, during the DU Pioneer game Frozen 4, [DU students lit a mattress on fire and blocked evans and were later congratulated for their win](#). “Pioneer Nation” got to walk away with DPD tweets of support and 0 conduct cases, while Native students were met with threats from Campus Safety, and members in our protest were pushed and regulated. In addition, our retired Native American Faculty from Illiff, Dr. Tink Tinker, was called “a jerk” during the protest by DU Director of Campus Safety, Don Enloe, after Don seemed to imply that he would measure out the distance that was appropriate to stand in front of a DU building to protest.

A few months later, DU's Board of Trustees decide to [continue to invest in the fossil fuel industry](#), to which NSA responded with a letter to the Board about how the fossil fuel industry commits violence against Indigenous communities beyond the destruction of land, and how by investing in these companies, DU is complicit in violence against Native communities, the same communities that the University claims to be trying to heal its relationship with. Neither the Board or Chancellor Chopp responded to the letter.

In the fall of 2017, NSA launched a campaign addressing DU's use of the nickname “Pioneer.” In March of 2018, DU Student Activists (DUSA) teamed up with NSA to host a “blackout” at DU Hockey's last home game of the season. At this blackout, the protestors dressed in all black and filled the student section of the hockey game. Every time DU's team scored, the group held up a banner that said “Pioneers stole Indian land and killed Indian people. #NoMorePios.”

When we raise our voice as a campus it is not met with dialogue and conversations. This protest had student members, both in NSA and other affinity groups, were then faced with hostility, aggression and the reaction from the crowd of adults in the crowd yelled and heckled us. We were told to “go back to where we came from,” which would be funny to Native students whose ancestors were here long before theirs were, except the fact that we had multiple international and immigrant students in our group. Eventually, we left the hockey game for our own health and safety. We got up, held hands, and left the game together. That night, we made sure no one walked home alone. There were some folks that were worried for our safety. Unfortunately, this reaction was expected, so much that we had Vice Chancellor Lili Rodriguez and other DU staff come chaperone the protest. However, DU never condemned these actions made by alumni and Pioneer sports fans.

Those memories stayed with us for months after the protest, as pro-Boone and Pioneer alumni started sending threats our way, and were creating rumors about our protest. We began to

plan carefully about when and where we spoke up against the nickname, making sure we felt safe to do so. At times, we even dropped the campaign until things died down on campus and we felt safe again. Earlier that year, NSA was asked if we felt safe attending the Homecoming Parade. We were confused as to why we wouldn't and the Office of Campus Life and Inclusive Excellence (CLIE) offered to have additional security around our float if we chose to participate. The wording and thought of that alone did not make us at NSA feel safe or want to be there because staff were already thinking in that manner.

When articles were published in the DU Clarion about student support against the Pioneer nickname, there were many harmful comments under the thread saying things like "these students should go back to the reservation," asking why we were at the school if we didn't like it, saying "Native American should have been genocided." NSA members during this time faced multiple instances of harassment from pro-Boone alumni. One Native student, who also worked at the DU Clarion, had comments harassing her specifically and cursing her out. One of these pro-Boone alumni called her boss at her job in an attempt to get her fired.

Let's Go DU, run by the same pro-Boone and Pioneer alumni who threatened us, made an [organization chart](#) including NSA asking "who did it?" on the No Mask Policy implemented by DU administration for safety concerns wearing masks on campus to harm other people while hiding their identity. This policy banned masks on campus, which included banning the alumni-funded Daniel Boone Mascot from wearing a mask on DU's campus, which made these alumni upset. This same website continues to put up hateful articles about our Native students, including posting [articles with pictures of our students' and elders' faces in them](#).

In 2018, fellow alumna in the Graduate School of Social Work 18', Alyssa Willie, conducted a research paper for her class about the Pioneer nickname and how it affected Native American students, which included interviews and organizing students. The paper concluded that NSA students were hypervigilant, and held themes that NSA members were struggling with mental health effects from the Pioneer nickname, including anxiety, not feeling safe on campus, and not feeling a sense of belonging on campus. Native students also felt subjugated to microaggressions from other students, staff, and faculty, and were constantly being asked to be the spokesperson, or to be the interviewee for various student's research papers for class.

2012-2015 — Boone Protest/Harlem Shake Video Era: Continued Campus Safety Violence to NSA—"Settler Logics-Indians are in the Way"

In 2014, alumna and former undergraduate student Amanda Williams, led the first ever No More-Pioneer protest on the DU campus, during the Harlem Shake video using Daniel Boone as a mascot. Amanda Williams, Julia Bramante, and Jozer Guerro held signs against the Boone character in front of Sturm Hall to demonstrate the disapproval of Daniel Boone in the Harlem Shake video. All three were not there to stop the event, but to show that the campus was not being inclusive and the video being shot did not represent all students who attended the university.

As more people showed up, the organizer for the video called security and stated that Amanda, Jozer, and Julia were disrupting and not allowing the video to be filmed. Campus Security then came and all three were then questioned if they had “permits” or “authorization” to be on Driscoll Green because the organizer of the video had a “permit” to video. We then learned that there were no permits or authorization given to the organizer of the video and the claim that he had them was false. We were the only students asked to provide student ID to prove we were students and were escorted off campus by Campus Safety because one of us did not have our “Pioneer Card/ID Card” to “prove” we were DU students, even though two of us did have our IDs. We were placed on student conduct alert and were not able to register for courses until Chancellor Coombe made a phone call to the Student Conduct Office to release our records, because we did not do anything wrong.

During this time Jozer Guerrero received threats from former DU Alumnae about how they would physically find out where he lived and harm him. Guerrero said that while they tried to “reason with” the filmmakers and guards, the guards were “rude and disrespectful” and used “excessive force” on the shoulders and arms of the students during the incident. DCS Public Information officer, Sgt. Banet said the policy surrounding use of force in escorting students is a use of “reasonable necessary force.” There were [over 100 students](#) (apart from us) there for the video, and many of them shouted racial slurs at us as we were forced off the Driscoll Green.

During our meeting with the Chancellor after the event, and in an email following the meeting, we requested that the security cameras with footage of Sturm and Driscoll Green be reviewed to visually show what happened that day. We also requested the footage from the officer’s body cam. These requests were repeatedly denied. Notably, the following year when there was an issue with another student organization on the same Driscoll Green and they requested to review the security camera footage, their request was immediately approved and the footage was provided to them to personally review. Jordan Ames, the administrative manager of the University’s marketing and communications department, also lied to the Westword and [said](#) that the Harlem Shake group had a permit, and that Campus Safety was not aware of any complaints, despite the several made in writing by us following the event

During this time, there were also efforts to change the mascot. The University attempted to create a new mascot by forming several University mascot focused groups (Mascot Steering Committee, Mascot Task Force, etc.). These groups were alumni, undergraduate students, graduate students, and faculty. The discussions and information within these groups, combined with the press surrounding the NSA and Harlem Shake video led to many conversations throughout DU regarding “controversy surrounding Boone,” resulting in conversations had on campus Facebook groups and alumni blog sites. Offensive comments were made by fellow undergraduate students and alumni, such as: “Amanda, Jozer, and Julia should go fuck themselves;” “These students should go back to the reservation where they came from;” “They should go and get drunk on their reservation;” “Don’t worry, this won’t be an issue anymore once all of the Native Americans die off.” These types of comments were made by the USG senior class president at the time, who also went on to make senior t-shirts with Boone on them.

A Native student had to work their way out of being in the same group project with this individual who said such violent words.

2008-2011 — Colonial Embedded Values of “Playing Indian” Era

In 2011, the DU Homecoming theme was “How the West was Won,” which was approved by Student Life, Office of the Chancellor, and Alumni Relations. NSA and CLIE (at the time called Center for Multicultural Excellence, or CME) brought up the issues of this theme and its colonial legacy, pointing out that “How the West was Won” resulted in genocide and removal of Indigenous peoples, which is directly linked to DU’s history of the Sand Creek Massacre.

In October of 2011, right before Indigenous Peoples’ Day was officially recognized, the Vice President of Greek Life made racist comments about NSA’s “Indigenous Peoples’ Day” during a Greek Life meeting by saying “I just want to end our meeting by saying Columbus Day is a real holiday,” which was then followed by more racist remarks. If an ally in the Multicultural Greek Life SLB had not said anything via email after the meeting (at the time Director Carl Johnson) those remarks would have been ignored. Later in November 2011, a “Pilgrim and Indian Party” was shut down in the Art Department when a NSA member brought up the problematic issue of “Playing Indian”. We are grateful to the Art Department Dean who immediately shut down the event.

In Spring 2012, a DU fraternity and sorority held a [Cowboys and Indian themed party](#) where women would dress up as Indians and men would come as Cowboys. Native women have the highest rate of sexual assault and of going missing in our communities. Native and Indigenous women are vulnerable under the structure of colonialism, which we see to this day with Indigenous women in North and South America. The hypersexualization of Native Women depicted through costumes and as objects by settler logics causes harm to our community.

This event resulted in a public apology by the Greek Life to the Denver Native Community and forced to do community service at the DU Pow Wow in 2012. The sorority and fraternity volunteered for a few years, but over time they expressed that they no longer understood why they had to attend our Pow Wow and service our community. Their main argument was that they were not the cohort of folks who attended and held this party. This demonstrates two things (some, of course not all) non-Native students are not willing to learn, unless they are forced to learn, about our culture and how to respect our culture and they never want to continue the process of healing that their predecessors caused. There is not a continuous culture of learning and mutual respect from past wrongs on our campus. How can we have a dialogue on campus about this term “Pioneer” if there is no such facilitation or environment for such conversations to happen?

After the University publicly apologized, the conversation went onto a digital platform where many anonymous racist remarks were made to the Native students. In the DU Clarion, one student made note, “If there were no Native students on campus, this wouldn’t be an issue.” Other persons also added “That the Native American population will eventually decrease and

when there are no longer Native Americans anymore this will no longer be an issue.” There was also an Alumni who made remarks on the comment section that stated “we didn’t give out enough smallpox blankets to the Native Americans.”

During these past days since the release of these emails, we have compiled these events as oral histories to remind the community where we stand and we will continue to be here now and in the future. Oppositional thoughts and conversations have always been a part of campus’s greater discourse. Yet, we want to call to attention that NSA students are never safe in having these conversations that you are encouraging to have.

In Solidarity with Current Native Students at DU,
Former Leadership of Undergraduate DU Native Student Alliance
Indigenous Alumni Affinity Group



Archives

No DAPL

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MK0EZXOf5Og&feature=youtu.be&fbclid=IwAR0dSMaW4UEv77qgfSf-fRCF03MV-IMKNepYRocXh4ZBGgw3--e77Asfv1M>

DU Harlem Shake

https://duclarion.com/2013/02/harlem_shake_du/
<https://www.westword.com/news/former-du-mascot-boone-is-in-trouble-5119687>

Protests and Native Experiences from 2016-2019

<https://duwhilenative.home.blog>

Let’s go DU

<https://letsgodu.com/2018/01/13/breaking-letter-confirms-collusion-at-highest-levels-of-du-who-did-it/>

Cowboy and Indian Theme Party

https://indiancountrytoday.com/archive/students-to-apologize-for-cowboys-and-indians-party-zfs4QOene0Ox_MpXvoXQyQ

We have a letter from Campus Safety admitting that the students filming the video DID NOT have a permit and also informing us that they reviewed the video footage (but still did not provide it to us)

- This is from an email sent to Chancellor Coombe following the event:
 - We were holding signs that read "Boone Needs to Go" in order to voice our opinion and help raise awareness of this difficult issue. We calmly stood on the field, and after being accosted by the videographer, expressed that we in no way were trying to stop the film, we were just going to stand there and be a part of it in the only way we felt we could. The videographer became very angry and offensive, and promptly walked with Boone over to Campus Safety, telling them that they did not want us there and to force us to leave.
 - Campus Safety swiftly came up to us and told us that we had to leave immediately. We tried to explain to them that we are students of the University and have just as much a right to be there as anyone else, yet they persisted to reprimand us and demand we leave the boundaries of DU's campus, even after we gave them our student IDs. Upon more deliberation, they said several times, pointing at Boone and the videographer that "They don't want you here, so you have to leave...You have been uninvited." Comments like this were continually spoken to us throughout this entire struggle on the Green, and we were also threatened that we would be given citations for "Disobeying a DU staff member" and would be forced off of the campus if we did not go ourselves. At last, Campus Safety forcefully removed us from Driscoll Green.
 - Not only were our basic rights as DU students utterly and publicly violated, but Boone, a figure that is not even a part of our University, was given authority over us. At his command, Campus Safety, without any discussion, made the decision that we the students of NSA were in the wrong and should be thrown off of campus. In our code of conduct under the section regarding interference, it explicitly states that "Any act, display, or communication that causes a disruption or an obstruction of educational, administrative, residential or other aspect of the University's mission or operations, or intentionally interferes with the right of access to University facilities or freedom of movement of anyone on campus. This policy is not intended to prohibit organized, peaceful, and orderly protests." We were not disturbing any aspect of DU's mission, unless someone were to claim that the glorification of Denver Boone is a part of DU's progressive mission. Nor were we doing anything more than calmly and peacefully expressing ourselves for the better of the DU community as a whole. By this definition of interference, those violating the code of conduct were the Campus Safety officers, the videographer, and the student dressed as Boone. It is impossible to ignore that race discrimination took place that day, directly attacking DU students of color.