Engaging students in discussion on controversial societal issues is important when preparing students to become knowledgeable and engaged citizens in and outside the classroom (Hess & McAvoy, 2015). Critical thinking is crucial in higher education, which was illustrated in a report by the Association of American Colleges and Universities that found 93% of higher education faculty believe critical thinking is an essential learning outcome (Quitadamo & Kurts, 2007). Furthermore, research has found that students who develop critical thinking skills get better grades, are able to use reasoning when making daily decisions, and are more employable (Quitadamo & Kurts, 2007). Thus, by addressing controversial issues in the classroom students are pushed to develop critical thinking skills that may improve their cultural competency and decision-making skills as engaged, productive members of society.

One controversial issue that provides a platform to encourage critical thought in the classroom is the debate surrounding the use of Native American mascots in sports. Native Americans have a long and storied history in the United States and Native culture has been used to brand sports at all levels for more than a century. While sport brands include components such as team names, logos, and symbols that allow an organization to differentiate itself from another, the prominence of the mascot as an emblematic representation of the sport organization makes it an exceptionally important part of the sport brand (Presley, Shreffler, Hancock, & Schmidt, 2017). Combining this importance in branding with the polarizing effect of the Native mascot debate encourages a more critical examination of the use of Native mascots in sports.

This phenomenological study was designed to address this critical conversation and examine the perceptions of non-Native students towards the Native American mascot controversy. Participants engaged in two semi-structured interviews and participated in a class discussion on the topic led by a Native American lecturer. The lecturer discussed concepts relating to the history of Native American mascot use, the formal effort to change by the National Congress of American Indians, cultural appropriation, Native American stereotypes, the history of the word “Redskin,” and the elimination of the Native. The goal of this presentation was to present on controversial Native issues and encourage critical thinking by students to help understand their own thoughts and perceptions about this topic, while also considering those of others. Qualitative research was deemed appropriate for this study because narrative accounts and testimonies are valued as sources of data in both Critical Race Theory and Tribal Critical Race Theory (Brayboy, 2005).

Following the review of the transcripts from the interviews, themes were created for both the pre-lecture interviews and the post-lecture interviews. For the pre-lecture interviews, the themes that emerged were: Honor, Indifference, Affiliation, and Colonized Education. For the post-lecture interviews, the following themes emerged: Offensive, Misrepresentation, Empathy, and Elimination. Each theme will be discussed in more detail if accepted for presentation at the conference.