Recruitment and Retention of Underrepresented Students at the UIUC

By: Chris Lalla

“[The UIUC] admissions has recently started to do more recruiting the past few years to increase diversity” according to UIUC admissions counselor, Jamie McFarling. I interviewed Ms. Jamie McFarling on March 13, 2008 in her office on the first floor of the UIUC admissions building. She specifically looks at applicants that apply to the College of LAS, which contains the highest number of applicants and admitted students out of any other college.\footnote{"Undergraduate Profile." College of LAS. 2005. University of Illinois At Urbana-Champaign. 04 Apr. 2008 <http://www.las.uiuc.edu/about/profile.html>.} Ms. Jamie McFarling provided great insight on the types of presentations, brochures, and other ways that the UIUC advertises the university to both junior and senior high school students. During the main course of the interview, diversity became a topic of conversation and the ways in which underrepresented students benefit more than other students from the presentations, brochures, etc that the UIUC admissions department has for prospective students. Overall the interview was relaxed, and it became a guiding forefront for the subject of appealing to all students, specifically underrepresented students that will increase the diversity on campus.

Diversity for the subject of this research will be defined as the social interaction between students of a different culture, ethnic background, socioeconomic class, or area that one came from. The UIUC campus is predominantly made up of white, suburban Chicago students.\footnote{"New Freshman Demographics." Illinois Student Enrollment Information. 2007. University of Illinois At Urbana-Champaign. 05 Apr. 2008 <http://www.dmi.uiuc.edu/stuenr/abstracts/fa07Freshman_ten.htm>.} The underrepresented students are those that are not white, come from a rural area, state other than Illinois, or country for that matter, or even extremely underrepresented in their major, such as a female in engineering. The admission of more underrepresented students on campus has increased the statistical diversity on campus in recent years, according to the UIUC enrollment figures of
ethnic background and socioeconomic background, ultimately allowing students the chance to prepare for what they will encounter in society. Statistical diversity is linked to the recruitment of underrepresented students; however, the UIUC is also concerned with ideological diversity which involves the retention of the underrepresented students and providing opportunities for social interaction for students of all race, socioeconomic background, culture, etc. This idea of ideological diversity stems from the notion that the workforce is becoming more diverse thus is a more ‘global workforce’. By linking the recruitment of students and what types of students it benefits most with statistical diversity, and using this notion to analyze the services, resources, and cultural opportunities provided to all types of students that increase the ideological diversity, one will become more informed of the process that it takes to achieve a high level of diversity for all students, to prepare them for the global workforce.

In order to increase the diversity on campus to lead towards the goal of preparing one for a global workforce, the first aspect that must be done by the UIUC admissions office is to advertise and provide information about the academic services and cultural groups that exist on campus. In the interview with Jamie McFarling, I gained the notion that the UIUC is aware that historically, many inner city students don’t have the knowledge about the counselors that will help them academically, the cultural houses that will continue to celebrate their culture on campus, the financial aid or scholarship money provided, or many other opportunities that will help them in their college search. In recent years, the UIUC admissions department is placing a greater importance on admitting a diverse, yet qualified student body each year, according to Jamie McFarling, which starts with informing prospective high school students about these opportunities and resources that the campus provides. The admissions department faces many challenges to increase diversity, while accepting students that have the potential to succeed; however, the office has various ways it attempts to overcome these challenges.
One way these challenges are overcome is through providing high school juniors and seniors with brochures about what the experience is like on campus and the endless amounts of organizations, services, and groups that exist on campus. During the interview with Jamie McFarling, I was given a diversity brochure that I was able to examine that is currently given out at admissions presentations. This brochure provides knowledge to students about the ways that diversity is attained on campus and how certain cultural groups provide opportunities for students to celebrate their culture or just celebrate another culture, while on campus. From my own experience one year ago in the admission process, I felt that the UIUC diversity brochure would appeal most to African Americans, Latino/a’s, and Native Americans as there are various cultural lunch ins, cultural houses, student organization, and orientations/open houses that are explicitly stated in the brochure. This brochure provides information that details the housing arrangements so students can live with people of different backgrounds to help them obtain more of an open mind about race and society in general. The cultural houses help students achieve a rewarding educational experience, while promoting the understanding of the culture and social events such as a dinner banquet. Although this brochure does appear to cater to specific cultural groups, it also informs all students of the wide range of organizations on campus that will make them feel comfortable and that they can attend these cultural events to learn more about the history of a culture. Also, this brochure informs students of events to welcome students of all backgrounds such as the African Students’ Organization BBQ, the Office of Minority Student Affairs orientation, and the Latina/o orientation. This type of information will appeal to students of various races and ethnicities to show the various opportunities that exist once admitted and arriving on campus. This knowledge helps to increase awareness to students that are less-informed about the admissions process such as first generation college students, lower socioeconomic background students, and students that just aren’t provided in the resources in high school about the benefits of
attending a university like the UIUC. The images in Appendix A give an impression of the way that the UIUC advertises a diverse student body and for that matter administrative body. There are other ways in which the UIUC meets the challenges of attracting underrepresented students to campus.

The UIUC Admissions offers a program called, “Orange and Blue Days” in which prospective students can come to campus to take a tour, attend an admissions presentation, and a diversity presentation, according to the UIUC admissions home page. Those students that don’t have the transportation from the city of Chicago because they can’t afford it or don’t have a ride are provided an “Illini Bus” to attend one of these days, free of charge, according to Jamie McFarling. The UIUC admissions website is a user friendly site that allows students to simply sign up for one of the Orange and Blue Days on campus, and once registered it will confirm the registration via email with directions and an itinerary for the day. Registration can also take place via mail or telephone for those who don’t have access to the internet. The free of charge Illini Bus allows students from inner city schools that are typically of a low socioeconomic background to come experience campus life, while seeing the organizations and cultural houses that are presented before them on campus, whereas without this service they may have never been given the chance to experience what day on campus is like for a UIUC student. This recruits all students in a way, but it really is most beneficial to students in the inner city students that are possible first generation college students, have very low incomes, or just don’t have access to the information about the UIUC that the majority of students that apply do.

From my own experience, I attended one of these days and while I did find it interesting, I already knew most of the information and endless amounts of student organizations and other opportunities that existed on campus. I know that many students of a different race had many
questions on financial aid and possible cultural living arrangements that will allow them to continue their cultural rituals they might at home. While I cannot speak for all other white students, it appears that these presentations have more of an impact on an underrepresented student’s decision to attend and make the UIUC their home for four years, as many students at the UIUC come from a suburban background with a high degree of knowledge about the reputation and services offered on campus. By putting on these presentations on campus, students ultimately will get the chance to experience campus life and tour the campus possibly for the first time. This is crucial in many students’ decisions; especially those that did not have prior knowledge about the number of services on campus such as lunch INS, diversity discussions and cultural organizations. For those students who cannot come to campus for various reasons, the UIUC caters to their needs.

The UIUC admissions travels to high schools and community colleges to promote this idea of global interaction in the work force, which attracts underrepresented students who are less likely to be aware of the cultural existence they can have on campus. The University of Illinois has three campuses that work together to promote their cultural opportunities, organizations, and various social networking groups that are available on the particular campus. According to a Chicago News Forum, a Loyola University student transferred to the University of Illinois at Chicago because of an African American organization that obtained a tuition waiver for her and welcomed her into their group on campus. Although this occurred at the campus in Chicago, the U of I can be said to have students that specifically attend this university because of the scholarship awards and numerous cultural organizations and registered student organizations on campus. By traveling and providing this knowledge to prospective high school juniors and seniors, all students will be

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able to realize the various cultural seminars, banquet dinners, cultural houses, academic tutoring, and much more that exist on campus. It also is important to realize that the UIUC travels to every single county in the state of Illinois to inform all students, but potentially students who were unable to come to campus because it was an inconvenience or they just could not make it for other reasons gain the most from this experience.\cite{4} I personally was able to attend a presentation at my high school.

From my own recollection of this presentation at my high school, many of the students around me seemed to be more concerned with the academic qualifications, though there were a few students of color that asked many questions about financial aid, housing, and cultural events pertaining to their culture that exist on campus. Though this is just one recollection, it appears and is quite possible that the high school presentations are most effective for students who are concerned about finding their niche on campus, which are typically underrepresented students. These high school presentations also provide general background about the Office of Minority Student Affairs, as this is an academic service offered to not just minority students but all students. According to the Office of Minority Student Affairs website, “OMSA assists campus units and student organizations with creating environments and programs that will support and bolster minority students' success and continuation at the University.” It is evident though that the OMSA was specifically created to help increase the success of minority students, who typically may come from high schools that don’t offer the coursework that many other student had access to or lack a social niche on campus. Nonetheless, the presentations help these students understand to excel in the highest courses offered to them and that there will be services such as the OMSA. It is vital that the UIUC continues to inform students in all different ways that will be at the student’s convenience about the potential experience one can have on campus in order to maintain a diverse

\textsuperscript{4} McFarling, Jamie. Personal interview. 13 Mar. 2008.
student body that attracts foreign students, students of color, out of state students, inner city students, etc.

These miscellaneous ways that students are given information about the UIUC, such as mailing, emails, and other forms of communication that they either register for or the UIUC obtains from a standardized testing agency per the student’s consent. According to University of Illinois Admissions website, students can sign up as a prospective to student to receive mailings from the UIUC or students can indicate this on a standardized test, and these mailings include diversity and admissions brochures, Illini monopoly which contain facts about the UIUC, student registered organizations, and much more. The UIUC admissions website has student blogs where students of color, lower income, of a different ethnicity, and many more write about their experience on campus. This allows students of a specific culture or background read about a student’s experience that may be similar to what they are looking for on campus. It allows an honest opinion from an actual student’s experience, which allows those not able to experience the campus life, learn about possible clubs, organizations, academic groups, and social groups that may fit their needs when they arrive on campus. The student blogs offer a unique perspective from a current student that will be more apt to attract a prospective student that may be skeptical of the way that UIUC officials present the campus and the diversity within it.

Financial information and other opportunities are included in mailed brochures to prospective students. I learned a great deal about scholarship opportunities within these brochures for specific student groups in an interview with the Assistant Provost for Recruitment and Retention, Domonic Cobb. It was March 27, 2008 in Mr. Cobb’s office located in the Swanlund administration building. The interview was very relaxed throughout, and he provided contributed a great deal of knowledge about the funding for scholarships and support services by the Office of
the Provost for groups on campus. For example, the President’s Award scholarship is a scholarship that is for underrepresented students that provides them financial assistance for their academic achievements. Domonic Cobb specifically stated in the interview, “The salute to academic achievement award provides financial assistance to students.” I found that these two awards specifically are for underrepresented students, who are typically students that are in the most need of financial aid. There are many more scholarships available to students by accessing the UIUC admissions home page and going to the scholarship tab. The financial aid and scholarship information available on the web page provide students with the assurance that if they are in need of financial aid, there will be some form available to them whether it is through scholarship, government based need, or another type of financial aid. The merit based and need based scholarships that I learned about through Domonic Cobb and the UIUC admissions web page are just one of the many ways that the UIUC assures students that they will be able to attend regardless of their financial situation. The Office of the Provost provides much of the support services and funding for various college programs or groups in order to go about the second aspect of preparing students for the global workforce, the retention of all current students.

The UIUC offers a wide range of cultural programming for minority students and encourages all current students to attend. Cultural programming may include an African American lunch in, Filipino Dance, Latino history seminar, or Native American cultural presentation. Though all students are encouraged to attend these to develop their education outside of the classroom, the minority students these are intended for is what is attractive for prospective students as they will see it as a way to find their niche through a smaller organization. It allows a minority student to experience firsthand how their culture is continually celebrated on campus. Also, a prospective white student may experience a cultural program like this, though not as likely, to gain knowledge about another culture or just to cease the wide range of organizations and events that
exists on campus on a daily basis. For example, in a recent Daily Illini editorial by Paul Cruse III, it was stated that, “An event like a Filipino culture-inspired fashion show might convince a visiting prospective Filipino student to attend the University. A prospective black student could make his final determination to attend based on the great experience he had listening to a Civil Rights Movement lecture given during his campus visit.” This editorial provides support and an actual example of how the UIUC encourages cultural organizations to invite prospective students so that they experience what the brochures and presentations advertise. The UIUC cultural house, La Casa, provides Latino/a students with a place where they can comfortable, socially interact with students of their culture and for that matter any other student that is trying to benefit from interacting with those of another culture. While many Chicago suburban students know a lot of what opportunities the UIUC offers for them, there are many underrepresented students from other countries, rural areas, or out of state that don’t have the chance to talk to their friends about the UIUC because that is not what many of their friends chose for higher education.

Other ways that the UIUC retains minority students and ultimately makes them feel comfortable on campus is by inviting prospective minority students to cultural programming nights, so they will get a firsthand experience of the comfort level they will be able to feel and that they will be able to associate with students of their culture as well as teach other students about the history of their culture. A recent Daily Illini article by Paul Cruse III stated, “Cultural programming makes this school more attractive to minorities. An event like a Filipino culture-inspired fashion show might convince a visiting prospective Filipino student to attend the University. A prospective black student could make his final determination to attend based on the great experience he had listening to a Civil Rights Movement lecture.” This will not only recruit but retain many students that are concerned about the environment on campus. The list of possible cultural programming for prospective students is endless and this certainly is what the UIUC
Admissions targets by informing students about these events. Although white students may make their decision off the academic profile of the university and the atmosphere it has, there are many minority students that further analyze if they will feel comfortable being a minority on campus and be able to continue possible cultural rituals, cultural education, or simply be able to socially relate to similar students. I have realized from my own experience on campus that many underrepresented students may not have the issue of adapting academically, but many appear to seem socially out of place. The cultural events like the Filipino fashion show allow Filipino students and all other students to come together and unite for a great event.

The fact that inner city students which include many Filipinos are invited to a banquet and dinner dance to experience what it is like on campus and how their cultural traditions can still be obtained on campus is vital to obtaining some of the best minority students not only to accept but to graduate from the UIUC. It is important to realize that the UIUC does not intend these cultural programs and dances to be only for the specific culture. Domonic Cobb stated in an interview that, “All students are encouraged to attend. I went to an African American lunch in and there were some Latino students and white students. All students have the chance to practice diversity in this environment.” Underrepresented students, including minority students, and all students will benefit from these opportunities that are advertised as they will have the chance to interact and learn more about each other’s culture. Minority students will have the chance to celebrate their cultural traditions, while other students will have the chance to learn about other countries, cultures, and most of all interact with these students to develop their social skill. There are various services available to students that are struggling to find these opportunities, information about the events, or simply just need some type of counseling.
The Office of Minority Student Affairs was originally created to assist underrepresented students adjust to campus both academically and socially. Although it has expanded to offer all types of students counseling, graduate tutoring, and much more, its main goal is to bolster the success and continuation of minority students on campus. In an interview with the director of minority student affairs, Michael Jeffries, on April 7, 2008, I became informed about the independence rather than dependence idea that the OMSA has. The OMSA supplements and helps students adjust to help all students realize the global workforce that they will be entering in their near future. Mr. Jeffries was very informative about the way that the OMSA has partnerships with the cultural houses and information about the cultural events to direct students that are looking for more social interaction on campus. The OMSA helps to make the UIUC feel like a smaller place by the one on one graduate tutoring it offers, counseling services, and the living learning communities that were created by the driving force of the OMSA. Overall the OMSA simply tries to assist students in becoming more independent, rather than dependent on services offered, by creating a comfortable environment such as a LLC that one can live in or come to each day to learn and socially interact a great deal. According to Michael Jeffries, the OMSA’s philosophy is to provide points of support throughout the campus, but it is not a home away from home. It provides resources such as graduate counselors to help provide tutoring or career knowledge for a specific program or major and allows students to interact with their graduate mentors on a personal level too, but the goal of this is to create further independence.

From my own observations within the OMSA, the majority of students using the cultural events, services, and other resources provided were underrepresented, mainly students of color. Although the OMSA offers services to white students to realize there is a world outside of their

own community, many of the students served are underrepresented as this was the original purpose of it. This is mainly because underrepresented students are in more need of not necessarily academic services, though some are, but many come from the inner city, rural area, or foreign country so they cannot relate to most of the suburban students on campus. The OMSA is a catalyst, according to Michael Jeffries, in the sense that it informs students of the Career Center, cultural houses, student registered organizations, and many other resources that it used to provide, but now has became more of an informative level of services for the social purpose of students. The OMSA still offers graduate tutors to assist in the academia, along with counseling all types of students to help bolster their academic success and help them make the adjustment to campus. It appears from the interview and my own observations that many of the students that use the OMSA are freshman and sophomore students because they have the most trouble adjusting immediately to campus.

The success of these students both at the school and the professional level continues to grow based on the utilization of resources that the particular students use. Michael Jeffries told a story about how a young woman in 1992 became a part of the scholars program at the OMSA as an undergraduate student, and became more acquainted with technology at the time, yet still was not very experienced with it. He told me that he never thought she would obtain a professional career in technology. However, an hour before my interview with Michael took place, she came to visit him as they used to work closely together, and she was working for an informational technology company in the eastern U.S. The moral of the story is that the OMSA identifies issues and provides services and resources on more of an individual basis. Also, success is measured by the way the student uses the resources whether its graduate tutoring, being informed of the Career Center Services or any other type of service that the student uses to a degree. There are various

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other ways that the OMSA is more of a catalyst or supplemental service to all students that helps assist them in the right direction to prepare them for their future.

The final aspect that helps advertise these programs to retain all types of students is the numerous fliers, posters, and emails about cultural nights presented by the Illini Union Board, such as an African American History makers seminar. These posters can be seen in dorm room hallways, the Illini Union, and many groups on the Quad promote these types of events. Students, particularly underrepresented students, will typically be most interested in these events as it is their chance to become involved on campus. It is their chance to make a difference in an organization where they can have these seminars about the history of their culture. With the help of the Illini Union board, the OMSA helps to increase diversity on campus (as there is a long way to go according to Michael Jeffries) by promoting these events online, by posters, and by word of mouth in the actual office. Although many students may still not be aware of this and there is a long way to go to continue to encourage all students to attend, the UIUC is offering a wide range of opportunities to bolster the level of ideological diversity on campus. White students are increasingly becoming encouraged to attend these events to expand beyond their comfort zone of their hometown and to help them realize that the world is much more diverse than where many students on campus come from. These programs that are advertised to recruit students and to help the retention of many students who may at first feel uncomfortable or out of place is important to maintaining a diverse campus to prepare one for the global work force. The UIUC prides itself on the diverse level of students on campus, but it also prides itself on the increasing number of activities and events for students of all backgrounds to come together.

This idea of a global society is the driving force behind the importance of offering and encouraging all students to come together to learn about each other’s cultures and interact with
each other, to expand beyond their own comfort zone. According to a Chicago Sun Times article, the UIUC has the most number of foreign students of any public university in the U.S., which ultimately increases the number of underrepresented students on campus, allowing more of a variety of students on campus to promote the idea of a global economy.\(^7\) The recruitment of foreign students and all underrepresented students is vital to having a diverse student body, while the retention of this wide range of students until their graduation is vital to allowing and preparing students not only for their professional jobs, but the social skills they will need in today’s global workforce. According to Michael Jeffries and Domonic Cobb, corporations have provided communication that they are looking for people who have strong work skills, but also personal and social skills. This is the main reason that studying abroad is strongly encouraged as the UIUC is still working on increasing the actual campus diversity.

Although both Domonic Cobb and Michael Jeffries acknowledge that diversity is increasing, there still is a long way to go to provide students the ideal environment to prepare for when they graduate and enter the global economy. The aspect that is being addressed currently is to encourage the interaction of students from different backgrounds and most advertising and promoting of cultural programs and other opportunities. In 2000, the school started a program called Global Crossroads, which brings multiple cultures together in one dorm. In addition to living together, students can attend classes, seminars and cultural exchanges on international issues. One current UIUC said in reference to the diversity on campus, "Coming here . . . has really opened me up. "Sometimes I feel like a minority because there are so many different cultures and races." The UIUC chancellor, Richard Herman ended the article by saying, "We are changing the mind-set of these students," he said. They come back with a different outlook on the

world.” The mindset of many suburban students is very narrow and many don’t realize that the global economy is very diverse and many individuals don’t realize this until they enter the actual workforce. For example, Professor Nancy Abelmann, who directs an ethnography of the university said, "Many undergraduate students go about their lives quite untouched by the presence of many international students." The UIUC is simply trying to prepare students for life after graduation and beyond the academic classes on campus.

Although globalization is an important concept, many parents and students in the state of Illinois argue that the UIUC is rejecting qualified in state applicants in exchange for foreign students who may pay more as they can’t qualify for government based need or simply because these students help create more of the global environment. Many may argue that there still is not the level of social interaction between students that are foreign, of a different race, or underrepresented on campus. Students just choose to live their lives separately from these foreign students or other underrepresented students, thus this is decreasing the amount of in state students that can be admitted while diversity is not truly increasing to prepare one for the global workforce. Although students are still not expanding completely beyond their comfort zone, the recent promotion of programs like Global Crossroads and other cultural events that encourage all students to attend will eventually help increase the level of social interaction.

One must realize that the UIUC’s job is to create an environment that will prepare its students for the professional world they will encounter, along with the types of people they will interact with. There is overwhelming evidence to support the idea that the UIUC does offer an


endless amount of support services, resources, cultural organizations, groups, and other counseling to help retain underrepresented students. It is evident through this research that the UIUC does offer many opportunities that allow students to ‘practice’ what they will encounter in their professional careers. While the argument exists that diversity may not be increasing as fast on campus, there has been more social interaction observed on a daily basis in class discussions or groups. I believe the UIUC is offering a great deal of services to help students learn about other people and cultures; however as Michael Jeffries agreed, it is the student persistence that the university cannot control. Although there may be upset students about the level of social interaction between students of different backgrounds, the UIUC still needs to provide a wide range of opportunities and increase the promotion of these opportunities in order to create an environment in which one can practice diversity. It is ultimately up to the student, hence student persistence, if they choose to take advantage of the wide range of education they can take part in simply by interacting with other students and attending a cultural seminar, event, or joining a living learning community/cultural house. Remember, it is the UIUC who creates the environment; the students choose or choose not take advantage of it.
Appendix A

1. A sample student blog at the UIUC Admissions Blog Web page (http://blog.oar.uiuc.edu/?author=12)

2. UIUC Admissions Diversity Brochure

3. UIUC art sculpture day
   http://www.oar.uiuc.edu/future/campuslife/photos/sculpture.html

4. UIUC La Casa Latina Cultural house alumni
5. UIUC Office of Minority Student Affairs building

UIUC Admissions counselor, Jamie McFarling

6. UIUC OMSA director, Michael Jeffries

Domonic Cobb, Assistant Provost for Recruitment and Retention

Office of Minority Student Affairs

Project AIM brochure to assist students in adjusting to campus.

An example of a UIUC cultural house
UIUC admissions brochure promoting the campus as the most diverse in the Big Ten.

A photo of the UIUC Asian American Cultural Center
The workforce has become very global, thus the UIUC is concerned about the diverse background of students it has to offer opportunities for all. The world around us is diverse, thus the UIUC hopes to prepare its students for this on campus.

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