

## Diversifying Graduate Education at Illinois

The University of Illinois is a land grant institution charged with enhancing the lives of citizens in Illinois, across the nation, and around the world. Diversity in graduate education is a vital part of that mission. In the *Next 150*, the university's recently launched strategic plan, the centrality of diversity to the achievement of our mission is emphasized. The report highlights the need to *"...Invest in the success of graduate education and our graduate students to ensure access and inclusion to our university for as diverse a student population as possible, through sustainability funding and graduate fellowships..."* as well the need to *"... Empower our graduate programs to recruit, fund, enroll, retain and graduate underrepresented minority graduate students."*

**Economic Rationale** - In today's global and digital economy, attaining an undergraduate degree is not enough to achieve full earning potential. According to a 2013 survey, employers want universities to place more emphasis on intellectual and practical skills with "information literacy" (72%) and "teamwork skills in diverse groups" (67%) topping the list of desired abilities. By comparison, "quantitative reasoning" came in at 55% and "knowledge about science and technology" at 56%. Surveyed employers also identified "ethics" and "intercultural skills" as the two most important areas for prospective employees regardless of academic field. **Graduate education matters for all populations as improved information literacy and cultural competency through "more education leads to better prospects for earnings and employment."** Equally as important to students is **attending a university with diverse graduate programs allowing the opportunity to develop valuable on-hand skills for working in diverse groups.**

**Social Rationale** - In the past thirty years, the demographics of the United States has changed dramatically. African Americans and Latina/o's now make-up 31.1% of the US population. In global cities such as Chicago, Los Angeles, and New York, people who identify as non-ethnic White are no longer the majority population. For example, Chicago's population is 31.7% non-Hispanic white, 32% African American, and 28% Latina/Latino. The University of Illinois has been slow to keep up with national and state demographic changes in its undergraduate and graduate enrollments. The underrepresentation of African American, Latina/o, and Native American students within graduate programs remains severe and systemic. In spite of demographic changes at the national and state level, improvements in undergraduate enrollments, and the fact that graduate education improves the earning potential and employment prospects of students, ethnic and racial minorities make up 10.6% of graduate programs at Illinois, a percentage that is substantially lower than for undergraduate students on our campus (19.4%). **Out of 14,672 graduate students, only 1,555 students are from underrepresented groups. Additionally, Illinois is currently in the bottom 25<sup>th</sup> percentile of peers in the percent of graduate and professional degrees granted to students from underrepresented groups. In sum, Illinois is underserving underrepresented communities with regard to attaining a graduate education.**

**Institutional Rationale** - Diversifying graduate education is a prerequisite for the development and implementation of an equitable and inclusive institutional culture. Research on structural diversity and its impact on students demonstrates that diversity along the entire ecosystem from undergraduate to graduate to faculty plays a significant role in producing an equitable and inclusive climate. **Improving the success of underrepresented undergraduate and graduate students is dependent on increasing diversity throughout the academic pipeline. Moreover, to meet the needs of industry and academy requires an investment in graduate and undergraduate students. A Ph.D. is required to attain employment in many STEM industries and national laboratories, for example.**

**The Next 150** - The release of our new Strategic Plan, coupled with the launch of a new IVCB budget model, provides us with an ideal opportunity to rethink how and why we will commit to supporting graduate education for students underrepresented on our campus. It is in this spirit that the Graduate College has outlined the following goals and action steps for collective consideration by our university community.

**Goal One: Access - Provide increased funding to support underrepresented minority graduate students at Illinois.** Cost is a significant barrier for many prospective underrepresented minority (URM) graduate students. Any effort to increase the number of underrepresented graduate students will need to provide increased funding for stipends and tuition waivers.

**Action Step 1.1 - Increase the number of students supported on Graduate College Underrepresented Minority fellowships from 50 to 150.** Currently, 50 underrepresented students are supported on central campus funds through the Graduate College Fellowship (40 doctoral; 10 masters) at a cost of approximately \$1.2M per year. The Next 150 Working Group on Diversity recommends substantially increasing this figure. We propose that a three-fold increase in central campus funding to \$3.6M will enable us to support 120 doctoral and 30 masters students. With three years of funding for doctoral students matched by two years of support at the department level, and one year of funding for the masters students.

**Action Step 1.2 – Secure renewed funding for a third and final 3-year term for the Sloan Foundation University Center for Exemplary Mentoring (UCEM).** The [Illinois UCEM](#), founded in June 2015 has achieved its primary objective to recruit and mentor 50 underrepresented racial/ethnic minority doctoral students in STEM fields. Illinois leveraged the financial resources, quality, depth, breadth and size of 19 STEM units in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences and the College of Engineering. In AY17-18, 26 Sloan Scholars enrolled in PhD programs and 3 MS students in MS/PhD programs. In just two years, the UCEM has increased to 54 participants across 13 departments. Securing continued Sloan funding through 2024 is essential to maintain the established momentum and to foster diversity and excellence in graduate education in the STEM fields.

**Action Step 1.3 – Seek industry and philanthropic support for bridge programs and other collaborative efforts between Illinois and minority serving institutions.** We must build robust bi-directional partnerships between leading Minority Serving Institutions (MSI) and Illinois to develop and sustain lasting relationships between students and faculty at our respective institutions to the mutual benefit of all. Our plan is seek industry and/or philanthropic support for a MSI Partners Initiative to advance these goals. We will coordinate our efforts in this initiative with our existing [Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion](#) programs which are designed to diversify graduate education at Illinois. For example, students attracted to the campus through the MSI Partners Initiative will be invited to participate in the programs and services offered by our existing and highly successful Sloan Foundation supported [University Center for Exemplary Mentoring \(UCEM\)](#). While the Sloan UCEM focuses on supporting URM doctoral students in STEM disciplines, the proposed MSI Partners Initiative would enable us to extend key elements of the UCEM project to a broader range of disciplines. It will also enable us to nurture long term, sustainable relationships between Illinois and our MSI partners.

**Goal Two: Recruitment - Ensure that promising students learn of the opportunities for graduate education available at Illinois and have an opportunity to visit our campus and meet our faculty and students.** Increasing the proportion of underrepresented graduate students on our campus will not be easy. Many potential students are not aware of all that Illinois has to offer. It will be important to market and publicize our programs widely through as many communications channels as possible.

**Action Step 2.1 – Ensure that Illinois is represented at major URM graduate student recruitment events.** The most effective recruitment strategies occur at the level of the program or laboratory. Building relationships between prospective students and our faculty and current students is critical to our success. Faculty interested in recruiting URM students should be provided with state-of-the-art recruitment materials and the financial support need to attend conferences and campus visits in support of our recruitment goals.

**Action Step 2.2 – Increase capacity of campus visit programs.** In order to achieve our recruitment goals we will need to increase the capacity of our fall, spring, and summer (Aspire, Community of Scholars, SROP/SPI) campus visit programs. We will also need to provide increased programming for research experiences for visiting undergraduate students (REU) who are hosted in numerous labs and programs throughout the summer.

**Action Step 2.3 – Growing the pipeline.** We need to target our recruitment efforts both within and outside our institution. We need to increase our efforts to recruit our own graduates and provide them with the resources they need to matriculate into our graduate programs. We also need to expand partnerships between Illinois and Minority Serving Institutions. These partnerships are most likely to thrive where pre-existing relationships have been established between faculty at Illinois and their MSI colleagues. We will conduct an “environmental scan” of existing relationships between Illinois faculty and colleagues working at MSI institutions. We will develop a list of “best practices” to guide programs and faculty interested in developing effective partnerships.

**Action Step 2.4 - Establish and support bi-directional internships and short-visit programs.** Most research universities offer a variety of summer research experiences funded with internal and/or external funds. While URM students already participate in summer internships at Illinois, we need to expand the capacity of these programs as well as provide opportunities for less formal “short visits” in which URM students will be invited to visit our campus for informal “get to know you” visits in which they will be introduced to graduate students and faculty, and get a chance to participate in campus social activities.

**Action Step 2.5 – Assist departments with the establishment of post-baccalaureate bridge programs.** In some disciplines, departments offer post-baccalaureate bridge programs to enable promising URM students to make up coursework deficiencies prior to matriculation into a doctoral program. We will work with departments to identify exemplar programs at peer institutions and explore logistics relative to the establishment of similar programs at Illinois.

**Action Step 2.6 – Waive the doctoral program application fee for all URM students.** Many of our peers already waive application fees for URM doctoral students. If we waived the fee for 400 URM applicants applying to doctoral programs, that would decrease application fee revenue by \$28,000 annually.

**Goal Three: Inclusion - Ensure that graduate student admission criteria do not unfairly disadvantage students from non-traditional backgrounds, including underrepresented minority students.** Overreliance on single variables, particularly standardized test scores have been shown to disadvantage students from non-traditional backgrounds. The campus should strive to implement holistic admission procedures that consider a range of different factors in the admission decision.

**Action Step 3.1 – Require that departments develop and share clearly articulated admissions criteria for all graduate programs.** Admission to graduate programs at Illinois is a two-step process. The Graduate College role is to confirm that students possess the requisite undergraduate qualifications and language skills for admission to the university. Department faculty review applicant files and select those individuals most likely to succeed and advance departmental goals. Processes for review of applicant files vary greatly from department to department and across disciplines. While it is neither possible nor desirable to implement a single admission process for the whole campus, requiring that departments develop and share their admissions criteria will help to focus attention on how to maximize equity and inclusion while preserving excellence.

**Action Step 3.2 – Promote the establishment and implementation of holistic admission criteria.** Students succeed in graduate education for a wide variety of reasons. Not all of these characteristics are captured equally well by standardized admissions tests such as the GRE. The Graduate College does not require the GRE or any other standardized test for admission to the university, with the exception of language proficiency tests for non-native English speakers. The Graduate College will work with faculty across colleges and departments to promote best practices around inclusive recruiting, admissions, and mentoring. This includes offering graduate admissions training for all departments to share information on the benefits of implementing holistic review of applicant credentials and avoiding overreliance on variables known to disadvantage students from non-traditional backgrounds.

**Action Step 3.3 – Disseminate information about the impact of implicit bias on the recruitment of non-traditional students.** A number of recent studies have examined the possibility of unconscious or implicit bias in admissions as a contributing factor to the relative lack of diversity in graduate education. The Sloan Foundation funded Illinois UCEM requires that Graduate admissions committee members read and discuss information about implicit bias and unfounded assumptions prior to evaluating applicant files. We will work with programs and departments to ensure that this type of information is shared widely with all faculty members who review applications and make admission decisions.

**Action Step 3.4 – Ask each department to appoint a graduate diversity advocate.** The Graduate Diversity Advocate will serve as the point of contact between the department and the graduate college and will assist with the dissemination of information, the sharing of best practices and procedures, and ensuring that departmental admission procedures maximize equity and inclusion while preserving excellence.

**Goal Four: Student Success - Provide students with the support services and programming they need to succeed upon matriculation.** It is not sufficient to recruit students, provide them financial support, and admit them to the university – we need to also ensure that we provide them with the support services and programming they need to successfully graduate.

**Action Step 4.1 – Provide state-of-the-art professional development programming.** It is important to provide a program of year-round professional experiences and activities designed to facilitate professional advancement and academic success. The Graduate College currently offers [numerous educational programs](#) that assist students to make the most of their time in graduate school. Other programs are offered at the department or college level. These types of programs are essential to assist helps students to identify short, medium, and long-term goals and how to make realistic plans to achieve them. Additionally, it is important to offer advice on grant and proposal writing, career development, and academic problem solving and mentoring.

**Action Step 4.2 – Ensure students have access to a variety of social experiences and a supporting network of friends and advisors.** Being a grad student can be as challenging as it is rewarding. Students often require substantial support and resources to help them integrate self-care into their daily routine to assist them to stay well and stress less. The Graduate College works with a number of partners to provide a variety of ways to [balance the challenges of work and life](#). As we strive to increase the number and proportion of URM students on our campus, it is essential that adequate resources be in place to provide these essential support services.

**Action Step 4.3 – Share information about academic progress and key deadlines regularly.** In addition to ensuring that mandated annual departmental reviews of graduate student progress are conducted in a timely manner, the Graduate College is also developing a student information portal to provide graduate students with real time information about their academic progress. Using a “traffic light” feedback system, students will know if they are on track for timely graduation (green light), or if they need to address delays and/or deficiencies (yellow/red light).

**Action Step 4.4 – Provide regular access to career counseling and exposure to successful alumni.** Underrepresented minority graduate students should be provided with numerous opportunities to explore career goals. A critically important component of graduate education includes careful self-reflection and an assessment of values, interests, and skills. By helping our students discover who they are and what they want, they will be better able to take advantage of the many opportunities available to them, and ultimately be more likely to succeed.

**Action Step 4.5 – Identify, train, and support effective faculty mentors.** There is a growing understanding that effective faculty mentors can have a substantial positive impact on the progress made by graduate students. The Graduate College will gather together a cohort of exemplary mentors of underrepresented minority students and work with them to identify and share best practices with their faculty colleagues.

**Action Step 4.6 – Assign empathetic peer mentors to all URM students.** Each matriculating underrepresented graduate student will be matched with a more experienced graduate student who will serve as a peer mentor, helping the student navigate the formal and informal situations that arise early in a student’s career. This is important because many URM students are in departments that lack diversity and may feel a sense of isolation if left to succeed on their own resources.

**Goal Five: Coordination - Establish a coordinated campus-wide infrastructure to ensure that every college and every program takes advantage of opportunities available to diversify graduate education on our campus.** Diversifying graduate education at Illinois will not succeed without the support of the faculty and programs. Every college and department should have a clearly articulated diversity plan. Campus efforts should be coordinated by a campus-wide committee with representation from each academic college and research institute.

**Action Step 5.1 – Establish a Campus-wide Graduate Diversity Committee.** The Graduate Diversity committee will be chaired by the Graduate College Associate Dean for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion and will include representation from each academic college and each of the OVCR-sponsored research institutes. This group will meet monthly to discuss strategies for coordinating diversity efforts across campus and sharing best practices and policies. The committee will report to the Dean of the Graduate College.

**Action Step 5.2 – Establish and monitor metrics and key performance indicators at the campus, college, and program level.** Diversifying graduate education is a key priority of the new *Next 150* Strategic Plan. It will be important to establish metric and performance indicators related to our diversity goals at the program, department, college, and campus level. A publicly-accessible dashboard will be developed by the graduate college to share and disseminate metrics at each level.

**Action Step 5.3 – Align with campus diversity goals.** Achieving our institutional diversity goals goes well beyond increasing the diversity of our graduate student population. It is about building a culture of acceptance and inclusion in everything that we do. Diversity initiatives work best when underrepresented students see themselves on campus, in classrooms, and in laboratories. Our university is committed to attracting faculty and staff members of color. We also have a responsibility to intentionally weave our commitment to diversity into our curriculum, our extra-curricular activities, and everything else that we do. It will be essential for our efforts at the graduate level align well with the university strategy coordinated by the soon to be appointed Vice Chancellor for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion.