

Diversity Now

As the University of Illinois prepares to commemorate the anniversary of Project 500, its ambitious fast-tracked minority recruitment program of 1968, alumni and faculty say they remain gratified by its legacy.

By Raven Hill



Patricia McKinney Lewis didn't even consider applying to the University of Illinois as a high school senior in the late 1960s. She had heard it was too hard to get admitted to the Urbana-Champaign campus because of the high standards for the application process. Although she was all set to attend Southern Illinois University, she had second thoughts after a personal appeal from a U of I student who had attended her high school.

One day after school in the spring of 1968, she drove to the university with a mentor, Ms. Florida Gee, to complete an application.

That fall, Lewis was one of 565 minority freshmen to enroll as part of a massive recruiting drive to increase the numbers of Black, Hispanic and economically disadvantaged students in the wake of Dr. Martin Luther King's assassination.

The Special Education Opportunities Program (SEOP), known as Project 500, was the most ambitious minority recruitment program in the country at the time. Forty years later, as the university prepares to commemorate Project 500, alumni and faculty say they remain gratified by its legacy.

Since the early 1960s, officials had initiated efforts to build a more diverse student body at the state's flagship institution. But by 1967, only 67 Black freshmen had enrolled, and there were just 330 Black students in total — barely 1 percent of the total enrollment. That

figure had remained virtually static for decades. Officials made plans for a gradual enrollment increase, setting the goal of 500 to 600 freshmen students by 1973.

However, amid the uprising that resulted from King's assassination in April 1968, that five-year goal became the immediate goal as Project 500 was quickly accelerated.

More planning was a luxury that the tumultuous times would not permit, says Dr. Joy Williamson-Lott, who authored the book *Black Power on Campus: The University of Illinois, 1965-75*.

The voices from Black students demanded change, says Williamson-Lott, an associate professor at the University of Washington. "The university couldn't wait."

Project 500 outpaced efforts by other predominantly White universities. The total enrollment of Black students that fall more than doubled.

A Lonely Place

Lewis remembers the feelings of camaraderie among the Black students taking part in a special orientation program the week before classes started.

"It was exciting to see all the different students arriving from all different parts of the country," she says. "It was a great meet-and-greet."

It didn't take long to pierce the cocoon as the school year got off to a chaotic start.

Like Lewis, many of the new freshman re-

cruits were swayed by current Black students, many of whom went back to their hometowns to round up potential students.

Despite their fervent appeals, some of the students lacked knowledge of admissions and financial aid procedures, at times promising more than the university was prepared to deliver.

"Half of the students who had enrolled weren't admitted until July," giving the university little time to work out financial aid awards, housing assignments and course placements, says Clarence Shelley, former director of SEOP. Charged with getting the students acclimated to U of I, Shelley arrived just weeks before the school year started. "We had students enrolling on campus who hadn't even applied."

"We assumed we could integrate 500 students who were very much unlike the student body without trauma, misunderstandings, mistakes and flaws. We didn't appreciate how deeply grounded the university was in its culture and history," says Shelley, who is currently special assistant to the chancellor at U of I.

The weekend before classes started, a clash between Black female students and university administrators over housing assignments turned into a protest at the Illini Union.

Tensions flaring, students gathered at the Union past closing hours in a show of unity to support the women. Police were called and about 250 students were arrested on counts of

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mob action and participating in an “alleged unauthorized mass demonstration.”

Mistakenly billed as a “riot” in newspapers across the country, the incident inflamed passions and misconceptions from other students, alumni and state legislators.

“The (new students) were seen as not being



Alumna Patricia McKinney Lewis, who was one of the students to enroll through Project 500, says the legacy of the program showed that the university embraced diversity.

appreciative, tearing up the union and being disrespectful. It inspired a lot of anger about the students and university itself,” Williamson-Lott says. “The university went into defense mode. A lot of university officials had to defend and explain that they supported the students, and newspapers exaggerated the damage.”

In the span of a week, the campus became a chillier place for Lewis and others. Many White students openly questioned the means by which minority students had gained entry to the university, even though Project 500 included a small number of White and Hispanic students.

“On the Quad, I overheard people talking

about Project 500 and how the students were not qualified. There was some resentment,” Lewis says.

Lecture halls were often the loneliest places. The students were lucky if they found one other Black student in their classes, which made it difficult to form study groups. There were no cultural centers or many cultural groups to join, aside from sororities and fraternities.

Edna Lee Moffitt enrolled at U of I in 1965. She remembers a different campus environment prior to Project 500 — one with very little Black student activism.

“We probably blended in much more. We weren’t that sensitive to those issues. I think they (the new crop of students) helped open our eyes to other possibilities,” Moffitt says. “It really took the university from being a very White, classically patient environment to one where change was happening very quickly. I’m not sure the university ever caught up with it.”

Alumna and retired psychologist Charlynn Chamberlin puts it this way, “Project 500 finally broke the ceiling,” since the percentage of Blacks at the university substantially changed with Project 500.

By 1973, one-third of the Project 500 students had graduated. More than two-thirds eventually completed their degrees, whether at Illinois or elsewhere.

The “Special” in SEOP was dropped in 1971, and the Educational Opportunities Program was renamed the Office of Minority Student Affairs in 1986. OMSA provides academic, cultural and social support to students.

Over the years, the number of minority students has continued to grow. The university’s 42,326-student enrollment is currently 6 percent Black and 6 percent Hispanic. The campus now includes cultural centers for Asian and Native American students as well and

features other diversity initiatives, which many attribute to Project 500.

While minority student representation still lags behind the state’s overall population numbers — Illinois is about 15 percent Black and 14.7 percent Hispanic, according to Census data — U of I has the highest minority graduation rate among Illinois public colleges at 68 percent.

“We have, frankly, worked incredibly hard,” says Chancellor Richard Herman, “but our job is not yet done.”

Various units, including the colleges of education and engineering, are working to improve linkages with elementary and secondary schools around the state to encourage more students to enroll.

Today, the climate for Black students is similar to many other schools, says George West, president of the Central Black Student Union.

“Across ethnic lines, we don’t interact with each other as much as we should,” he says.

Returning to Campus

In November, hundreds of alumni are expected to reunite on campus to celebrate “500 Dreams Ago: Continuing the Legacy and Bridging the Gaps.”

When he first began speaking to people from the Project 500 era, Herman says he feared that most would reflect negatively on their Illinois experience.

“You can understand the loneliness,” he says, “but they were able to blaze the path for us. By their success, they were able to show us what could be done.”

Lewis, a retired school administrator who now runs an education consulting service in the Champaign area, expresses appreciation for the education that she received at U of I.

“The legacy of Project 500 basically showed that the university embraced diversity,” Lewis says. “It afforded disadvantaged students the opportunity to attend a world-class university and become major contributors to society and the global community.”

Still, Moffitt says she would like for those administrators who toiled behind the scenes prior to Project 500 to get more recognition.

“Someone had to be in the system to fight for Project 500 — it just didn’t happen magically,” she says. “Those are the shoulders we stand on. Project 500 is more like the middle of the book rather than the first chapter.” □

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