

FINAL REPORT

# Institutional Image and Competitive Positioning Analysis

University of Illinois at Springfield · Springfield, Illinois

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## Executive Summary and Recommendations

### Summary of Research Findings

Contained in this final report are the separate reports for each research study conducted as part of the comprehensive market research project for the University of Illinois at Springfield. Those studies are:

- On-campus focus groups with current students (traditional undergraduates, adult undergraduates, graduate students, faculty, staff, and interviews with key administrators)
- Telephone survey research of the following prospective student populations:
  - College-bound high school students from Illinois
  - Traditional age undergraduate (transfer) inquiries
  - Adult undergraduate inquiries
  - Graduate student inquiries
- Survey research on the following populations of decision influencers:
  - Parents of college-bound high school students from Illinois (telephone)
  - Springfield area employers (telephone)
  - Mail/fax survey of high school guidance counselors
  - Mail/fax survey of community college counselors
- Online survey of students in online courses
- Student Satisfaction Inventory results from current students

Each section below includes the key findings from the specific research project. In this executive summary, we provide an overview and synthesis of these findings.

## Information Resources

Prospective students as well as decision influencers acquire information about colleges and universities from a number of different sources. For nearly all of the populations studied in this project, word of mouth sources (specifically family, friends, and high school counselors) were most often used to gather information on an initial list of schools to be considered. (Graduate student inquiries and students in online courses were more likely to mention faculty members and material from UIS as sources of information.)

Web sites figure prominently as information resources at the stage when prospective students (traditional as well as non-traditional, undergraduate as well as graduate) have developed an initial list of schools and want to do further research on the schools on their list. Web sites are also used by parents, high school guidance counselors, and community college counselors.

Publications were sometimes mentioned by specific populations. Students in online courses seem to use UIS publications to get information about online courses. High school guidance counselors mentioned college publications and the catalog as sources of information that they were most likely to use. Community college counselors also mentioned these, as well as articulation agreements. When asked about communications from colleges, employers indicated that publications directed to human resource directors would be most useful for them.

## What is Important to Prospective Students

Regardless of the population surveyed, all of the prospective students indicated in one way or another that the following items are important to them as they considered different colleges and universities:

- **Program availability:** Does the school offer programs that I'm interested in? Even for undecided students, there are typically a constellation of programs or subjects that they are considering.
- **Cost and financial aid:** Can I afford the tuition, and is there financial aid available to help with costs? Prospective students are concerned about costs, even if their parents will be paying for college. Relatively low tuition and fees are an advantage but beyond this, prospective students and their parents are interested in whether or not a school offers financial aid to help reduce the cost to them.
- **Faculty who are good teachers:** What are some of the outstanding characteristics of the faculty? Prospective students want to know that the time they spend in class with their professors will be worthwhile, and that if they need it they can turn to their professors for help and support in their efforts to learn.
- **Learning in small classes:** Will my professors know me? Prospective students do not want to get lost in the "system," and anticipate that at some time they will need personal attention.

For specific student populations, certain other items stood out as important:

- **College-bound high school students:** These students also indicated that campus safety and security was important to them, as well as the availability of student clubs and organizations.

- Traditional age undergraduate (transfer) inquiries: These students also indicated that it was important to them to be able to transfer course credits in easily, and that their courses have a “real-world” impact. When asked to indicate the most convenient time to take classes, this population prefers daytime, weekday classes.
- Adult undergraduate inquiries: These students also indicated that flexible class schedules and convenient locations were important to them, as well as having campus services (registrar, billing, financial aid, career services, etc.) open during the evening. Like traditional age undergraduate inquiries, they also want their courses to have “real-world” impact. However, when asked to indicate the most convenient time to take classes, this population prefers evening, weeknight classes.
- Graduate student inquiries: These students shared many of the same interests as adult undergraduates, especially flexibility of class schedules, convenient locations, and courses with “real-world” impact. In addition, it is important to graduate students that the program (and not just the university) has a strong reputation.
- Students in online courses: These students value the availability of specific courses (and not just program availability). They also value the opportunity to work at their own pace, which is afforded by online courses.

For some of the decision influencers, several features were important:

- Parents: They recognize that the school needs to have the programs that their son or daughter is interested in. It is also important to them that the school be close to home, is affordable, is safe and secure, and that the faculty are caring and effective teachers. Parents also value the “real-world” impact of courses, and look to academic resources and facilities as a way to judge the quality of a campus.
- High school counselors: Academic reputation is important to counselors when recommending a school to their students, as are the outcomes of the school’s graduates. They also indicate that professors who work closely with their students and small class sizes are important features to them when recommending a school.
- Community college counselors: Community college counselors indicated that ease of transferring credits and cost of attending were the two features that were important to them when recommending a school to their students.

In the on-campus focus groups, current students were asked their reasons for choosing UIS. The reasons mentioned included the cost (relative to the value), small class sizes, accessible faculty, faculty who understand the needs of adult students, proximity to their home, the opportunity to earn a “University of Illinois” degree, and preparation for a public service career.

Respondents to the Student Satisfaction Inventory indicated that academic reputation and geographic setting were factors that influenced their decision to attend UIS.

### **Perceptions of the University of Illinois at Springfield**

The first finding to consider is the level of awareness that different populations have of the University of Illinois at Springfield. Not surprisingly, levels of awareness are lowest among college-bound high school students, their parents, and high school counselors. As more people learn about the Capital Scholars program, this awareness will likely increase, but it is important to

bear in mind that at the time of the research, there was little awareness of the fact that UIS offered programs to high school graduates. Levels of awareness are much higher among the other populations studied.

Beyond general awareness, it is important to consider how the university is perceived among the specific populations included in the research project. These perceptions include perceptions of academic quality, location of the campus, and ratings of specific features of the university. In general, the populations had a favorable impression of the academic reputation of UIS, with undergraduate transfer inquiries, adult undergraduate inquiries, and community college counselors more often describing the university's academic reputation as "very good." The "overall reputation" of the university was rated highly by adult undergraduate inquiries, parents of college-bound high school students, and students in online classes. Quality of academic programs was rated as a strength by college-bound high school students, adult undergraduate inquiries, students in online classes, parents of college-bound high school students, and high school counselors. Class sizes and the student-faculty ratio at UIS were rated highly by traditional age undergraduate (transfer) inquiries, adult undergraduate inquiries, high school counselors, and community college counselors. Online students also rated faculty qualifications and reputation of the program favorably.

When asked about location, both college-bound high school students and their parents used words like "nice" and "safe." However, college-bound high school students prefer a college location in or near a major city such as Chicago, while their parents preferred a college location in or near a small city, such as Springfield. Campus safety and security at UIS was rated highly by college-bound high school students, their parents, traditional age undergraduate (transfer) inquiries, adult undergraduate inquiries, and graduate student inquiries.

Several features of UIS that are related to affordability messages were rated highly by some populations. For example, college-bound high school students, traditional age undergraduate (transfer) inquiries, and adult undergraduate inquiries all rated highly the ability to graduate on time from UIS. Traditional age undergraduate (transfer) inquiries also rated affordable tuition costs highly, as did community college counselors. Community college counselors, traditional age undergraduate (transfer) inquiries, and adult undergraduate inquiries all rated UIS favorably on ease of transferring prior course work.

For messages about outcomes, some populations seemed to register that UIS offered desirable outcomes. For example, employment or graduate school opportunities at UIS were rated favorably by traditional age undergraduate (transfer) inquiries, adult undergraduate inquiries, parents of college-bound high school students, and high school counselors. Internship opportunities at UIS were rated favorably by traditional age undergraduate (transfer) inquiries, high school counselors, and community college counselors. When asked about public service opportunities at UIS, both high school counselors and community college counselors rated this highly.

On features of convenience and the needs of adult students, ratings of adult undergraduate inquiries and graduate students were both favorable.

## **Strengths of the University of Illinois at Springfield**

In our interviews and on-campus focus groups, several features of UIS were mentioned as strengths. These were:

- Public affairs mission
- Size of a small institution at the price of a public
- University of Illinois connection
- Convenience and flexibility
- Faculty who are enthusiastic about teaching
- Programs with real-world relevance
- Academic facilities
- Online programs

Some of these perceptions can be validated by comparison with responses to the Student Satisfaction Inventory. For undergraduate students, the strengths of UIS are:

- **Instructional effectiveness:** Based on the SSI, faculty do indeed seem to the undergraduates at UIS to be not only enthusiastic teachers, but to care about students as individuals. Faculty are available after class, provide quality instruction that is valued by students, and contribute to an environment where students feel like they experience intellectual growth.
- **Academic advising:** The academic advising and support provided to undergraduates at UIS is perceived by them to be a strength.
- **Safety and security:** Although it wasn't mentioned particularly in focus groups, the SSI results suggest that the campus feels safe and secure to undergraduates, which is important to college-bound high school students and their parents.
- **Campus climate:** Undergraduate students believe UIS has a good reputation and that tuition is a worthwhile investment. They also find campus staff to be caring and helpful.
- **Campus support services:** The mention of academic facilities in focus groups is reflected in the SSI results indicating that computer labs are adequate and accessible, library resources are adequate, and that library staff are helpful and approachable.

Graduate students register most of the same features as strengths of their experience at UIS, except they don't indicate that their experience of academic facilities such as computer laboratories and the library meets their expectations.

## **Competition**

Few of the viewbooks received in the competition study used compelling themes to command the attention of prospective students. Nearly all institutions communicated with a prospective inquiry in a timely manner, and provided material which addressed some of the basic questions of a prospective undergraduate student. Communications with graduate students was much less effective in addressing the specific interests and concerns of prospective graduate students. In

terms of messages and communication, there are opportunities for UIS to develop new publications that will distinguish it from among its top competitors.

### **Market Opportunities**

The greatest opportunities for expanding enrollment of traditional age students is in the metropolitan area of Chicago and the counties immediately surrounding it to the west and south (defined as the northeastern and east central regions of the university's recruiting territories). In large part this opportunity is due to projected population growth in these regions. But because household incomes and educational attainment are higher in these regions than the statewide average, families here are more likely to send their children to college.

The region that will see the greatest growth in adults between the ages of 25 and 44 is the east central region. (This region includes some of the counties of the Chicago metropolitan area, which will likely be where most of the growth will occur for this region.) The rest of the state will lose population in this age cohort. Since this demographic cohort makes up the majority of adult students, efforts to enroll more adult students will either require reaching students in the east central region of the state, especially in the counties immediately south of Chicago or encouraging adults in other regions to enroll in higher education who would not otherwise consider it.

The west central and southern regions of the state (which includes much of the market currently served by UIS) have lower levels of household income, educational attainment, and projected rates of job growth in most occupations than the rest of the state. These regions also have higher levels of unemployment than the rest of the state. Since the projected rate of population growth in these regions is much lower than the rest of the state as well, they do not present the best opportunity to recruit new students.

Job growth will be greatest in fields including computer science and management information systems. Programs that serve these fields will likely be increasingly in demand throughout the state. Job growth will be slowest in fields served by programs in public administration and political science. Demand for programs that serve these fields will continue, but it is not likely that there will be dramatic increases in demand.

### **Recommendations**

- **Build awareness among college-bound high school students, their parents and high school counselors.** With the implementation of the Capital Scholars program, UIS has transformed itself into a very different kind of university. With an established tradition as a senior-level and graduate institution with a strong public service mission, UIS is well-known among prospective transfer students, adult students, graduate students, and employers in the Springfield area. While it has made some inroads among college-bound high school students in Illinois, their parents, and high school guidance counselors, the university is not nearly as well-known among these markets as it is among its traditional markets. The university needs to continue and enhance its communications with these new markets.
- **Manage "word of mouth."** As part of its communications plans, the university should develop a strategy to influence "word of mouth" messages. One key constituency is high school guidance counselors, who are a frequent source of information for prospective

students and their parents. The university should continue its current communications with high school counselors, including visits to high schools. Admissions representatives to high schools should be prepared to discuss not only the Capital Scholars programs but other programs available at UIS, since even traditional age transfer students indicated that they used information from high school guidance counselors in their college decision process. In addition to information on program availability, high school counselors need more information about the setting of the campus and what campus life is like for students.

UIS also needs to communicate with community college counselors. Unlike high school counselors, many community college counselors are much more familiar with UIS, and tend to have a more specific and more favorable impression of the university. However, they still seem to be lacking important information. In particular, information about financial aid available to students transferring into UIS and also information about the achievements of UIS alumni are both areas where community counselors seem to lack information that prospective undergraduate transfer students will want to know.

Similarly, employers in the Springfield area who were interviewed have favorable impressions of UIS, but seem to lack information about the outcomes of UIS graduates. This would be a natural topic of conversation with employers, and compelling information about outcomes would be well-received by prospective students and their family members who might discuss UIS with others in the community.

- **Anticipate the interests of prospective students.** In communications with prospective students (and those who influence their decisions), anticipate that they will be interested in learning what programs are offered, how they (or their families) can afford the costs (and what are the costs), and what classes will be like (Are the faculty good teachers? Will they care about me?) All communications (including opportunities such as campus visits and high school visits) with prospective students should be able to provide answers to these questions.

These are questions that all prospective students (and those who influence their decisions) will have. In addition, certain populations will have other specific interests. For example:

- College-bound high school students will want to know about campus life and about campus safety
  - Parents of college-bound high school students will have questions about campus safety, and whether programs at UIS have “real-world” relevance
  - Adult students (whether undergraduate or graduate) will want to know how they can take courses to fit in with their schedules
  - Undergraduate transfer students (regardless of age) will want to know how to transfer prior course work and the “real-world” outcomes of UIS graduates
  - Graduate students will want to know about the qualifications of faculty in the program as well as the “real-world” outcomes of UIS graduates
  - Online students will want to know whether specific courses are available
- **Develop a viewbook with an effective marketing theme and compelling messages.** The current set of publications sent to prospective Capital Scholars does not provide a visual “icon” to communicate a distinctive theme. While they do touch on certain important messages and have a consistent design, a viewbook is more comprehensive and helps to

communicate the fact that the university is more than just one program. As part of the larger consulting project, Noel-Levitz is working with marketing and enrollment management staff at UIS to develop a new suite of recruitment publications. The publications will use the theme and marketing messages developed on the basis of the research presented here and in on-campus brainstorming sessions.

- **Messages should promote the strengths of UIS.** Based on the research on what prospective students want and the experiences of current students, the university can promote several compelling features and benefits:
  - A “University of Illinois” degree. Focus groups with students and SSI results suggest that this is a perceived benefit of attending UIS that is important to them. Messages to prospective students that promote this connection are an effective way to document the university’s academic reputation. When combined with messages about small class sizes and personal attention from faculty the university creates a compelling value proposition for prospective students.
  - Location. The university’s location in the state capital and its tradition of strong programs in public affairs are well-known among several audiences (traditional age and adult undergraduates, graduate students, community college counselors, and employers). In addition, for parents of prospective students (who may have concerns about safety and security) a city the size of Springfield is the most desirable location for a college or university. For college-bound high school students it may be that the city of Springfield (and the university’s location on the outskirts of the city) does not afford the cultural and entertainment opportunities that they seek. The university will need to develop more of a campus life for residential students in order to attract and retain sufficient numbers of Capital Scholars.
  - Supportive faculty who are good teachers. The SSI results and student focus groups reveal that current students value the instruction they receive. Research on the features desired by prospective students (all populations) and decision influencers shows that faculty who are good teachers is a very desirable characteristic. Marketing messages to all groups should show faculty interacting with students, should feature faculty testimonials about their students and student testimonials about the attention they receive from UIS faculty.
- **Develop more effective affordability messages for selected populations.** For college-bound high school students, their parents, high school counselors, and adult undergraduates affordability is an important feature, but their perception of the affordability of UIS is not as high as it should be. This suggests that they need to receive more effective communications that show how they can afford the costs to attend the university. It is not sufficient to communicate that tuition is low. Effective affordability messages should also include information on what students can likely expect in the way of financial aid, and how they can contact someone who will help them work through the financial aid process.
- **Explore further the perceptions and the reality of course availability and convenience of course schedules.** The research shows that prospective adult undergraduates have different preferences for course schedules than do traditional age (transfer) undergraduates, and that for both populations, convenience and flexibility of courses is an important characteristic. While focus group participants cited convenience and flexibility as a strength of UIS, SSI results show that the item “I am able to register for classes I need with few conflicts” had quite a large performance gap (1.44), which indicates for many current students at UIS,

course availability and convenience of course schedules is perceived to be a problem. The university will be hampered in its ability to market its programs effectively to prospective adult students until it explores what experiences create these perceptions and makes the changes necessary to improve students' experiences.

- **Review UIS Web site.** The university's Web site is an important information resource for prospective students who are initially considering UIS and want answers to specific questions. Does the Web site provide information to the types of questions that students are most likely to have? These would include a list of available programs that is easy to navigate (in alphabetical order), information on costs and financial aid availability, student clubs and organizations, campus activities and events, and testimonials from current students and alumni about their experiences at UIS and after graduation.

The site should also be designed with the needs and interests of adult undergraduate and graduate students. For example, the former will want to know how to transfer prior course work, while the latter will want to know specifics about individual programs (including faculty credentials and library holdings), and both will want to be able to quickly see what courses are available at a given time.

In addition to prospective students, parents, high school counselors and community college counselors expect to find information on the UIS Web site. The site can be enhanced by the addition of separate pages for parents of prospective students and for high school and community college counselors.

- Develop plans for recruiting Capital Scholars from northeast and east central Illinois, and particularly from counties south of Chicago. In both the southern and west central regions of Illinois, the population of 15 to 19 year olds is projected to decline slightly over the next decade. For this and because of their relatively low household income and educational attainment levels, these are not the regions most likely to fuel growth in the Capital Scholars program. The more likely markets are the northeast region and the east central region, the two regions which will account for most of the state's population increase in this cohort. The counties south of Chicago are somewhat closer to Springfield, making the distance from home to campus somewhat less.
- **Develop new geographic markets for online courses.** Consider developing new markets for online courses in northeastern Illinois, specifically in the counties south of Chicago, where the greatest increase in adults between the ages of 25 and 44 is projected to occur. Current students in online courses demonstrate a high level of satisfaction with their courses, and the distance from Springfield to these counties suggests that online courses may be a viable delivery mode for this market.
- **Promote program features and benefits to prospective graduate students.** Unlike prospective undergraduate students, who judge the academic reputation of the entire university, graduate students focus on the features of the specific program in which they are interested. Communications with prospective graduate students need to include messages about the features and benefits of specific programs. For example, graduate students will want to know about assistantship and internship opportunities available, the qualifications and recent research activities of faculty in their program (including adjuncts), library holdings and other research resources available in their program, and how often courses in their specific program are offered.

The University of Illinois at Springfield serves many different markets: traditional age students transferring into senior level undergraduate programs, adults returning to college to complete a bachelors degree, graduate students in masters and doctoral programs, students who are seeking online coursework as a way to overcome the barriers of place, and most recently college-bound high school students. The research identifies some common interests that prospective students in all markets have when considering UIS as well as interests that are specific to each market. The university has several strengths that make it attractive to students from each market and these should be the central messages of communications with prospective students in these markets. The research has also identified certain features that prospective students desire that are not currently strengths of UIS (or are not currently recognized as strengths). The university's long-term marketing plan should include actions to address these issues in order to strengthen its competitive position.