Report on the LAS Global Studies Forum on the Campus Racial Climate

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The LAS Global Studies program held a forum on December 2, 2015 to discuss ways to improve the racial climate at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC). We organized the event based on evidence that the current climate is negatively affecting our majors. One of our majors has decided to leave UIUC because of racist incidents at fraternity houses and in the classroom and because she feels that her concerns are not being taken seriously by campus administration.

Prior to the forum, the staff conducted a survey among its 204 majors that focused on their experiences and/or observations of racism on campus (Appendix 1). The survey response rate (21%) was relatively high given the short time that students had to complete the survey and the fact that it was conducted over the Thanksgiving holiday.

Survey Results

Nearly a third (31%) of Global Studies majors have personally experienced racism. The most common experiences involve racial slurs (23%) and stereotyping (31%). Students also reported anti-Semitism (15%) and being viewed as exotic (15%) as racist experiences. Most (62%) of our majors who have experienced racism are Asian. One Asian student described her experience in the following terms:

Both fortunately and unfortunately as UIUC is a public university, the composition of the students that attend this university come from a variety of backgrounds. Some students come from very small towns with little to none racial diversity, thus reflecting a clear lack of exposure to racial issues and/or contributing to racial tension. Personally, my roommate freshman year was racist and made several racist remarks to me and about me to my suitemates. These remarks included content along the lines of feeling unsafe because "there are too many black people" or telling my suitemates that she was unable to understand my English despite the fact that my native language is English. Furthermore, the social dynamics at UIUC and the history of the university evidently is an institution that was built to benefit a certain race whether intentionally or unintentionally. Therefore, in classes and outside of classes, there is a certain uncomfortable racial distinction that is drawn amongst students. Additionally, there have been cases in which even professors and mostly TAs have made microaggressive remarks towards me and other students.

Sixty-five (65%) of our majors said they have observed incidents of racism on campus. These incidents include overhearing other students make racist comments or encountering them on social media (27%), the so-called Illini White Student Union on Facebook (15%), and witnessing other forms of racial microaggression (15%). One white female Global Studies major stated in her response to the survey:
There's been a couple incidents I've witnessed. A recent one was when there was the solidarity event on the quad and while walking there, I heard many people making racist comments about the people rallying and speaking. Later that day I also saw many posts and comments on social media about the event that were also racist in nature.

Another white female student wrote:

One time at the LAS desk, an Asian international student was confused about where she needed to go to get a form signed. She politely asked someone behind the desk who repeatedly yelled at her in a condescending tone when she didn't understand what he was saying. I was standing in the back of a long line and he was nice to everyone else in front of me. It was a very obvious show of racism.

An Asian female stated:

I also think it is racist toward Native Americans when students insist on wearing school gear with the Chief.

When asked what actions LAS Global Studies might take to address the racial climate problem, students made 18 different recommendations. Their most common recommendation is to increase awareness of and dialogue around racism on campus (33%) followed by integrating diversity and inclusion into courses, particularly LAS 101. One of our majors said:

Educate students on issues of race. Most people do not know or understand anything about issues such as cultural appropriation or police violence. Many people live in their safe little bubbles and are not aware of the issues other races are facing.

Many of our students’ recommendations (see Appendix 2) echo those already made in the 2015 report *Racial Microaggressions at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign* (Harwood, et al 2015).

**LAS Global Studies Forum**

The forum was held on Wednesday, December 2, in 316 Gregory Hall between 4:00-6:00 pm. Thirty GS majors participated along with the GS staff. GS Director Thomas Bassett opened the forum by expressing the program’s concerns about the effects of the campus racial climate on student wellbeing. He described the highly diverse racial/ethnic composition of GS majors and then highlighted the results of the survey discussed in the previous section. The introduction was followed by a breakout session comprised of four groups of students and a GS staff member.

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1 LAS Global Studies had 204 majors in Fall 2015. When they applied to the U. of Illinois, these students identified themselves according the following “racial” categories: White: 96 (47%); Asian: 65 (32%); Hispanic/Latino(a): 30 (15%); African-American: 12 (6%); and Native Hawaiian: 1 (<1%).
During the breakout sessions, students described their experiences and observations of racism on campus. They then discussed what Global Studies and the university administration might do to change the campus racial climate. Students expressed themselves freely and with great respect for fellow students and the GS staff throughout the thirty-minute session. We then reconvened into a plenary session in which staff members conveyed their group’s recommendations to improve the campus racial climate. Students elaborated on and added to these recommendations while they were being listed on the blackboard. In the end, students listed a total of thirteen recommendations. This list (see Appendix 3) is, not surprisingly, similar to those made by our students in the online survey.

Director Bassett concluded the forum by thanking GS majors for their active participation. He noted that the major findings of the survey and forum would be discussed by the Global Studies staff and transmitted to campus administration. The program is also following and participating in the activities of the Central Black Student Union to foster a more tolerant and culturally sensitive campus community.

**Major Findings and Recommendations**

The LAS Global Studies staff is deeply concerned about the apparent disconnect between campus mission statements regarding diversity and the steps that need to be taken to make UIUC an inclusive inter-racial community in which all students feel welcome and comfortable while pursuing their studies. The most glaring example of the administration’s failure to address racism is its failure to take a strong ethical position on the retirement of the racist mascot Chief Illiniwek. The university was forced to act by the NCAA to retire the mascot, which sends a strong signal to minority students that the administration does not truly care about racism on campus.

The failure to create a nurturing and respectful inter-racial learning environment is leading to student recruitment and retention problems for LAS Global Studies. Most recently, Global Studies Academic Advisor Malcolm Jamal visited Urbana High School to speak with African-American students about the GS major. Malcolm and Moises Orozco of LAS Administration met with nine members of the Urbana High School African-American Club. During the discussion period following his presentation, Malcolm was stunned to learn that eight of the nine students in attendance were not applying to the UIUC because of its racial climate. They are applying to schools where they believe they will be better welcomed.

Given the similarity in findings between the LAS Global Studies Survey and Forum on the Campus Racial Climate and the Racial Microaggressions at UIUC report (Harwood, et al 2015), Global Studies recommends that the higher administration implement that report’s recommendations as soon as possible.
LAS Global Studies also urges that the higher administration become much more proactive in eliminating racism on campus. It should bridge the gap between its mission and its accomplishments in this area. A perusal of the *Inclusive Illinois 2015 Impact Report*\(^2\) indicates that much remains to be done in this area. The College of LAS’s summary of its activities on p. 17 is particularly thin.

To address one of the most egregious and festering racist issues UIUC, the higher administration needs to send a strong and unambiguous message condemning the vestiges of Chief Illiniwek on campus. This message should be accompanied by concrete actions that *demonstrate* the university’s commitment to inclusivity, culturally sensitivity, and symbols appropriate to a public institution. For example, university leadership could educate students about the history of racism at the University of Illinois, including the history of Chief Illiniwek, through a permanent exhibit at the Spurlock Museum.

The administration’s response in November 2015 to the so-called Illini White Student Union Facebook page was effective in terms of its speed and action. It should consider how it could capitalize on this racist incident by using it as a proactive teaching moment.

LAS Global Studies believes that unit-level conversations and actions are key to making the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign an inclusive and culturally sensitive center of learning. It will do all that it can through its instructional programs, advising, and outreach activities to build competency in cross-cultural understanding. We are also committed to creating an open and safe place for students to share their concerns and to advocating on their behalf. Given the system-wide nature of racism on campus, the higher administration needs to take concrete steps to demonstrate its commitment to an inclusive campus where there is zero tolerance for cultural insensitivity. We offer additional recommendations for building a more culturally sensitive community in Appendices 2 and 3.

**References**


\(^2\) [http://inclusiveillinois.illinois.edu/supporting_docs/2015%20Inclusive%20Impact.pdf](http://inclusiveillinois.illinois.edu/supporting_docs/2015%20Inclusive%20Impact.pdf)
Appendix 1

Survey on Global Studies Students Experience or Observation of Racism at UIUC

This survey is designed to raise awareness of the extent of racism on the UIUC campus as experienced by LAS Global Studies majors. Its goal is to enable all students to enjoy positive living and learning experiences during their studies at Illinois. Knowledge of specific incidents of racism, whether they are subtle or blatant, will help to identify the institutions and practices that impede this goal. Your participation in this survey is voluntary and anonymous.

1. Do you feel that your race or identity has been a factor in the way you have been treated at UIUC? If so, please describe the specific incidents that have negatively affected you.

2. Although you may not have been its principal victim, you may have witnessed an incident of racism on campus. If you have observed such an incident, please describe it in detail.

3. On the basis of your experiences or observations of racism on campus, what actions can you recommend that LAS Global Studies can take to address this problem?

4. How do you identify yourself in terms of race or ethnicity?

5. What is your gender identity?

Thank you for participating in this survey.
Appendix 2

Recommendations for Improving the Campus Racial Climate based on the LAS Global Studies Student Survey

1. Increase awareness, dialogue, and services on race, human rights, and cultural diversity
2. Integrate racial and cultural diversity issues into LAS 101 and workshops
3. Include culturally diverse viewpoints into courses
4. Create programs that integrate international and US students
5. Create courses and forums on racism
6. No actions are needed
7. Take a specific course (e.g. EPSY 202) to learn about racism
8. Be more strict and proactive at the campus level in addressing racist behavior
9. Post ACT scores and GPAs of minorities to counter view that their admission is due to affirmative action.
10. Make all departments into safe spaces where students feel comfortable and can obtain advising
11. Require a Gen Ed course on minorities in the US
12. Require LAS Office of Students administrators to participate in sensitivity training
13. Build a more diverse faculty
14. Take symbolic actions to increase cross-cultural understanding (e.g. hijab day)
15. Organize more group projects in classes so students of different backgrounds can interact more frequently with each other
16. Treat people as individuals and not on the basis of their skin color
17. Promote more interfaith/multicultural events on campus
18. Encourage professors to take a leading role in combating racism in classes
Appendix 3

Recommendations for Improving the Campus Racial Climate based on the LAS Global Studies Forum

1. Introduce Gen Ed requirement emphasizing race/ethnicity/cross-cultural relations

2. Include a robust cross-cultural component in LAS 101/LAS 122/LAS transfer courses

3. Provide a safe space for students to share their experiences; respond quickly to racist incidents

4. Make cultural activities more popular by giving credit to students for organizing workshops, for example, within leadership training certificate programs.

5. Bring issues to students rather than asking them to attend events (e.g. integrate cross-cultural events/speakers into courses to address issues like racial microaggressions)

6. Require diversity training for faculty, administrative staff, and higher administration

7. Increase awareness and conversations on the definition, scope, and forms of racism and microaggression.

8. Require sensitivity training in Greek system and impose consequences for documented racist incidents. For example, reinvent the relationship between the Pan-Hellenic system and UIUC by revoking all sorority and fraternity charters and requiring these organizations to reapply under new campus rules in which eliminating racism is paramount.

9. Consider making group names and activities more inclusive to draw broader support

10. Faculty need to be proactive in eliminating racial microaggressions in the classroom

11. Require cross-cultural (diversity?) training for popular RSO such as AIESEC

12. Greater acknowledgement of and action by higher administration to address racism on campus

13. Use social media (e.g. Facebook) to create a safe space for students to talk to one another about the campus racial climate.