

UI sees significant drop in minorities

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Although the University of Illinois just enrolled the largest freshman class in its history, the number of minority students dropped significantly from a year ago.

There are 410 black students in the freshman class this year, down almost 200 from 2003. It was the smallest black freshman enrollment in at least the past decade, according to the Office of Admissions and Records.

Hispanic student numbers dropped by 20, and American Indian freshman enrollment dipped from 25 to 19. Asian enrollment was up by 453, but the UI doesn't consider them an under-represented group.

Other Big Ten universities such as Ohio State and the University of Iowa reported minority declines.

"The minority enrollment was a disappointment. That is something we have been spending a lot of time on," said Stanley Henderson, associate provost for enrollment management. "We dropped in all three categories. The definition of excellence includes diversity. We are not willing to accept that kind of drop."

UI officials are especially disheartened after having record numbers of black, Hispanic and American Indian freshmen last year. There have been at least 500 black students admitted annually since 2001 – until this year.

"Our minority numbers have gone up for several years. We are very concerned about the reversal," said Interim Chancellor Richard Herman. "We are looking at if we did anything that led to this conclusion. I am not happy with the results and we need to turn it around."

Giraldo Rosales, director of La Casa Cultural Latina, agreed.

"This is very perplexing," he said. "The university shouldn't want to see themselves in this predicament again. Historically, the university has been isolated from public scrutiny. This absence of objective opinion and input has created our current policies."

There are several guesses why the undergraduate numbers decreased. Henderson said there was a drop in the quality of the applicant pool, which wasn't the case a year ago.

"We saw a big increase in applications of people whose predicted UI (grade point average) was in the lower range," he said. "That is a recipe for the increase of denials."

Henderson also suspects universities nationwide are all trying to reel in top minority students and the competition is heating up.

"Any university that wants to maintain that margin of excellence has to look at new ways of reaching students and getting their message out," he said. "We are looking at some major changes in recruitment practices. We have to do a better job of recruiting people of color."

The work to entice more minorities to come to the Urbana campus has already begun. The new recruiting strategy includes targeting high-level students – those with solid grades and at least a 24 ACT score – and sending out letters and e-mails, as well as candidates receiving calls from the admissions office and alumni.

"We are talking about recruiting families, not just the students," said Henderson. "Many times the extended family is going to have a role in the decision on where the student goes to college.

"So aunts and grandparents are going to be included as to why it is a good idea for their family members to come to UI."

There may be more undiscovered reasons why more minority students aren't applying to or being accepted by the UI.

Rosales said it could be the Chief Illiniwek controversy, or some students might want to stay closer to home and eat three meals a day instead of paying the high cost of room and board at a university. Others might not feel at home at the UI, where blacks and Hispanics make up less than 15 percent of the student population.

He added that the UI is a state land grant university, which is subject to state and federal funding requirements.

"And an important part of that is to maintain racial equity for student, staff and faculty. I think sometimes our decision makers forget that ... or hope we do," Rosales said.

Henderson said a bright spot was that the UI increased its number of black and Hispanic graduate students by at least 50 in each group.

While diversity took a drop, the university had about the same ACT average (27.7) and the same high school class rank, hovering around the 87th percentile, as last year.

The official freshman class enrollment is 7,248 students, a 6 percent increase from last year. The figure was actually 148 students more than expected.

"We were planning on the class growing. It's a bit ahead of where we were aiming for," said Henderson, who said the university was 15 students over its target last year. "We were a little more popular than we expected. That is one of the things that happens. If you look back five or six years ago, the UI was 300 over target."

Herman said not to expect the freshman class numbers to keep moving up, though.

"We are topped out now," he said.

Freshman international student numbers rose by 49 this year.

Out-of-state freshman student numbers declined by 56, making up 10.9 percent of the university enrollment. Henderson expects the out-of-state numbers to decrease in the future.

"Students who are looking at public institutions are tending to stay in state due to the rising cost of out-of-state tuition," he said. "That is a challenge that is difficult to overcome."