

Affirmative Action at University of Illinois: The 1968 Special Educational Opportunities Program

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In the spirit of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Higher Education Act of 1965, the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC) initiated the Special Educational Opportunities Program (SEOP), a program to recruit more African American students to the UIUC campus. The SEOP will be the focus of this piece. The objectives are twofold. First, I will discuss the implementation and nature of SEOP including recruitment, admission requirements, initial academic achievement, and graduation rates. Next, I will illustrate the impact this first substantial number of Black students left on the UIUC campus both socially and academically. The first group of SEOP students will be the focus though later students will be discussed tangentially.

UIUC administrators and faculty began discussing the ground work for SEOP in late 1963. In an interim report issued by the Committee on Human Relations and Equal Opportunity (CHREO), a conscious effort to "expand substantially the enrollment of Negro and other disadvantaged youth" became a basic goal for UIUC (CHREO 1964, 1). In the Preamble of the report, the Committee cited the overwhelming under-representation of African Americans in "almost all of the status roles and favorable conditions of our relatively affluent and largely white dominated society" (CHREO 1964, 1). In an effort to compensate for "the grievous record of the past and present," both nationally and on the UIUC campus, UIUC was directed to reexamine its role in the perpetuation of oppression. The Committee highlighted the low number of African American students, faculty, and employees and pointed to the fact that "the 'public service' to the state to which we are dedicated [has not] been at all focused on the racial problems of the state and its citizens" (CHREO 1964, 2). The imbalance of minority student enrollment due to past discrimination had to be remedied, and the University decided to take an active role. As a directive, the Committee suggested UIUC remember and reclaim the historical role of the university as the birthplace for social, cultural, and economic revolutions. The recruitment and retention of more African American students was one means to this end. The Committee suggested expanding the enrollment of "innately able but educationally, socially and economically disadvantaged" students, encouraging those already enrolled to complete their education, and assisting those with the potential to go on to graduate school (CHREO 1964, 8). Out of this proposal came the seeds of the SEOP:

It is not sufficient simply to affirm the principle of non-discrimination in all aspects of the University's undertakings. Instead it is urgent to develop an affirmative action program to help overcome handicaps stemming from past inequality so that all shall have equal opportunity to develop their talents to their fullest capacity (CHREO 1964, 1).

A short time after UIUC expressed a desire to increase and promote diversity, two federal government pieces of legislation helped initiate many changes in higher education. In 1964, the *Civil Rights Act* became law. In response to Section 402, a study "concerning the lack of availability of equal educational opportunities for individuals by reason of race, color, religion, or national origin in public educational institutions" was conducted by the Office of Education under the auspices of the US Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (1965, iii). This report heightened awareness of discrimination in education and the value of a diverse campus environment as well as reminded institutions that federal money would be withheld from any institution in non-compliance with providing equal opportunity.

The next year the *Higher Education Act* of 1965, Title IV, Part A, was created with the mandate to "encourage and enable exceptionally needy high school graduates and college undergraduate students, who otherwise would be unable to continue their education, pursue their studies at institutions of higher education by providing them with educational opportunity grants [EOGs]" (US Department of Health, Education, and Welfare 1966, 9). Financial assistance was not limited to Black students, but they benefited most from the grants. The grants covered half the student's financial need. Part B enabled students to get low-interest loans from their respective institutions (US Department of Health, Education, and Welfare 1966, 11). Part C enabled students to take advantage of Work-Study programs in which they would work part-time to help defray college costs (US Department of Health, Education, and Welfare 1966, 13). These financial gifts enabled many low-income African Americans to attend institutions of higher education. Both the *Civil Rights Act* of 1964 and the *Higher Education Act* of 1965 acted as catalysts in opening the

doors of educational opportunity.

If the UIUC campus was just preparing to enroll African American students in significant numbers in the early 1960s, the 4 April 1968 assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. accelerated the process. As a result of King's death, segments of the campus and community, especially the Black Students Association (BSA), founded in October 1967, demanded that more African Americans be admitted in the Fall of 1968. In 1960, African Americans constituted 10.3 percent of the Illinois population and 5.1 percent of the Champaign county population (Bureau of the Census 1963, 15-202). By 1970, they represented 12.8 percent of the state population and 15.2 percent of the county (Bureau of the Census 1973, 15-89, 15-90, 15-252). On the UIUC campus in 1967, they constituted only 1.1 percent of the UIUC student population. The numbers are as follows: 330 Black UIUC students of 30,407 total students attended in the Fall of 1967; 223 undergraduates of 22,017 and 107 graduate/professional students of 8,390 (Wermers 1974, 17). Black students became determined to increase their numbers.

The University, in an attempt both to quell the rising tide of Black student resentment and increase diversity on campus, was in the process of implementing a program to allow a large number of Black high school seniors to enroll. When first conceptualized, SEOP included approximately 250 students. However, after King's assassination and the BSA demands, expectations for the program changed. Instead of the original 250 students, over 500 were admitted. By admitting such a large number of students, SEOP became one of the largest programs initiated by a predominantly White university in attracting low-income Black high school students.

UIUC put forth five objectives in implementing SEOP: (1) to provide an educational opportunity to students who may not have had the opportunity to attend college; (2) to increase the number of minority students on the UIUC campus; (3) to develop educational programs and practices to aid the 'disadvantaged' students in their academic careers; (4) to expose non-SEOP students to the cultural and social experiences necessary in understanding different cultures; (5) to develop information enabling in the ability to deal successfully with educational and sociological problems affecting students from disadvantaged backgrounds (The Special Educational Opportunities Program of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign 1970, 2).

"Disadvantaged" students were those whose family income stationed them in the lower-class. David Johnson, Chief of the Educational Opportunities Grants Branch of the Office of Education, outlined the economic qualification in a Memorandum sent to Coordinators of student financial aid. In meeting the requirements for the program, each student had to qualify for a federal EOG or have an unmet need of at least \$1,200 in UIUC expenses. If UIUC students were representative of all students receiving EOGs, only 13 percent came from families whose annual gross income exceeded \$7,500 (Johnson 1968, 1-4). They were also students not exposed to college preparatory classes during high school or students ranking highly in their high school classes but with low college entrance test scores. In its first year of existence, SEOP accepted disadvantaged students from out-of-state and non-freshmen; but, in Fall 1969, the program was limited to Illinois residents and freshmen (The Special Educational Opportunities Program 1970, 1). Students received Illinois State Scholarship Commission Grants, federal government grants (such as EOG), and tuition waivers authorized by the University to offset the amount expected from family contributions (Warwick 1968).

To recruit students, the University solicited high school counselors to identify and encourage prospective students to apply to SEOP and arranged a series of Illinois regional conferences with counselors working in schools with large numbers of disadvantaged students. At the meetings, admission and financial aid applications were distributed, questions answered, and problems discussed. Chicago, down-state Illinois, and Champaign-Urbana were the target areas. BSA also was involved heavily in recruitment efforts and visited eleven predominantly Black high schools in Chicago to solicit potential students. Also, in Spring of 1968, BSA hosted a "get acquainted" weekend for Black high school seniors accepted for the Fall 1968 semester. Approximately 150 Black high school seniors from Chicago, East St. Louis, Illinois, and Holmes County, Mississippi, visited the UIUC campus and participated in tours, discussions, dances, and other activities. According to William Savage, BSA Recruitment and Retention Committee Chairman, BSA initiated the program because of the "lack of initiative of the University" (Savage 1968). In a Memorandum on their contact with high schools, university administrators praised the BSA effort: "We are highly encouraged by this evidence of interest on the part of a student organization and regard it as a most effective means of

recruitment. We shall continue to encourage their efforts and to cooperate in every way. The activities of this group will be an important aspect of the total program of identification and recruitment" (Memo of high school contact program of the Black Students Association 1968).

The University broadened its admissions policies in admitting the SEOP students. The requirements for admission included: students who met the high school subject pattern requirements for the college and curriculum to which they were applying and who ranked in the top half of their graduating class; students who met the subject requirements, ranked in the third quarter of their class, and had an American College Test (ACT) score of at least 19; and students who ranked in the fourth quarter of their graduating class and had a composite ACT score of at least 21. Students not meeting the above requirements could qualify for special admission (Shelley 1969a, A-3, 2). The students also had to have an unmet financial need. At the end of registration, approximately 1300 students applied to participate in SEOP; 768 were approved for admission (the University predicted that two-thirds of beginning freshmen actually register); 565 students registered. These included 502 freshmen and 63 transfer students (Peltason 1968, 1). A report compiled by Dr. Faite Royjier-Poncefonte Mack, UIUC Dean of Personnel, revealed that of the 502 SEOP freshmen, 478 students (95.2%), were Black. 287 students (57.2%), were women while 215 (42.8 %), were men. Most, 402 students (80.1 %), were Illinois residents. The rest of the students primarily were from Holmes County, Mississippi, and Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

Academic programming was altered to fit the SEOP students. Financial, personal, and academic counseling were made available. Also, several courses, including Rhetoric, Mathematics, Chemistry, and Psychology, were restructured to emphasize "content appropriate to students with scholastic deficiencies" (The Special Educational Opportunities Program 1970, 2). A reading clinic, a writing laboratory, study skills workshops, and tutorials were initiated and coordinated by the Director of SEOP and several college departments. An additional day of freshmen orientation allowed for the students to attend the all-University orientation as well as a more personal SEOP orientation where students learned about the different services available (Shelley 1969b).

After their first semester on campus, the 1968 SEOP freshmen achieved a mean grade point average of 2.3 in the SEOP courses, 2.0 in regular courses, and a 2.1 overall (on a 4.0 scale). The mean grade point average after the second semester was 2.0 (The Special Educational Opportunities Program 1970, 3). In the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences (LAS) a Spring 1969 study comparing the grade point averages of the SEOP students in LAS and other students in LAS revealed a difference between groups after the first semester. While 76 percent of regularly enrolled LAS students were clustered between 2.5 and 3.49, 60 percent of the SEOP students were clustered between 1.5 and 2.99. Also, SEOP students were more represented across the grade point average range with 41 percent below a 2.0 grade point average versus 9 percent of regularly enrolled students and 59 percent above a 2.0 average versus 91 percent for regularly enrolled students (Schiamberg 1969). Explanations or justifications of the drop in grade point average varied. A report published by the University stated the drop "reflects fewer available special courses for the second semester" (The Special Educational Opportunities Program 1970, 3). A separate report to the president by the Committee on Human Relations and Equal Opportunity stated that few "disadvantaged" students were prepared for the competition and academic demands of the University. "For most of them, it has been a first exposure to the predominantly white world, and the first encounter with major failure. As these students have encountered academic difficulty, they have usually become frightened and begun to withdraw, attributing much of the blame to the practices and attitudes encountered in the 'white' world" (CHREO 1967, 4). In order to help the students, the Committee proposed an easing of drop and probation rules, increased financial aid, and more support services.

A study conducted by Dr. Jane Loeb, Coordinator of Research and Testing, revealed that the 502 SEOP freshmen of 1968 were on academic probation, dropped, or not enrolled at higher rates than regularly admitted freshmen although they out-performed pre-SEOP Black UIUC students (Loeb 1973, 1, 5). For instance, in 1966 and 1967, 50 percent and 53 percent of Black students, respectively, were on clear status after the completion of their first term. In 1968 and 1969, the first two years of SEOP, 64 percent and 67 percent, respectively, were on clear status (Loeb 1974, 9). Regularly admitted students also graduated at higher rates than SEOP students within an eight semester period. For the freshmen entering UIUC in 1968, 45.4 percent of the regularly admitted students and 16.7 percent (84 students)

of the SEOP students graduated by June 1972; by 1973, 60.7 percent of the regularly admitted and 32.1 percent of the SEOP students graduated (Loeb 1973, 8). This was evidence that SEOP students who remained at UIUC, on average, took an extra two semesters to complete college requirements and receive their degrees.

According to a separate study by Dr. Faite Mack, 44.4 percent of the Fall 1968 Freshmen SEOP students completed eight consecutive semesters between Fall 1968 and Spring 1972. 8.6 percent terminated enrollment after 1968 but re-enrolled for continuous student status by the eighth semester. 47.0 percent terminated enrollment and did not re-enroll. 69 (13.7%) students graduated in June 1972 (Mack 1972, 22). While a discrepancy in numbers exists between the Loeb and Mack studies, the conclusions were similar. The SEOP students who remained at UIUC took longer to attain a bachelor's degree than regularly admitted students. Mack, however, came to another conclusion: those students who left the University often enrolled in other institutions. 59 of the drop-outs attended another four-year (39 students) or two-year (20 students) institution after leaving UIUC (Mack 1972, 46).

The large infusion of Black students heavily influenced student and academic life on the UIUC campus. With the SEOP students, the number of Black UIUC students more than doubled. The increase in numbers gave the Black students confidence and support. They now constituted a crucial number of the UIUC population and, in accordance with the BSA motto, no longer *hoped* for anything; instead they *demanded* everything. In this way, the University got more than it bargained. It initiated SEOP to increase Black representation on campus--and it succeeded--but, as a consequence, the late 1960s call for Black Power also was magnified on the campus.

Black UIUC students had begun a concerted effort to participate in the Black Power Movement across the nation before the SEOP students arrived. Along with national sentiment, Black students reevaluated the goal of integration and the tactic of gradualism advocated by Civil Rights advocates of the 1950s and early 1960s. Instead, they initiated race-based student groups, such as BSA, for the purpose of celebrating and promoting "Black pride." Also, they made several demands on the university to actively support and promote diversity. The arrival of the SEOP allowed for a critical mass of Black students who then attempted to alter policies and programs on campus.

SEOP student demands altered campus academic life by initiating the development of courses with a decidedly Black focus in the Spring semester of the 1968-1969 academic year. The first, History 199, was a visiting lecturer series. Students enrolled for one credit hour and wrote a paper on one of the lectures or African American culture. Reverend Channing Phillips, who placed fourth in the presidential balloting on the Democratic ticket in 1968, spoke about "Being Black in America"; Val Gray, a Black dramatist, spoke about the "Concert Voice of the Black Writer"; Percival Borde, a scholar of Caribbean and African culture, gave a lecture entitled "The Talking Drums"; Alex Haley, editor of *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, spoke about his work-in-progress, *Roots*; Wardell Gaynor, an associate producer of a television show, spoke about his program "Of Black America"; Reverend C. T. Vivian, Southern Christian Leadership Conference member, gave a lecture entitled, "The Black Church in Transition"; A. B. Spellman, author and participant in the television show, "Black Heritage," gave a lecture entitled "Toward a Saner Base for the New Black Music." 275 students--and not just Black students--enrolled in the course (Jackson and Plater 1970).

By Fall 1970, African Americans constituted only 3.6 percent (1,252 students) of the total UIUC student population (Wermers 1976, 12). However, their numbers did not deter the lecture series or the development of African American-centered courses; in fact, the call for the initiation of a Black history class was made by the campus chapter of the Congress of Racial Equality when less than 300 Black students attended UIUC in late 1966. The 1970-1971 lecturers included dancer and anthropologist Pearl Primus, Professor of English and Director of Afro-American Studies at Iowa State University Charles Davis, Chicago reporter L. F. Palmer, Chicago reporter Burleigh Hines, Black comedian and activist Dick Gregory, Chicago poet Don L. Lee, musician Tony Zamora, linguist Orlando Taylor, artist Charles White, and former UIUC student and BSA president turned lawyer David Addison (Jackson and Plater 1970). In 1970, LAS Deans projected that the average 1971 lecture attendance would be 875 students (Jackson and Plater 1970). Due to increased interest, the College of LAS proposed a follow-up course to LAS 199 in the Spring of the 1970-1971 academic year. LAS 291, "The Black World: Perspectives," was open to sophomores, juniors, and seniors with prior relevant coursework (Cox 1970). College departments also developed African American oriented courses in political science, psychology, sociology and English.

SEOP students altered campus social life by inaugurating separate activities based on race, a reflection of their connection to the Black Power Movement. Sponsorship of separate activities based on race could be interpreted as a repudiation of the university. However, Black students created parallel activities to those of the university signaling their desire to participate but at the same time feel comfortable. Black students created Black academic support organizations such as the Black Graduate Student Association and the Black Theater Students Association. Though the university sponsored events such as Mom's Day and Homecoming, Black students initiated separate celebrations. Black Mom's Day celebrations included a Black Chorus concert, a banquet, and a fashion show with African/African American styles of dress. Black Homecoming events included a dance and the election of a Black Homecoming King and Queen. Also, Black students published a yearbook, *Irepodun*. The university yearbook, *The Illio*, included a section on Black student activities, but Black students considered the treatment sparse and insulting. BSA goals, Black activities, Black social life, and Black student outreach programs to the Champaign-Urbana community were highlighted.

In early 1969, African Americans living in Illinois Street Residence Hall (ISR) moved to create their own residence hall government. Michael Wilson, in his article, "ISR", published in the 29 April 1969, *Daily Illini*, explained the reason for the racial split. He stated that the ISR government was racist and that in order for Black students to make the government more relevant to their needs they had to secede. Elaborating on the split, he declared, "more specifically, black students at ISR have been assessed fees which are then used to perpetuate white cultural activities, only. Secondly, they feel that the judicial mechanism of their dormitory is biased." As early as 1969, Clarence Shelley, SEOP Director, recognized that "the biggest complaint of SEOP students is that they do not feel welcome or comfortable in the [residence halls]" (Shelley 1969a, 10). This governmental split was the catalyst in the formation of the Black Student Unions that soon would be initiated in each residence hall on the UIUC campus.

With the initiation of the 1968 SEOP, UIUC maintained its position as the Midwest university with the most Black students enrolled. According to data compiled by the US Department of Health, Education, and Welfare Office of Civil Rights, UIUC continued to lead Big Ten institutions with 4.0 percent Black undergraduate enrollment in 1970 (Weinberg 1995, Table 45). In the years since, the number of Black undergraduates fluctuated. According to the Office of the Vice President for Academic Affairs report, "Underrepresented Groups at the University of Illinois: A Report on Participation and Success, December, 1995," as of 1994, UIUC fell to fifth in the Big Ten in Black undergraduate enrollment and placed third in degrees conferred (1995, 32, 88). Though UIUC dropped in Big Ten ratings, the university provided a model for recruitment efforts and later academic support programs offered through the Office of Minority Student Affairs.

The legacy of the first groups of SEOP students persists at UIUC both academically and socially. The university heeded Black student demands to reflect the heterogeneity of student experience by initiating an Afro-American Studies and Research Program and an Afro-American Cultural Program. Separate festivities and celebrations--to which all students are invited--continue to be held and now are sponsored by units within the university. Recently formed multicultural and cross-cultural courses, social groups, and academic associations promote interaction between groups. As a catalyst for such policies and programs, the initiation of SEOP helped enrich student life on campus by broadening the scope of the university's duty to its diversifying student population.

In the report by the Office of the Vice Chancellor, the university described its goals for the future, "to lead all Big Ten Universities and to serve as a leader nationally in the enrollment of underrepresented minority students, to improve the retention rate of undergraduate minorities so it is the same as that of all students, [and] to lead all Big Ten Universities and to serve as a leader nationally in the granting of baccalaureate, graduate, and professional degrees to under-represented minorities" (Office of the Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs 1995, 6, 26, 32). With attention focused on recruitment as well as retention and graduation rates the university continues to demonstrate commitment to a diverse student population. Conscious efforts still need to be made for the university to reach its goals, but it does have an established base on which to build for the 21st century.

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