

*Report of Chancellor's Committee on African Americans at the University of Illinois Chicago*

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Over the course of three months, following meetings with administrative leaders, faculty, students, alumni and other key stakeholders, as well as after reading several previous reports, we have a sense of the opportunities and issues confronting the University of Illinois Chicago (UIC) with respect to the recruitment, development and retention of African American faculty, staff and students. Without question, a number of individuals and offices have worked over the years to address conditions for Blacks on the UIC campus. In addition, a lot of the additional work the university needs to undertake is detailed in a series of task force reports penned over more than a decade. Rather than restating what's in those reports, or cataloguing each individual initiative underway across the campus, we have opted to zero in on five points of emphasis. We encourage the university to fully review the earlier reports for carefully crafted suggested solutions, informed by the lived experiences of committed institutional stakeholders.

### Leadership

After reviewing several reports, produced over more than a decade and spanning multiple administrations, it is clear the university community has confronted the opportunity of recruiting and retaining additional Black faculty, staff, and students for some time. That sense of repeated attention surfaced in a number of our meetings as well, especially with African American stakeholders—faculty, staff, students and alumni. One senses that the window of opportunity is open only so wide, and only for so long, before the university leadership loses the goodwill we found readily acknowledged by the aforementioned stakeholders. Thus we want to start with one word *urgency*. Several of the recommendations forwarded by previous committees should be adopted and implemented.

We start with leadership. Beginning with the chancellor and executive officers, three things should happen in the next three months. First, senior leadership must explain to the entire community how the recruitment and retention of Black faculty, staff, and students is key to the university's pursuit of excellence and how meeting established goals will be counted in annual performance assessments. Second, some may suggest that this cannot be done lawfully. Our experience indicates that if your mission statement speaks to the value of producing and maintaining an intellectual, racial, gender, ethnic and otherwise diverse learning environment, setting expectation is not only lawful, it is required for you to realize that mission. Third, the recruitment, development and retention of Black faculty, staff and students must be articulated as an integral part of the way the university assesses its commitment to excellence, with diversity

and excellence asserted as entwined pursuits. This means that UIC envisions itself as a leading institution, tapping and developing the diverse talent available in Chicago and the nation.

In addition, we gathered from the materials we read and the conversations we held that not all leaders shared the same degree of commitment to this aspect of mission and vision, let alone a full appreciation of the urgency. Several deans voiced a belief that things were basically fine and the primary problem was resources. Others fell back, predictably, on age-old arguments about the small pool of Black faculty and students and the competition for them. This rather defeatist attitude needs to be replaced by commitments to creative and expansive talent searches. While resources may play a role, we heard aplenty about culture and structure, aspects not defined by just financial resources. We recommend that the chancellor and the next provost meet with each dean and ascertain their desire to be held accountable for making real progress in all areas of recruitment, development and retention of Black faculty, staff, and students. As with any period of institutional transformation, some new leaders may be needed to tackle this opportunity. We believe that several of your senior Black faculty may be ideal candidates for both decanal and provostal openings. Several have the requisite administrative experience and academic stature to play central roles going forward.

#### Recruitment, Development, and Retention

Once senior leadership articulates its plan for addressing the change we recommend, then it should cull the previous reports for two or three short-term solutions, as you develop a plan for more intermediate and long-term change. This planning process will surely include focusing on some of the more recent efforts already in play, and considering how to consolidate and coordinate them in order to build on existing excellence and reward those persons and programs already clearly committed to this mission. And as you craft an overarching approach, it may serve your interests to think about the rhetorical, operational, and cultural aspects of any consolidated plan. This means addressing language, and framing the dynamic relationship between racial diversity and excellence, crafting a series of measures that allows the university to assess and measure progress, and thinking hard and carefully about how culture impedes or advances the goals of adding more Black students, staff and faculty to the campus.

With respect to faculty recruitment, units that have garnered success to date or have a real and viable plan for success may be a place to start. There is often a sense that priorities should be evenly distributed across an institution. In our experience you lead with those who have already exhibited leadership. Moreover, targeting for support programs and departments that can build robust curriculum and scholarly expertise in areas of relevance to our national tasks of racial reckoning and that can collaborate with the Chicago community on a broad range of pressing issues of social justice (from health and safety to economic and social mobility to democratic voice) will redound to the benefit of campus culture as well. In addition, this is the right time to put diversity, equity and inclusion expectations into all tenure and promotion files. We understand that such a discussion is under way and we applaud this effort, even as we hope that the outcome focuses on an inclusive set of faculty commitments from curriculum-building to publicly-engaged scholarship to mentoring to community-engaged collaborations.

With respect to the recruitment and cultivation of students, in our experience, the more successful institutions craft overarching signature programs. This is very true in terms of signature financial aid programs, pathway programs with local K-12 schools and partnerships with local community colleges. Successful programs also coordinate the student experience carefully once a student comes on campus. More than two decades ago, Freeman Hrabowski announced the creation of the Meyerhoff Scholars program to increase the numbers of African Americans majoring in STEM-related fields. Their internal research showed that students who earned less than a B- in several gateway courses had relatively poorer success rates than students who passed with a higher mark. Thus the program made it possible for the institution to redefine success as more than admission and graduation—success meant the institution and the student worked to master the subject. In the meantime, Georgia State made a commitment to eliminating the gaps in graduation rates for its Black students while raising the overall graduation rate. Again, they mobilized their own data and advising programs centrally to identify how best to leverage resources. This wasn't about new dollars as much as it was the wise deployment and coordination of current dollars. Sometimes, of course, the signature program will involve new dollars, such as those developed by several urban institutions to increase the recruitment of local students with adjusted family incomes below a certain cut-off -- for example, at Rutgers-Newark the recruitment of students from the majority Black and Brown Newark community increased by over 100% in 4 years in line with both a university-wide financial aid program and a university-wide Honors Living Learning signature program devoted to local citizenship in a global world. There are many national models of signature, comprehensive programs instituted by universities similar to UIC (e.g., see the Powered by Publics initiative mounted by APLU).

At present, we could not detect a signature program for UIC that serves as a selling point when seeking faculty, staff and students. A comprehensive signature program that crosses the siloes of schools and departments can capture attention and signal strong commitment. Instead, we heard that there are too many, uncoordinated programs that aim to serve the interests of Black students, particularly. Even on calls with well-placed senior institutional leaders it became clear no one had a great purchase on the range of services. That's a problem to be addressed. Clear gaps in financial aid, housing support, and coordination of support and advising services were repeatedly identified. Finally, a careful review of those programs, coupled with more intentional integration, could net savings that could be better deployed to attract and retain students. The university seems to have had success in recent years with similar programs for and with Latinx student recruitment and support, so it is perplexing that such signature efforts have not succeeded for African-American students. At the risk of being blunt, it often seemed as if a deficit lens, as compared with a lens on the cultivation of talent, was in play in the recruitment of Black students. In light of the location of UIC in a global city with a large Black community and in a city that has seen much progress in recent years in the public schools, this attitude seems misplaced at best, and destructive at worst.

## Accountability

Given what we have heard and read, we think it is imperative that the administration develop a kind of institutional scorecard that measures the numerical change year-after-year. A separate scorecard for faculty, staff, and students is in order, with captured variables particular to each population. That scorecard should be published each year as a part of the “State of the University” address. The faculty scorecard should detail recruitment, development (tenure and promotion) as well as retention data. But it should do more. Several faculty commented on matters of culture. It should strive to capture, qualitatively and quantitatively, dimensions of culture and how culture forwards or retards the diversity goals of the university. The student scorecard should track number of school visits, letters to Black students in Chicago proper and vicinity, offers made, students yielded, financial aid offered, advising and curricular programs coordinated, grade point averages and graduation rates. The staff card should track hiring across all job families, annual promotions, percent in leadership roles, and the numbers hired each year. In constructing the scorecard the institution should compare itself to peers within and outside the university system.

Moreover, we heard that nominal commitment to DEI is not matched by measurable ways of holding people accountable. Too often, we are told, many turn on the old excuse: they are too hard to find or they don’t want to come here. The blanket excuse makes it possible to carry on without developing a real framework for change. That lack of movement and momentum is a cause of frustration across campus and beyond.

## Outside-In Community Engagement

One telling moment repeated itself throughout our deliberations: the dearth of references to engagement with broader Chicago as a selling point in the recruitment of Black faculty, staff, and students. Other successful urban universities often expressly weave an anchor institution mission in to their strategic vision of institutional excellence, taking their responsibility as public goods seriously with what might be called an outside-in approach to publicly-engaged scholarship, education, and community-engagement (e.g., <https://www.margainc.com/aitf/>). They work closely with community-based organizations, with cultural institutions, with faith-based organizations, with local businesses, with public school districts in their city to build pathway programs, to identify mutually agreed upon programs that tap and develop local talent, to connect the university, for example, through local procurement programs to business development in the community. They collaborate with cross-sector partners in the city on pressing challenges such as local economic development, the social determinants of health, post-secondary attainment, civic voice through arts, culture, and public history, environmental justice, public safety, affordable housing and urban development, to name a few arenas in which UIC has strength and can build collaborative ecosystems with its Chicago community. In identifying as an anchor institution and creating substantive cross-sector collaborative “tables,” UIC will benefit directly from the two-way street between campus-community that follows this work. Our experience suggests that this collaborative work builds trust that reverberates in multiple ways,

especially enhancing the attraction and cultivation of local students, as well as staff and faculty. In this way, local families and groups and neighborhoods come to really see the value-added of the university and want to be associated with it; it also serves as a very successful launch pad for the recruitment of publicly-engaged scholars as faculty (and provides an immediate context for success for those faculty). Local public officials and civic leaders come to depend positively on the expertise of university faculty and staff, increasing institutional public impact. At the same time, pressing issues of racial reckoning and equitable empowerment come more authentically and organically to be owned by the university and set the stage for a more forthright, inclusive and healthy campus climate.

A critical aspect of the success of such anchor institution collaborative work, however, will depend upon the openness of the university (leadership, deans, faculty, staff, students) to embed it directly in the substantive mission of the curriculum and scholarly enterprise, rather than to silo it as “service.” It should be seen as critical to building an anti-racist, cross-university curriculum, for example, even as particular departments and centers and institutes may take the lead. The publicly-engaged scholarship of faculty engaged in these campus-community collaborations should be rewarded at the time of promotion and tenure. Spreading the “ownership” of this engaged work across the university’s disciplines and schools and colleges can create credibility, even as one central leadership office may coordinate efforts. Similarly, UIC should ensure that its new neighborhood hub does not get isolated and siloed.

### Leveraging Networks and Learning from Experiments

African American alumni as well as informed Black community leaders noted with some modicum of frustration, the ways the cultures of the university work to exclude. Black businessmen and women observed that procurement system makes little to no effort to work with Black-owned businesses, in the main. They rightly believe that students will be attracted to and prosper in an institution that readily values improving the economic vitality of the communities from which the students hail. In turn, these community members said, a strong symbiotic relationship with the university makes it possible for them to actively aid in recruitment.

The idea of culture or cultures surfaced numerous times. Many stated, the university welcomes us more than includes us. They signal a need to move from a welcoming community into a fully inclusive community. Along those lines, centering a strong African American Alumni Association for UIC is critically important. Failure to recognize, empower, and celebrate past alums makes it more difficult to recruit others to become alumni, all the more the case when current students feel a dearth of cross-campus programming and co-curricular activities to unite the Black campus community, even as they may not be fully aware of those that do exist. Strengthening the ties to Black alumni would likely enhance the advancement efforts as several community members noted that there would be considerable support for a building a freestanding home for the thirty-year-old African American Cultural Center on campus, similar to what has been constructed on the Urbana campus; such a building would highlight the work of the Center, reflecting the public history and culture of the community and representing a joint

university-community collaborative initiative. Similarly, initiating a strong advancement campaign for the Ida B. Wells Scholarship Fund was mentioned often.

UIC is surrounded by a plethora of colleges and universities—public and private. Some more expensive private institutions in the city fair better at recruiting and retaining Black students, if not faculty, than UIC. Do you know why? Are there experiments that others have run that are worth replicating?

### Conclusion

In conclusion, these five points of emphasis, individually and collectively, aim to draw concerted attention to institutional transformation, both in attitude and in actions, to move UIC forward with requisite urgency. Attitudinal transformation will necessitate discarding the deficit lens that clouds too many in too many parts of the university from seeing the opportunities right in their own backyard, so to speak. The university needs to take an outside-in look at itself and acknowledge that robust and programmatic actions to recruit and retain Black faculty, students, and staff, and to hold leadership accountable for real progress, while cementing trusting collaborations with and in the Chicago community, and thereby creating a genuinely inclusive and representative campus climate, will redound to the excellence of the institution, its impact and reputation as a leading public university in a critically influential city. UIC needs to be brave enough to see that its excellence will increasingly hang in the balance unless it makes real progress on DEI, on building an anti-racist culture and climate, on supporting publicly-engaged scholarship of scholars of color, on recruiting strongly and expansively in the Chicago K-12 schools and community colleges, on innovating with signature support programs, on engaging its community neighbors and CBOs and local businesses and alumni as genuine partners. Over the last decade there have been numerous task force reports saying exactly this about what is needed, and we point to them as sources for specifics to complement recent programs and programming; choosing here instead to dwell on the general shape and direction of the needed transformation, the potential for real success, and the positive impact that will undoubtedly accompany the effort at change.