



# ALUMNI RESPONSE

TO THE

## UNI HIGH STRATEGIC VISION TASK FORCE REPORT

MAY 31, 2017

University of Illinois Laboratory High School Alumni Association  
PO Box 593 | Urbana, IL | 61803-0593  
[www.unialumni.org](http://www.unialumni.org)

**Uni High exists to serve**  
the University of Illinois, to  
serve the Champaign-Urbana  
community, and most of all, to  
serve its students.

Only a small number of people have had the good fortune to be a Uni student. Across almost 100 years of history, the Uni alumni base numbers less than half the current enrollment of the University of Illinois College of Engineering.

So the Uni High Alumni Association asked Uni alumni for their unique perspective on the final report of the Strategic Vision Task Force. Spanning from the Class of 1947 to the Class of 2014, 179 of them answered.

Uni alumni see the Task Force report as an important starting point for the future of Uni. Some recommendations were met with resounding applause, while others sparked impassioned dissent.

The Alumni Association survey focused on nine specific recommendations from the Task Force. This Alumni Response summarizes alumni feedback and offers our own recommendations to ensure that future generations can enjoy the life-changing Uni High education that we did.

## TASK FORCE RECOMMENDATIONS

SUPPORT

NEUTRAL

OPPOSE

### PURSUE LAB MISSION

90%

Alumni support renewed engagement with the traditional “lab mission” of Uni, though identified the challenges of gaining consensus on this meaning of this mission, and of the university providing the appropriate financial and strategic resources to achieve these objectives.

### DEEPEN INSTRUCTIONAL INTEGRATION WITH THE UNIVERSITY

85%

Alumni are enthusiastic about increased educational integration with the University, viewing this as creating fruitful opportunities for students while enhancing ties with the university – as long as the students in question are socially and academically prepared for the experience.

### INCREASE FUNDRAISING

77%

Alumni broadly agree that there is considerable room for increased fundraising both among alums and with parents, but they chafe at impersonal alumni fundraising tactics and are deeply concerned about alienating families who genuinely lack the means to support Uni.

### **ENCOURAGE FEMALE STUDENTS IN STEM FIELDS**



Alumni back the proposal to develop programs to encourage girls to pursue STEM careers, due to its consistency with the Uni lab mission, its logical compatibility with the university's science and engineering strengths, and its current relevance and societal need.

### **ESTABLISH A GOVERNING BOARD**



Alumni favor establishing a governing board to make Uni stronger and more accountable, but share significant concerns that the suggested composition of the board is inadequate either to advocate for Uni or foster independent decision-making capabilities for the school.

### **BROADEN THE VIEW OF "GIFTEDNESS"**



A slight majority of alumni support expanding the definition of "giftedness," appealing especially to the values of diversity and inclusion, but many were wary of the considerable investment of resources that may be necessary to successfully acclimate this new group of students to Uni.

### **PREFER SIBLINGS IN ADMISSIONS DECISIONS**



The proposal for sibling preference in admissions proved divisive, with many alumni finding it a way to strengthen family ties and improve the student experience, while others believe Uni's status as an egalitarian meritocracy demands that it retain a strictly blind admission process.

### **RESERVE PLACES FOR CHILDREN OF UNIVERSITY FACULTY**



Most alumni oppose the idea of allocating 10 spaces per class to the Provost's office – while they support tying Uni closer to the university, many alumni worry that this policy may backfire by admitting unqualified students or hurting Uni's relationship with the local community.

### **ELIMINATE SUBFRESHMAN YEAR**



Alumni broadly opposed the elimination of subfreshman year, having strong positive recollections of their own experiences and believing that the subfreshman year serves as a critical transition to the unique culture and academic rigor of Uni, particularly for children from less privileged backgrounds.

**The Uni High Alumni Association believes in the future of Uni** and in the opportunity that the Task Force report presents to secure that future for generations to come. Based on the unique perspectives of alumni, these three recommendations will make that future even stronger.

### **1 Establishing a governing board, with appropriate alumni representation, should be the top priority.**

A governing board is the single Task Force recommendation that will make possible the effective evaluation and implementation of all other Task Force recommendations – including, most of all, defining and pursuing the school’s lab mission. The board’s effectiveness will be determined by its composition, which should balance objective “outsiders” with people who have meaningful personal experience at Uni.

- A** Establish a credible **nomination process** for board members that includes a wide range of stakeholders
- B** Ensure that the unique perspective of Uni alumni is represented on the board with at least one **voting seat for Uni alumni**, which will ensure the ability of the board to consider the perspective of students and enhance the credibility of alumni fundraising efforts

### **2 Fundraising infrastructure must meet existing opportunities and future needs more effectively.**

Many Uni stakeholders, including the Alumni Association, stand ready to help generate the resources that will ensure Uni’s future. We look forward to partnering with the school administration, under a newly formed governing board, to take steps toward seizing these existing opportunities.

- A** Heighten efforts to pursue a **broader range of external funding**, including government aid, charitable grants, and corporate sponsorships
- B** Provide more opportunities for parents, alumni, and other stakeholders to contribute to **specific priorities** that align with their interests, such as classroom technology, faculty salaries, or enrichment programs
- C** Enhance advancement practices to build **personal relationships** with alumni and personalize outreach tactics to increase the level and frequency of alumni contributions
- D** Develop a program that increases fundraising participation by suggesting **parent support levels** based on families’ abilities to contribute

### **3 Those Task Force recommendations that divide the Uni community require further consideration.**

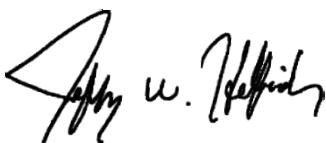
Several Task Force recommendations met impassioned opposition or ambivalence from alumni, likely reflecting divisions elsewhere in the Uni community. We should move forward on the Task Force recommendations that unite us, and consider in a united way the ones that divide us.

- A** Consider the recommendation to **eliminate subfreshman year** in terms of its effects on students’ acclimation to the unique culture and academic rigor of Uni
- B** Consider the recommendation to **reserve places for children of university faculty** in terms of its effects on meritocratic admissions and the likelihood of securing a financial levy from colleges in exchange
- C** Consider the recommendation to **prefer siblings in admissions decisions** in terms of its effects on the student and family experience and on meritocratic admissions

**Our organization was formed out of gratitude for Uni High,** for the faculty who made our unique educational experience possible, and for the classmates who made it special. That gratitude extends to the University of Illinois, and to the Strategic Vision Task Force, for their efforts to strengthen Uni.

The Uni High Alumni Association exists to turn that gratitude into action. We commit to doing our part to build connections among alumni, build connections between alumni and current students, and raise funds to support the school. We believe in the future of Uni, but we know that future won't be possible without all of us – alumni, administration, faculty, students, parents, the university, and the community – working together.

We submit this Alumni Response and the recommendations of the Alumni Association in that spirit. With excitement for the future of Uni, and with gratitude,



**JEFF HELFRICH**

President  
Class of 1999



**ASAD HUSAIN**

Chair, Strategy Committee  
Class of 1997



**JIM HURST**

Chair, School Connections Committee  
Class of 1996

Board members

**WILLIAM FERNANDEZ** 2011

**CHRIS PAYNE** 1971

**MICAH BERMAN** 2008

**JANE HAYS** 1972

**LIS POLLOCK** 1999

**DEREK WADE** 1996

**ISAAC CHAMBERS** 2009

**JEREMY HOBSON** 1999

**IRENE ANG STROHBEEN** 1974

**ADELE SUSLICK** RETIRED FACULTY

**BILL EISENSTEIN** 1990

**SHAGG MAKINO** 1983

**ADAM TIOURIRINE** 2009

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## APPENDIX 1/9 PURSUE LAB MISSION

Re-engage with school's lab mission through increased curriculum development, innovations in teaching, leveraging the UIUC relationship, and disseminating results via publications and conferences



**89.5% SUPPORT**

**7.6% NEUTRAL**

**2.9% OPPOSE**

Over 85% of respondents supported the idea of deepening Uni's commitment to its "lab mission." Most felt that curricular experimentation and innovation had long been a core part of the mission, and a valued part of their experience with the school. While supportive in principle, many felt unclear about what exactly this would mean for Uni High in practice. There was also considerable concern that appropriate financial and strategic resources would need to be brought to bear in order to achieve these objectives, with concern that those resources may not be forthcoming. Alums felt it should not be simply "tacked on" to the side of traditional teaching and college prep.

- "I believe strongly that experimentation/innovation in education should be the core of the school's mission, second only to the enrichment of its students."
- "I strongly support re-engaging Uni's lab mission, but it is vital to stay focused on lab activities that actually create tangible value for Uni, the University the broader CU community or other educational/governmental organizations. Uni must find a way to raise funds in recognition of the value it creates."
- "...the "lab mission" could help to engage the students, improve the classroom experience, and provide the best possible education. One would hope that the Department of Education would benefit as well."
- "Love the idea, if it comes with the funding to help teachers make it happen."
- "My issue is one of bandwidth. I am all for innovative teaching and curriculum development to the extent that it helps the students better themselves and their experience. However, if it is only to satisfy a University mandate then we have to push back to give teachers enough bandwidth to develop the students as solid college applicants."

## APPENDIX 2/9

### DEEPEN INSTRUCTIONAL INTEGRATION WITH THE UNIVERSITY

Deepen integration of Uni instruction with the educational opportunities provided by the University, particularly having Uni students take University courses for Uni and University credit



Almost half the respondents strongly support the proposal to pursue a deeper integration of Uni instruction with the educational opportunities provided by the University, while another 31% somewhat support it. Many respondents took classes at the university during their junior and/or senior years or had classmates who did so. They pointed out that many students through the years (including the current students) have taken classes at the university, so it isn't a novel idea.

Those who supported the idea saw it as an opportunity to increase the challenge level and diversity of educational options for students who are ready for it. Many also believed it would further improve ties between Uni and the broader University. Those who had reservations felt that some students may not be emotionally or academically ready for those courses and should not be pressured. In particular there was a caution about making this required for all students during senior year. As with some other recommendations, alumni felt this idea may require more resources rather than less in order to ensure a safe, enriching experience.

- “For the right students, it provides an introduction to college and an outlet to continue to challenge students.”
- “Uni is a high school, not a university. I feel this would increase competition among students and detract from the unique high school atmosphere.”
- “The downside is erosion of the high school experience and more academic pressure.”
- “[This proposal might] help foster cross collaboration and laboratory work with other parts of the university.”
- “If this happens, the University should support Uni financially in ways it has not.”

## APPENDIX 3/9 INCREASE FUNDRAISING

More aggressive fundraising, including through parents and the Uni High Alumni Association



Respondents broadly recognize the need to raise more money from parents and alumni with 77% indicating that they support additional fundraising initiatives. However, many alumni voiced dissatisfaction with the current fundraising tactics, and expressed concern that ‘more aggressive’ fundraising efforts may be ineffective or even counterproductive. In addition, alumni suggested that Uni should explore opportunities to raise funds through external grants and corporate sponsorships.

Many alums felt that current fundraising efforts lacked personalization or appeal to causes of interest, and should focus more on electronic communication than annoying phone calls. Regarding parent contributions, some alumni felt Uni should make the suggested donation similar to private school tuition and more strongly compel parents to contribute, while others were concerned that aggressive tactics like these could deter low-income families from attending and damage efforts to build an inclusive community. Numerous alumni expressed reservations about contributing funds due to a perceived lack of confidence in the school’s evolving mission, administrative staff, or operational capabilities. Some alumni feel that the school’s mission has increasingly become that of a preparatory school rather than one that seeks to help gifted children thrive in an unconventional environment. Similarly, a few alumni noted that while the proposal to remove subfreshman year might yield marginal cost savings, it may decrease net revenue overall by alienating alumni who would otherwise contribute to the school.

- “There are lots of opportunities here. Alumni and parent giving rates at Uni are well below those of other elite schools.”
- “I think the school has lost touch with alumni. It has to understand where they are first.”
- “‘More aggressive’ fund-raising has the potential to deepen the invisible schism between families of different incomes. Uni should not make anyone feel embarrassed because they do not have the financial means to contribute. It sends a very harmful (though unspoken) message to families that they are valued or condemned for their financial position.”
- “The school mission is unclear. As a graduate of Uni the lab school, I am not interested in subsidizing Uni the prep school with donations. There needs to be a sense that Uni is doing something unique that isn’t happening elsewhere.”
- “Alumni know the value of their Uni education. The message needs to be one of ‘pay it forward’ to the next generation of Uni students who will join the ranks of past Uni alums who are Nobel laureates and Pulitzer Prize winners. If Uni is watered down or eliminated, the country and world will lose an outstanding resource.”

## APPENDIX 4/9 ENCOURAGE FEMALE STUDENTS IN STEM FIELDS

Develop programs that encourage female students to consider careers in STEM fields



**76.2% SUPPORT**

**17.4% NEUTRAL**

**6.4% OPPOSE**

Alumni indicated a high level of support to this proposal, with 76% of alumni who completed the survey either strongly or somewhat supporting, compared to only 6% who opposed. Many commented that Uni is already strong in this area, both for girls and boys. They cited many factors for their support, including societal need/impact, its consistency with Uni's lab mission, potential funding available, the obvious opportunity to partner with UIUC in conducting research especially due to the engineering college, and Uni's enduring leadership in the field of STEM education.

On the flip side, opposing comments on this proposal primarily concerned neglecting other fields and not allowing girls (and boys) to pursue non-STEM interests: "not at the expense of humanities and social sciences." Other negative comments were that Uni already does this, and focusing on girls in STEM would be sexist and discriminatory. Suggestions that would strengthen the proposal included broadening to include other non-traditional STEM students, and conducting research to study the career tracks of Uni alumni to determine past impact on attracting women *or* men to the STEM fields.

- "STEM education was a strength at Uni when I attended, and there is evidence that high school environment is one important factor for spurring girls' high achievement in STEM subjects. It seems like a worthy goal."
- "This is a great idea and is exactly the kind of laboratory experiment where Uni could develop a national model. This is what Uni should be doing."
- "An excellent idea that is worthwhile in its own right and also provides a very natural avenue for Uni to do innovative, and much-needed, research. There are probably few secondary schools anywhere that are better positioned to take on this issue and develop a research initiative on it."
- "I think girls who are accepted to Uni are very capable of doing whatever interests them. I find it insulting to think they have to be treated differently."

## APPENDIX 5/9

### ESTABLISH A GOVERNING BOARD

Establish a governing board of University faculty and community members to ensure Uni thrives in its mission



**72.5% SUPPORT**

**18.7% NEUTRAL**

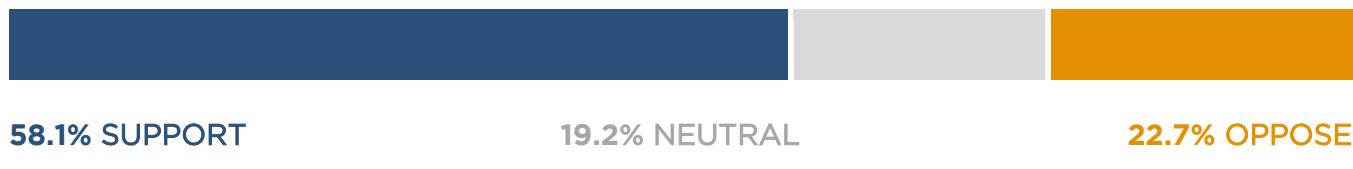
**8.8% OPPOSE**

There is strong support for establishing a governing board, with over 70% of respondents in favor. That said, alumni expressed a number of concerns. While alumni recognize the need for a board to be sufficiently independent, they feared that a board which collectively lacked real experience and understanding of the school's history and unique strengths could ultimately prove detrimental. Unsurprisingly, many alums also felt that representation by alumni who have experienced Uni directly would add valuable perspective. The recommendation left many alumni with questions about the specific makeup and responsibilities of the potential board.

- “This is probably the best, most vital recommendation when combined with an admission that Uni benefits from a relationship with UIUC...and that UIUC also benefits and stands to benefit more greatly from certain arrangements.”
- “The main challenge is ensuring that the Board would have adequate stature within the UI structure to serve as an effective advocate/manager of Uni. But assuming that can be done, I think the Board would greatly strengthen Uni's position in the UI, help Uni steer consistently toward its strategic goals, and provide a healthy degree of external oversight.”
- “The board would need to be constituted of people who have a real knowledge of or even experience of Uni. A board of interested community members or university administrators with little knowledge of the school and strong ideas about what education should be would be dangerous.”
- “A governing board must have alumni involvement in order to engender support from the alumni community”
- “I'm honestly not sure that establishing a governing board will make the overall governance of the school significantly better. The problems with the school lie mainly with the constraints imposed by the University and the structural lack of funding...”

## APPENDIX 6/9 BROADEN THE VIEW OF “GIFTEDNESS”

Revise and update admissions practices to broaden the view of “giftedness” to recognize that some “gifts” may not be reflected in test scores. As many as 5 students per year would be admitted through this shift, and would require some tutoring and mentoring resources for the academic success of this broader range of students



The recommendation to broaden the view of “giftedness” beyond test scores is a recommendation to redefine, even for a small group, the very identity of the Uni student body. Alumni noticed that magnitude with a wide variety of impassioned responses. The majority (58%) of alumni respondents viewed positively the recommendation to broaden “giftedness”, which appealed to their values of diversity and inclusion.

However, even supportive alumni had concerns about “finding resources for tutoring and mentoring”, with the resource concern being mentioned many times over. Alumni opposed to this recommendation also brought up money as well as potential erosion of academic standards – three separate responses included “dumbing down” or a similar phrase. Across the spectrum, many alumni sought clarity about what these other gifts encompass before rendering a final judgment.

Of course, such a big recommendation couldn’t exist without affecting other items in the Task Force report. Broadening giftedness would both require extra resources and hopefully attract them by pursuing grants, alumni said. Many argued the recommendation’s diversity goals would conflict with admissions preferences for siblings and for children of University faculty, and its proposed mentoring strategy would suffer from the elimination of subfreshman year.

- “This is by far the best and most important of the report’s recommendations.”
- “Recognizing and nurturing students who are gifted in a wide variety of areas adds richness to the Uni community and ultimately to society as a whole.”
- “Given Uni’s current financial troubles, I am not sure why it would be taking on tasks that require more resources.”
- “This is the biggest unicorn out of everything in the document, in my mind. This is a giant undertaking, of which we can do few.”

## APPENDIX 7/9 PREFER SIBLINGS IN ADMISSIONS DECISIONS

Have admissions decisions include some recognition or preference for siblings



**42.7% SUPPORT**

**29.2% NEUTRAL**

**28.1% OPPOSE**

Response to this question was fairly divided, with 43% in support, 29% neutral, and 28% opposed. Appropriately, the largest two response categories were “neutral” and then “somewhat support”. Interestingly, many people on both sides of the issue were surprised at the question, believing sibling preference was already the case (or was during their time at Uni).

Commentary in favor focused mainly on the potential for sibling preference in admissions to strengthen family loyalty to Uni, and thereby increase fundraising potential both at the time the children are enrolled and afterward. Many also valued the stronger bonds among siblings over shared high school experiences. Among those in favor, there was a widespread sentiment that sibling preference in admissions should be a supplemental factor in admissions offered to students who are otherwise academically qualified, not a “birthright” granted to unqualified younger siblings.

Those opposed most commonly felt that individual qualifications should be the sole factor in admissions decisions. Many who opposed this idea also noted their opposition to allocating admissions seats to UI faculty children or using any criteria other than individual qualifications. Some noted that admitting siblings as a matter of official policy could increase social insularity and perpetuate privilege among an in-group of “Uni families”. Some also noted that any perception that younger siblings had been admitted because of their older siblings could create social stigmas and self-doubt.

- “Providing recognition or preference for siblings could help engender family loyalty for the school, which could increase parent and/or alumni giving.”
- “As an older sibling, I am thankful Uni was the right fit for my brother and that he was transformed by his Uni education. I don’t think Uni is right for every kid so siblings shouldn’t be an automatic thing, but I think it serves kids and families to give it some consideration in the decision.”
- “Some recognition of sibling status could be considered in the admissions process, as long as principal criteria for admission are met. This was the case during my time at Uni and it fostered the sense of close-knit community.”
- “One of the core things I appreciate about Uni is its egalitarianism and merit-based philosophy, and moves like this undermine those values. ...we don’t want to move closer to the legacy-laden caste issues that Ivy League schools have created for themselves.”
- “Given the small class size, I believe having siblings attend in some ways completely undercuts the idea of also trying to support admissions by those who are not as fortunate - it is likely instead to make it more of a privileged opportunity.”

## APPENDIX 8/9

### RESERVE PLACES FOR CHILDREN OF UNIVERSITY FACULTY

Allow the Office of the Provost to allocate up to 10 seats per class to drive UIUC faculty recruitment and retention



**26.9% SUPPORT**

**25.1% NEUTRAL**

**48.0% OPPOSE**

Very few alumni strongly support allocating ten spots to the Provost's office. Those that did support the idea liked that it would tie the school closer to the University. Some supported the idea only if it came with significant additional funds from the Provost's office or the schools that are using these slots as a recruiting tool. Those that were ambivalent about the idea pointed out that most Uni classes already have ten faculty children and such a policy probably wouldn't change things all that much.

The plurality of respondents opposed the idea, with most strongly opposed. Uni alumni had diverse reasons for that opposition. Some view Uni as a meritocracy focused on academic excellence and such a policy as antithetical to that. Others posited that the policy would backfire. If unqualified students were admitted and failed, neither the students nor the faculty members that were recruited using the slots would be happy. A few suggested that such a policy would stigmatize all faculty children admits as other students would assume they got in "just because of their parents." Some people pointed out that this policy would further ensure a lack of socioeconomic diversity at the school. Still others pointed out that such a policy would hurt Uni's reputation as a resource for the community and would add to its elitist image and community resentment in general.

- "I think this is a good move. Uni needs to strengthen ties to the University to foster its long-term survival..."
- "As it is, many students are children of professors. They are a natural pool of applicants. I see no problem with this."
- "Making Uni even more exclusive is exactly the opposite of what should happen! Being accepted solely on the basis of being a faculty member's child would create the potential for stigmatizing those students and would reduce the number of community members who could attend Uni."
- "I vehemently disagree with the proposal to allocate 10 seats to the University to recruit faculty. Do the prospective faculty think that their children cannot compete with other applicants without special dispensation? Let their children face the SAME selection process as everyone else."
- "I find this option very disturbing. Th[e] goal is laudable, but this approach reads very poorly. It feels like the University's 'category I' admissions scandal just one layer down. ...we're lowering Uni standards to favor kids who already possess nearly every academic advantage in life."

## APPENDIX 9/9

### ELIMINATE SUBFRESHMAN YEAR

Eliminate subfreshman class and admit 15 more students to each incoming freshman class to keep the overall enrollment the same. Staff positions may be eliminated with this change



**16.9% SUPPORT**

**19.2% NEUTRAL**

**64.0% OPPOSE**

This question had mostly consistent responses, with 64% opposed and only 17% supporting the change. The majority of respondents had strong positive memories of their subfreshman experience and found the escape from public middle schools to be one of Uni's greatest gifts. Many alumni felt subfreshman year represented a critical transition to Uni's rigorous environment that does not impact High School transcripts, rendered all the more important if the proposal to expand admission definitions of 'gifted' were to be adopted. Lastly, there was significant concern about the impact of larger class sizes that would result from the elimination of teaching positions. While a significant minority found the elimination of sub year acceptable for its potential financial impacts, few alumni were concerned with appeasing local school districts.

- "I am concerned that the middle school years are those in which the brightest students have the toughest time in traditional public school."
- "With [the] goal of actively seeking to include more kids who might have a better academic chance than their parents did, it would be counter-productive to cut off subfreshman year. Get kids before achievement gap widens."
- "I think there are some important issues from the perspective of bringing women into STEM. I've seen research suggesting kids choose their self-identity between about 10 and 12 years old. Anecdotally I certainly found Uni a safe place to be a girl and like math."
- "You might be able to change the composition of the faculty absent subfreshman year, but I'm skeptical you can maintain quality while reducing staff across the same student count, full stop."
- "Subbie year is a key contributor to one of the great assets largely overlooked by the report, namely the strong sense of community at the school. Uni should be modeling, researching, and exporting methods for creating strong community among students and teachers (as part of its lab mission) because this is something it does unusually well and something sorely needed at many other schools."

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