

**Using Institutional Studies to Inform Decisions about  
Black Male Initiative Programs and Support Services**

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### Introduction

Institutional studies of targeted groups are often carried out as a reaction to an issue that has emerged, or has been highlighted, on a particular campus. Once addressed, the saliency of the initial issue wanes, and consequently, there is not an opportunity to build on the initial study in breadth (e.g., to examine additional targeted groups) or depth (e.g., to gain more information regarding a particularly critical factor identified within the responses of participants in the initial study). The pathway to success for African American male retention to graduation is a local and national concern that is of enduring interest to the leadership on the University of Illinois at Chicago campus. In this report, we share the findings and recommendations of student participants in a follow-up study that was designed to build on earlier institutional research findings.

In February of 2010, in a paper titled *Report of the Pathway to Success for African American Males at UIC*, we shared the findings of a study of African American male students who were in their senior year at UIC. We reported on their account of the strategies used, and challenges to and facilitators of their pathways to success at UIC. The report included policy and program recommendations to improve the success of African American male students in the future. Upon further consideration of these recommendations, it was clear that a number of initiatives specifically targeted to improve the retention and graduation of African American males at UIC had already been developed and implemented since 2008. Some of these recommendations mirrored the suggestions proposed by the seniors who were interviewed for the *Pathways* study. The senior students in the 2010 study were too far along in their academic careers to experience these initiatives, but the students who followed them as undergraduates did have access to these programs and initiatives. The purpose of this study is to examine the experiences and academic progress of students who entered UIC as freshmen in the fall of 2008. We pay particular attention to the programs or services in which students participated, and how that participation might have had an influence on the students' academic success.

### Background

Over the last two decades, the retention and graduation rates of undergraduate students at UIC have improved – one year retention rates increased from 68% to 82% and six year graduation rates increased from 36% to 53%. Yet the retention and graduation rates for African American students, particularly African American males, continue to lag behind the campus averages. In 2006, the one-year retention rate for African American males of 54.7% was more than 20% below the average for all students. This figure served as a clarion call to action for the campus. By fall 2008, several new programs were instituted targeting improvement in the success of African American males at UIC. The findings from the *Pathways to Success for African American Males at UIC* study informed existing programs, suggested that the new programs that were implemented may be important for student success, and offered insights about the development of additional programs and services. The programs and accompanying institutional research efforts have collectively found a home under the auspices of the Black Male Initiative at UIC.

This study is more focused than the earlier *Pathways* study, with particular attention to the experiences of the African American male fall 2008 freshman cohort. These students were the early beneficiaries of many of the new programs to improve the academic and co-curricular UIC experience of

African American male undergraduates. This research brief provides a succinct view of how African American male students have experienced UIC since starting as freshmen in 2008.

### **Methods**

The study used a mixed methods approach to understand the student experience at UIC. In this study, we specifically looked at African American male students who entered UIC as freshmen during the fall 2008 term and were still enrolled at UIC during the spring 2011 term. We collected data in three ways:

- 1) Student pre-enrollment and enrollment information drawn from student records;
- 2) A brief survey of academic and co-curricular experiences;
- 3) Small group interviews to obtain an in-depth understanding of the individual student experiences that guided the student experience and specific strategies that the students used to navigate the UIC academic and social systems.

### **Participants**

In fall 2008, a total of 80 African American male students enrolled as new freshman. One year later, 65 (81% of the initial cohort) were still enrolled. By the spring of 2011, when students were recruited for participation in this study, 45 (56%) of the initial 80 freshmen were enrolled at UIC. We received surveys from seven students and interviewed five students.

Of the five participants in the interviews, four entered in Liberal Arts and Sciences (LAS), one has transferred to Applied Health Sciences (AHS); and one entered and continues in the College of Business Administration (CBA). One of the students commuted from home, living with his parents; the other four have lived in campus housing or near the campus in an apartment with friends since coming to UIC. Two of the five attended the Black Male Summer Retreat prior to the start of the fall 2008 semester. Four of the students had some exposure to the Black Male Leadership Group and the Brothers Reaching Out student group. Two of the students have maintained grades that kept them in 'Good Academic Standing' during all semesters of enrollment. The other three have been in and out of probation standing during their enrollment to date. The qualitative analysis of the survey and interview responses from these students is detailed in the following sections of this report.

## Non-programmatic Factors Influencing African American Male Student Success at UIC

The focus of this study was to capture student's interactions with, and views on, specific programs and campus services. However, it is noteworthy to report on findings that are consistent with, and build on, prior institutional research (specifically the *Pathways* study). These findings will only be briefly highlighted here as an indication of the importance of these factors in students' lives. In the course of gathering comments and reflections from the students who participated in the study, students noted the impact of the following supports/challenges in their lives:\*

- **Family Support:** Students were unanimous in articulating the importance of family support, parental and especially maternal support as reported by Everett:

*In terms of my family, they've always been a support system for me in terms of education. My mother and my grandmother have always been really big on education and making sure, you know, that not just me, but my brother and sisters got a good education. .... So even now, here at UIC, there's still that support system.*

- **Finances/Financial Aid:** Students were clear on the role of financial aid, the stress of financing education, and discussed their various strategies for coping.

*Damon: Financial situations can have a real big effect on how you do in class because people stress out about it.*

*Ben: A big part of my success was financial help.*

The students also discussed the value of on-campus employment in the financial aid mix.

*Damon: One thing that I think helped me be successful was getting campus jobs, and I recommend it for anybody who goes here; because of the connections you make; the networking.*

*Charles. I think it (working on campus) gives you time management, because once you have a job you don't have as much free time as you may want.*

*Ben. So.... living in the housing the next year wasn't an option, but I came across an opportunity to work for housing and then I became an RA. ....And not only did that allow me to live on campus, but it also put me in a great financial situation.*

- **Preparation for College/Study Skills:** Students discussed the lack of preparation for the rigors of college.

*Damon: One thing that I can say that I wish I had—I was better at when I got out of high school is better study habits. .... — now I make sure that I do the weekly readings and freshman year I didn't do that because, like most of us, high school was a breeze for me. I got a (good score) on the ACT. I'm thinking like how much harder can college be? But you get to freshman year and it kind of opens your eyes a little bit.*

Other factors that should be mentioned, but will not be detailed here, include:

- the role of friends (on-campus, not from home) in supporting students as study partners, emotional support and social networks; and
- the importance of personal motivation in success.

\*Pseudonyms have been used to protect the identity of student participants.

## **Programs and Services Influencing African American Male Student Success at UIC**

Students who participated in the focus group interviews for this study were asked open-ended questions about the facilitators and challenges influencing their success at UIC. The participants' responses covered a broad set of factors, some of which were identified in the earlier *Pathways* study with African American male seniors at UIC. While we were interested in gathering a broad array of responses, the focus of this study was on the academic support services that have been put in place to enhance the success of African American male students.

The responses of the students fell into five broad categories: academic advising, academic support services, faculty/teaching assistants, engagement with the campus, and the role of early or pre-enrollment experiences. The students had varied backgrounds and academic preparation, and experienced UIC programs and services differently; however, these themes were consistent across our interview conversations with the students. The students' own words often provide more powerful insights and perspectives than any summary interpretation we have crafted, and thus we use their words in our discussion of the themes.

### **Academic Advising**

Students spoke extensively and explicitly about academic advising including the various and multiple sources of advising and the quality of the advising services. Advising resources are available through college offices as well as special academic programs such as the ASCEND (Assuring STEM Credential Expansion through Nurturing Diversity) program, support programs such as AAAN (African American Academic Network), and CHANCE (Counseling, Help, and Assistance Necessary for a College Education). Students also spoke of advice received through informal networks of friends in campus housing and student clubs or organizations.

College advising in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences (LAS) was uniformly viewed as impersonal and inadequate. However, the students were also quick to acknowledge that this had much to do with advising load. They discussed feeling rushed in advising appointments and that it appeared that the advisors had very little understanding of a student other than the cursory enrollment and grade snapshot provided by the DARS (Degree Audit and Reporting System) report. The students thought that each of the LAS advisors had too many student advisees, and consequently, the advisors did not know the students or the various academic programs well enough to provide good advice about courses to take (or to avoid) in order to move through the programs effectively or efficiently. College advising in colleges other than LAS (specifically the Colleges of Business Administration and Applied Health Science) were viewed far more favorably, both in the quality of the advice and the more personalized attention.

#### **In students' own words:**

*Everett: I actually don't go to the college advisors much and the reason I don't go much is because every time I've gone they've always given me these classes that I don't necessarily need.*

*Ben: I think a lot of that also depends on like what college you're in. I was in LAS at first; and I agree with the stuff they were saying, the advising there in LAS... It is nothing compared to now that I'm in AHS. My advisor now knows me pretty well.*

*Charles: .....Going back to that advisor, when you first come in, it's not that the classes are really that hard, it's just that—well, depending on certain classes that you take.... some of them are hard, like chemistry: chemistry killed me. But other classes, it wasn't really that it was that hard, it was just that I didn't take it as serious. And then as far as advising goes, I didn't know that I shouldn't maybe put all of these classes together in one semester. So I have an overload of classes that I would really have to put in a lot of time and effort to, and I didn't put in as much time and effort as I should have. ....When I chose my classes at first.... I knew what I scored on the placement test, and what they gave me on the placement test, and then the lady that helped us do the schedule, she just gave them anything that was available at the time.*

*Damon: In an ideal world I feel like there would be one advisor for every student. But of course that can't happen. .. But each student needs a certain amount of attention put towards him; you want to get something back from the person you're talking to about what you should be doing with your life. You want to get more of a feel that they care, but then at the same time you know that they have thousands of other students.*

*Everett: You know, in terms of (college advisors) they weren't really helpful. Another challenge, I'm not sure if this is really a challenge, but it's very hard to even really get an appointment with them. And I found that even when I would make an appointment, you know, they would give me like the bare necessity, you know, because they had other students, they had other appointments, other people would come in for walk-in hours and they had to get them advised as well. And so they would say, "Well, I can help you with that but I can't do that now, so you just have to come back later and make another appointment for that." And I'm like, "Well I don't—I'm a student, I have lots of other things, I don't have time to continue to come and make appointments; I'd rather do it now."*

Some of the students spoke to the advising services provided by AAAN as an opportunity to get more personalized attention and guidance tailored to their individual circumstance. While the students admitted that academic and course enrollment 'gate-keeping' authority resided in the college office, the insights and assistance provided by some of these other academic support services were important resources.

*Damon: ... and AAAN, those counselors don't have the amount of students that our college counselor has; you get to see them more often. So, you know, I can randomly show up to his office and he'll probably be available. And it's just more personal. If I go to my college advisor's office—and she recommends some classes, I might go to AAAN and ask my advisor, "Well, how do you think these classes will work with me having to go to work after? Do you think that's good for me?"*

*Akeem: They (staff of AAAN) encourage you to come back. .. They're more open.*

## **Academic Support Services**

The students discussed their use of various academic support services including advising, tutoring and networking opportunities. One student participated in the ASCEND program and discussed the importance of that program in connecting to support services. Discipline specific offices such as the Math Learning Center, the Writing Center and the Science Learning Center were mentioned as

opportunities to receive tutoring and establish study groups. Students also spoke to the use of services in TRIO, CHANCE and AAAN. While the discipline/department based Centers were generally acknowledged as important services, students also spoke to both timing; becoming acquainted with the services early in the semester and the competition to receive services because of crowds during peak demand periods during the semester. Specifically, students mentioned difficulty in getting into the Math Learning Center around midterms.

In terms of the support services not housed in academic departments, there was consensus among the students that TRIO is more focused on tutoring; AAAN is a source for advising services, and CHANCE targets networking. One student spoke extensively about the support provided through the Urban Health Program (UHP) as a vital link for minority students in pre-health disciplines. This student suggested that UHP provides the kind of encouragement and mentoring that is needed especially for students with limited exposure to, or experience with challenges of pre-health profession curricula.

In students' own words:

*Charles: I think that it (UHP) is a great organization because when you're going into the medical field you hear a lot of people telling you, as soon as you come in, that you might not be able to make it. You messed up, you didn't get an A in all your classes first semester so you might want to reconsider a major. And then when you go to these events you actually see doctors and dentists and nurses, and they actually they tell you, 'You made mistakes, I made mistakes as well. But you can still do it, you can still move forward. You know, as long as you can keep progressing, then you'll be okay.' And you also get networking opportunities 'cause you meet people that are in the field. You don't just meet people that want to be doctors, you actually meet doctors. And then with us like liberal arts, I mean LAS advisors, they're like, "Yeah, well you might want to reconsider your major now."*

*Damon: I wished I would have known more about tutoring opportunities. I think they need to stress to freshmen, drill it in their heads, that you need to go to a tutor and that it's a really important part of college, because I've used it every semester since second semester freshman year.*

*It (the Math Learning Center) is crowded, but it was also crowded in TRIO. I was using that one so I can't really say that that really was the difference. But it was kind of an attention thing. Other than that you're just wasting your time. And then you're basically just going in there hoping that a tutor's available, and hoping that they actually can help you in whatever class you're in.*

*Akeem: Yea, I'm still using my study group (from the Science Learning Center) for Organic Chem. You can't survive without a study group in that class.*

*Charles: TRIO's more tutoring; CHANCE is more a networking tool. They[CHANCE] have a lot of different events they sponsor. They have sponsored a lot of events that I was involved in. And I guess for an actual personal advisor, I mean I do also go to CHANCE because they have ambassadors as well as their different staff. But for the most part, I do go to AAAN for the actual advisor.*

## Faculty and Teaching Assistants

Students expressed some concerns about access to professors and teaching assistants when they were in need of help in understanding course material. The primary concern about academic support from professors was limited availability and office hours. One student discussed how he put off asking a professor for assistance because his office hours conflicted with another class. However, more importantly, students were vocal and unanimous in their distress about teaching assistants. They were direct and pointed in their comments.

### In students' own words:

*Damon: To me, that's one of the worst things about education at UIC, is the TAs. I think it's a serious problem and they don't put any attention to it.*

*Ben: Well, I've taken a lot of science classes and a big challenge for me was TAs. Like a lot of them are foreign. And I remember my first chemistry class, which is 112, my TA she—it was still very difficult for me because I couldn't go to her for help because she didn't know English. And it was hard for me to go and talk with my professor because it was intimidating being in a class of couple hundred kids. ... So, yeah, that was hard for me because I had to just really just learn to do independent learning ... because the TAs were not a support system for me.*

*Everett. You know, I gotta go to the professor, but it was almost impossible. I mean there were some times where I said, okay, I'm going to have to miss this class to go... of course that 's not good, you know, because then I miss materials in the other class. But I would try to at least miss a class that I was doing pretty good in, so it wouldn't hurt me too badly to miss the class.*

## Academic Engagement – Getting Involved

Some of the students elaborated on the importance of getting involved on campus as vital to establishing a peer network and connecting with students outside the classroom. Student organizations and campus housing were mentioned. The way that students find their network may vary, but finding the network is critical to surviving and thriving.

### In students' own words:

*Everett: One of the things that I think is very important in terms of success in academics is to meet people on campus... I feel like if I didn't have some kind of connection with somebody, it would have been much harder for me to do anything. .. But because I had connected with some students on campus, you know, I could take a break and say, "Okay, let's go hang out. Let's go out to eat. Let's go to the movies or let's go to a game."*

*Ben: I would say, just join a student organization; something that pertains to what you're going to do in life. I think that by joining a student organization, as long as you're around people that have similar goals as you, I think that's important in your success. You can talk to them about your problem; you're all going through the same thing, you all can exchange (test and papers). .. I think that that's an integral part of being academically successful. I've been here on campus for three years. I think that's important in meeting people and, you know, being involved. Just get involved.*

## Pre enrollment/Transition programs

In the interview, we asked students to reflect on their transition to college and UIC. While the students conceded that they had some rough starts early in the time at UIC, particularly underestimating the demands of college study, they were generally positive about a variety of early and transition experiences. As noted earlier, one student participated in ASCEND, and was involved in transition programs specifically for the ASCEND students. Two students participated in the Black Male Summer Retreat program; one student who was not able to attend the retreat became involved in the BRO (Brothers Reaching Out) programs and another student reported connecting with campus administrators through the Black Male Leadership Group mentor programming. It was clear from the perspective of these students that early transition programs are important to adjusting to college. Many of the students admitted that as good students in high school, they underestimated the demands of UIC.

These transition and pre-enrollment programs also serve a critical need to find a peer network, - students of like-minds to share social and academic interests. In addition, some of the students were quite animated in their discussion of the importance of campus 'social' events as opportunities to interact and just have fun. Two specific examples cited were the New Student Convocation and Picnic and the more recent Fall Concert on the Green. It may be that no one program fits all students, but they spoke to these events and programs as opportunities to meet and socialize as they were getting ready for the fall term.

### In students' own words:

*Ben: Well, I know pre-first semester I went to the (BRO retreat). I'm not active at all with BRO anymore, but I think that they were critical to my success as a freshman because they taught me how to read my DARS report, they told me how to approach professors. You know, they told me what to expect in the classroom setting before I actually got there. They told me to join an organization, you know, things like that.*

*Everett: The only thing that I could really even think of is to have more of those programs like ASCEND but more geared towards making sure that when you start your freshman year, you're going to be acclimated to the curriculum. And so they really help you play catch-up before you actually start.*

*Damon: The (BRO) retreat is great. The retreat is like....genius for Black male students. It solves the issue of coming to school as one person and not knowing anyone. Because you come two weeks early; you live in a dorm, so you already know, you kind of get a gist of what it's like to stay there. And then you, well not everyone stays there, but then even if you're off campus, now you know people. You may not remember everybody by name, but just being able to walk through student center and say, "Oh, this guy was at the retreat, hey what's up man? How you been? Oh I'm good". You know, you know people. Everybody's not alien to you.*

*Charles: Because like he said, with the Asian people in my class, like yeah I don't—I didn't really feel comfortable asking some of the Asian individuals in my class for help because it was like I was intimidated for the most part. .. So if I would have gone to a retreat like the (BRO) retreat I think it would have changed a lot of my mind. It would change my mind-set when I first came in.*

*I wouldn't have been trying to look for people; I would have already known a few other people. I would have already been comfortable.*

*Ben: I think another challenge for me was being in a big lecture center and there (not) being a lot of people of color in there. And for me that was intimidating because I went to a diverse high school but there weren't as many Asians or Indians in my classroom setting. Always in our school those are the minority. And here they're the majority. Well it seems like they're the majority in our classes. So I think for me that was very intimidating. The stereotype of an Asian person is that they would be smart. So, you know, being a freshman, subliminally that stuff kind of can get to you. So I think it took a while for me to really feel that I was capable of doing what they were capable of.*

*Akeem: I think most people, when they go to college; they have a friend from high school. But for me, I didn't know anybody so it was hard for me... Now I meet a lot of people and that helps for homework (study groups).*

## Recommendations to Support the Success of African American Males at UIC

The students were candid and had strong views on some aspects of their UIC experience, both in and out of the classroom. The following recommendations have been drawn from the responses of the student participants:

### **- Tutoring and Mentoring**

- Communicate often and clearly with students about the tutoring services available to them. Make sure that students are able to discern what type of services are offered by the various academic support units on campus to allow them to find the best fit for their needs.
- Establish a network of tutoring and mentoring programs to share information and expertise.
- Before the first semester of freshmen year, develop communication mechanisms that ensure that students hear about the importance of tutoring from student mentors. They need to hear **from students like them**, that even if they did well in high school, they should assume that college level work will be more demanding, because if the first semester grade point is low, it is very difficult to bring that grade point up in subsequent semesters. Incoming students need to know that it is far better to begin cautiously than to have to play catch up for the balance of their academic career.
- Connect students to faculty and staff mentors who check in with the students about their academic progress. Mentors should be encouraged to consider the personal situations (family, finances, etc.) of the students as they give advice about academic issues. The BRO organization retreat is a model for developing mentoring relationships early.
- Connect students to role models who can provide guidance and encouragement when students face challenges. (The Urban Health Program and the Black Male Leadership Group are examples of these programs).
- Examine all tutoring resources to determine whether there are an inadequate number of tutors in general, an inadequate number of tutors with the level of subject matter mastery to provide tutoring to more advanced students, or whether the inadequate number of tutors is related to crowding at test times (e.g. midterms) or other scheduling issues. Each of these challenges would require a different institutional response.
- Ensure that **all** incoming students know about the various disciplinary learning centers – especially the Writing Center.

### **- Academic Advising**

- Deal with the dire issues associated with college advising – especially in LAS. One student called college advising “the worst thing about education at UIC”. Advisor load (ratio of students to advisor) is only one aspect of this complex problem.

- Ensure that all undergraduate academic advisors can help students to understand how to use academic policy and programs to their best advantage (e.g., course withdrawal policy). Advisors must have a thorough understanding of the nuances of academic programs to help structure the most efficient and effective enrollment planning possible.
- Coordinate the various academic advising outlets on campus so that the resources that are available are better distributed across the student body. Some students seek guidance from multiple resources – we need to be sure that the information is consistent and accurate.

#### **- Academic Engagement – Getting Involved**

- Continue to encourage students to get involved on campus. Whether that translates to joining a college-based or campus student organization, working on campus, or regularly participating in campus programs, involvement is critical. During orientation and early in the first semester, inform students of the student organizations available on campus, and of the importance of getting involved. For students who have already chosen a career path, involvement in a career oriented organization may be particularly helpful academically. Perhaps student organizations should be more assertive in inviting students to participate.

#### **- Early (Pre-Enrollment) Experiences**

- Market pre-enrollment programs to incoming African American male students more effectively. Use quotes or the experiences of previous attendees in recruitment information for these programs. The BRO retreat and the ASCEND programs were cited as particularly beneficial.

#### **- Faculty and Teaching Assistants**

- Students must have access to faculty and teaching assistants for after class questions about course content and assignments. Faculty and teaching assistants should poll their students to see if their office hours will accommodate student schedules.
- The language proficiency standard for teaching assistants is too low. This is especially problematic in first year courses. New requirements must be set for the English language skills of teaching assistants. Teaching assistants must be better prepared to work with undergraduates, particularly the diverse undergraduate enrollment of UIC.

#### **- Campus Social Life**

- Campus-wide events that allow for and encourage students to engage with the campus are vital in building community. Events like Freshman Convocation and the New Student picnic were examples cited by the students. The campus should take more responsibility for planning large events. These types of programs give students an opportunity to meet other students, connect to the campus, and unwind from their studies. They don't have to hunt for social activities because they are woven into campus life.

## Concluding Remarks

Our primary goal in this study was an investigation of how the students who entered as freshmen in the fall of 2008 used campus services and programs, with particular attention to the more recently implemented programs developed under the auspices of the Black Male Initiative. The study design focused on aspects of campus life that influenced (or hindered) their academic progress. The students shared their views and perspectives on these programs and other aspects of undergraduate life at UIC. They were candid and pointed in their remarks. We share these views with the express purpose to learn from the students and to improve the undergraduate experience for all students.

While we have shared insights regarding the new programs, it is worthwhile to also note the consistencies from the first Pathways study in which we spoke to students from the entering class of 2003, 2004 and 2005 (and at senior standing in Spring 2009):

- The concern about the language skills and teaching ability of many teaching assistants, especially in first year courses, is a frustration that should not be ignored.
- The concern about advising must be addressed. This issue is fundamental to the success of all students, especially those who come from families with limited exposure to the college experience; i.e., first generation college students.
- The positive impact of the residence hall experience for many students was evident.
- The importance of developing a network of like-minded friends and study partners is vital to student success. Campus programs that facilitate these networks are critical.

We believe that it is important to share findings that are consistent across institutional studies. The findings of this study point to the reliability of the findings of the earlier study; highlight persistent service, program and policy concerns that have not yet been addressed; and identify strengths that should be supported or, at the very least, maintained in times of constrained resources. This study suggests that the campus is making some progress in creating an infrastructure for African American Male success at UIC. In a meeting with key campus policy actors, we were pleased to learn that a number of program and service initiatives have resulted from the studies that have been conducted.

It is important to note that the findings of these studies have been shared with the Provost's office, and other relevant campus constituencies. In addition, we typically prepare the report of findings so that they are suited to each constituent group. Each group, (e.g., campus administrative leaders, academic advisors, student service professionals, and faculty) finds different conclusions and recommendations relevant to their role in making program and service decisions on campus. At the same time, it is important for everyone responsible for student success to have access to the full set of conclusions and recommendations. Our hope is that this research will encourage service and program coordination between constituents.

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