In June of this year you tasked UNLV Chief Diversity Officer Rainier Spencer (from my office) to collect historical data regarding the UNLV mascot and gather qualitative feedback from various campus and community stakeholders as to their perceptions of the mascot. Below is a summary of Dr. Spencer’s research. I’ve also included the full report with his findings. I’m happy to discuss further or answer any questions you may have.

Overview

Over the last year, a series of discussions in various campus towns across the country have developed surrounding symbolism, mascots, and historical references. The topic was subsequently raised in southern Nevada not long after national events drew attention to the matter. Naturally the leadership at both NSHE and UNLV found it appropriate to make a commitment to having greater dialogue around Hey Reb!, dialogue that would include both internal and external constituencies.

Scope of Project

The goal was to collect data and assess sentiments regarding the mascot, its name, the history, and the related imagery. Through a series of focus groups, and also historical research at the UNLV library and the State of Nevada archives, data and sentiments were collected about the history and evolution of Hey Reb!, the changes made over the years to the mascot, and the reasoning behind those changes. In addition, through dialogue with campus and community stakeholders, Dr. Spencer was able to glean the overall perception of current and former students and athletes, current and former faculty and staff, and long-time southern Nevadans’ perception of Hey Reb!

Findings

There is overwhelming support for use of the term Rebels as UNLV’s mascot. Although there was strong, positive sentiment for Hey Reb! as the physical characterization of the university’s mascot, it was not as strong as the term Rebels. There are also those – although much smaller in number – who find the Hey Reb! mascot to be offensive and see the mascot as having ties to the Confederate South.

Research also revealed that there have been at least four times in UNLV’s history when the mascot has been freshened or updated to reflect the times, most recently in 2006. Previous ties to the Confederacy were dismissed by most constituencies, some expressing surprise at the inferred affiliation.

Through our own internal audit, we found a rendition of the university’s initial mascot – that has ties to the Confederacy – on the floor of the Barrick Museum, the original venue for UNLV basketball. The
mascot for that era, which was also the original mascot, was the lone wolf “Beauregard.” Some discussion ensued around what to do with the image given its placement on the wooden floor, the historical value of the location of the image, and acknowledging that some forms of artwork are controversial in nature but part of the creative activity that takes place on a university campus. It was recommended to preserve the rendering for archival purposes.

Finally, through Dr. Spencer’s rigorous research, we found that the name of the student newspaper has vacillated between Yell and its current name of Rebel Yell! Some questions were raised about the meaning of the term Rebel Yell! and the roots of that term, as well as its perception among stakeholders.

In conclusion, I would recommend the following action items:

1) Share the findings of the research with the campus community, NSHE officials, and other stakeholders so any further dialogue that occurs can happen with the full historical context.
2) Ensure that all documents and/or expressions of the mascot in physical and digital forms associated with school mascot Hey Reb! are updated.
3) Place a plaque in the Barrick Museum by the lone, remaining rendering on campus of the university’s original mascot - Beauregard (wolf) - to provide context as to its place in our history and to clarify that we have disavowed any references to the Confederacy and there is no connection with the current mascot Hey Reb!
4) Approach the Advisory Board and leadership team for the student newspaper and ask it to consider changing the name.
5) There is a history of freshening or updating the current version of the Hey Reb! mascot approximately once every decade dating back to the mid-1990s. Determine the need to freshen Hey Reb! to reflect current times, given that the last update was done in 2006.