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University of Illinois attracts Chinese

By Jim Nowlan

The University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC) is one of the world's great graduate research centers. The 2013 world rankings compiled by Shanghai Jiao Tong University, one of China's most prestigious, placed UIUC at 25th best in the world, ahead of elite U.S. institutions such as Duke, Northwestern and the Ivy League's Brown.

The challenge is to stay near the top of the rankings in a context of fierce competition to develop and attract star faculty and the research grants they bring to campus.

I am amazed that UIUC has done as well as it has. It is sometimes tough to attract faculty to a small city (actually cities) on the prairie where it can be difficult to find a rewarding job for one's spouse.

A huge challenge is money. UIUC lacks a large, multi-billion dollar endowment like those at some major private institutions. The university entered the fund-raising game late, relying instead on generous state funding.

But the state has neglected UIUC in recent years. According to the university's budget book, direct state support for overall university operations has declined from a little over \$1 billion in 2002 to \$621 million in 2014, in 2014 dollars.

State funding for operations makes up only 14 percent of the university's overall, three-campus \$4.5 billion budget (though the state does cover major pension payments).

To offset this decline in state funding, UIUC has increased tuition charges sharply, to about \$15,000 per year, one of the highest charges among public universities in the nation.

A few years ago, when tuition was about half that, UIUC was an attractive, low-cost option. The campus didn't need to offer financial aid to win a large percentage of those who were admitted.

Now other universities, such as Iowa, Indiana and Missouri, are poaching many of the best students with financial aid packages that cost the student less than to attend UIUC. As a result, fewer admitted students are actually enrolling at UIUC.

UIUC has long been a graduate research center first and an undergraduate teaching institution second. Large classes help make it possible for tenured faculty to focus on research and in some cases teach only one or two courses a year.

(Among other research accomplishments, the first effective Internet web browser, Mosaic, was created at UIUC and provides the template for Google Chrome, Mozilla Firefox and others.)

So the *U.S. News & World Report* annual rankings, which focus on undergraduate education, put Northwestern and Brown at 12th and 14th, respectively, among national universities, and UIUC 41st, still respectable but not in the elite category.

I am teaching an introductory course this fall at Knox College, a small liberal arts college, for 15 freshmen and sophomores. This is not likely to happen often at UIUC.

But status-crazed Chinese families and students are attracted by UIUC's world rankings, especially by the very high rankings in computer science, engineering, and the sciences.

When I taught this past spring at Fudan University in Shanghai, my students, many of whom want to study in the U.S., knew the reputational rankings of U.S. universities better than I did.

While many Illinois students were opting away from UIUC this fall, 600 Chinese students who had been admitted decided to enroll, representing one in ten of the incoming freshman class!

UIUC is already an international campus, with more foreign students than any school other than the University of Southern California. Nine thousand of the 44,500 on the UIUC campus are international students.

International students are attractive in that most pay out-of-state tuition, which is more than twice that paid by in-state students.

Some major U.S. universities such as Duke and Johns Hopkins are creating campuses in China, Maybe the UIUC strategy is instead to create a truly international campus here on the prairie.

To do so, the campus will have to devote major resources to integrating the international students into the life of the campus, which could be enriching for in-state students as well. Otherwise, a ghetto of separated Chinese students is likely to develop.

Second, UIUC will have to devote more resources to financial aid, creating competitive financial aid packages to attract the best and brightest of our own state's students.