

# Diversity and Excellence in IIT's Student Population

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“Commit to Diversity and Excellence” – a core value and principle at Illinois Institute of Technology. In accordance with this commitment, this principle is stated to ensure inclusion and openness to all viewpoints. It seems like Illinois Tech embodies this value, with students from 90 different countries as of fall 2020. However, IIT admission demographics report a total of 19% underrepresented minority (URM) enrolled students out of all IIT's degree and non-degree seeking students which make up a student population of 6,342.

Underrepresented minorities, as per the IIT website are students of the following ethnicities: “African American, Hispanic, American Indian or Alaskan Native, two or more races, Native Hawaiian, or Pacific Islander.”

When the URM enrolled student percentage is broken down by undergraduate student population as per IIT's 2020-2021 Common Data Set, it's seen that out of a total of 3,122 undergraduates, there are 562 Hispanic/Latino students, 147 African American students, 2 American Indian or Native Alaskan students, 113 students of two or more races, and 1 Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander student. This means that out of the undergraduate population, there are 18% Hispanic/Latino students, 4.70% African American students, 0.06% American Indian or Native Alaskan students, 3.62% students of two or more races, and 0.03% Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander students as of fall 2020. Additionally, in fall 2021, Illinois Tech's female students were reported to make up 37% of the total student population.

For a university that values diversity, IIT's student population seems to struggle to commit to that principle, as per student enrollment data. In the past, however, IIT had been in the process of improving diversity, seen in the 1970s when the Early Identification Program (Early ID) was first implemented.

In 1973, General Electric Corporation made a \$25,000 grant to Illinois Institute of Technology for minorities in engineering. Nathaniel “Nate” Thomas was the Assistant Director of Cooperative Education, which was designed to allow engineering students to earn their bachelor's degree while simultaneously working in an engineering position.

When Thomas investigated who the grant would go to, he was startled to discover that there were only six minority engineering students, and he sought improvement. When Thomas toured Chicago area high schools to investigate the issue, he realized that there were too many high-achieving students unaware of the college admissions process and lacking guidance. This led him to pioneer the Early ID.

An ally in the establishment of Early ID came in the form of Dr. Thomas Lyle Martin, IIT's new president in 1974. Dr. Martin and Thomas had a casual conversation that same year, during which the latter was unaware of Dr. Martin's position. Thomas shared his thoughts on IIT's recruitment process, pointing out how few minority students were at IIT considering its south side location.

Dr. Martin believed diversity was key to a successful learning environment and helped Thomas to implement Early ID in 1974 alongside other staff and allies.

The program was established with the goal of “identify[ing] talented minority students who could handle [the] academic challenges of the STEM field,” said Michael Hill, Early ID alum of 1976, IIT alum of 1982, Founder, Chair Emeritus, and Historian of the African American Alumni Association (4A).

Minority students in the top 10% of their respective high school classes interested in engineering were selected for an eight-week summer program to explore various aspects and fields within it, involving team projects, visits to manufacturing corporations, and mentorship in the form of undergraduate students and professors. While the program focused on recruiting Black, Hispanic, and female students, any qualified student with an interest in engineering was accepted.

“Nate recruited students that he felt were prepared for the academic challenged and rigor of college,” said Raymond Nelson, a co-op student personally recruited by Thomas and IIT graduate of 1978.

Thomas and his staff set themselves apart not only by personally recruiting students for the program, but by establishing relationships with trusted high school faculty to point students in the right direction. From there, news of the program spread by word of mouth. In the same process of recruiting students for Early ID, Thomas used similar methods to recruit students to study at IIT. Rather than continuing the traditional method of receiving and reading applications, Thomas pushed the department to reach out to prospective students with his staff.

As years passed, the reputation of Early ID grew, as did IIT’s as a result. High school students found attending the program to be a “point of pride.” The program found its way into the pages of “Who’s Who of High School Students” in Chicago, a reputable journal detailing academically accomplished high schoolers. Chicago newspapers published images and wrote of the talented students in the program.

Dr. Martin also promoted Thomas to the position of Director of Admissions to improve IIT’s student enrollment in 1974. The promotion was a controversial one – Thomas had no background in admissions. Thomas faced resistance from the members of the Faculty Admission Committee, but his close relationship with Dr. Martin shielded him from the politics of the administration.

In Thomas’ first class as a member of the admissions department, 801 freshmen enrolled. This was an incredibly large jump from the 436 freshmen that enrolled in Thomas’ predecessor’s class. By the end of the first year of recruitment, there was a 433% increase in minority students – 39 minority freshmen enrolled at IIT. 52 high school seniors were accepted and ready to attend the Early ID program.

By hiring Thomas as the Director of Admissions, IIT’s incoming class of freshman was seen to nearly double in class size. This move was beneficial to the university financially as well.

Thomas and his staff’s work in admissions increased the 1975-1977 incoming classes to a total of 801, 950, and 987 students respectively. By 1983, African American enrollment at IIT was at an all-time high at 20%, out of a total of 2000 full-time engineering undergraduates.

Early ID gave students confidence that they could succeed in higher education. Students were able to foster a sense of community and experience the college environment shortly before filing their applications, keeping their quality experiences at IIT fresh in their minds. The program acted as a feeder of capable, accomplished engineering students to IIT.

Looking at IIT today, it's clear that many pre-collegiate programs are offered, ranging from Artificial Intelligence to Biomedical Engineering. However, few are like Early ID in terms of having no financial involvement from students. Previous students of the program and alumni treasure their experiences and would like such programs to be continued at IIT for minority students who could benefit from exposure to scientific and technical fields.

Additionally, while many recruitment efforts leave positive impressions on prospective students, recruitment efforts made by Thomas have never been recreated since. Thomas was able to encourage students to seek higher education by having a genuine interest in their success, noted by former Early ID students on his knowledge of every student in the program, which roughly amounted to 200 people. Once the program ended, however, minority student enrollment waned.

Diversity is a key aspect of a successful environment. As a driving factor of innovation and creativity, it offers unique perspectives, which IIT like any university would benefit from. Pioneers like Nate Thomas understood this and fought for the inclusion of those without that power.

“Thomas had a deep commitment to the community surrounding the university,” said Zanette Sanders, a member of the Early ID class of 1983 and IIT graduate of 1989. “As an alum, that legacy inspires me to want to do the same.”



Pictured above is an image from IIT's former University Relations Department. The department allegedly published the following with the photograph:

"A model rocket zooms into space as Early Identification program students at Illinois Institute of Technology watch their team effort take off successfully. The eight-week program is sponsored by IIT for bright Chicago area high school seniors interested in engineering, and includes team projects, visits to Chicago company and plant locations, and counseling on how to interview for jobs and apply for colleges."



OFFICE OF THE MAYOR  
CITY OF CHICAGO

HAROLD WASHINGTON  
MAYOR

PROCLAMATION

WHEREAS, 104 minority students will graduate from Illinois Institute of Technology's "Early Identification Program" August 12, 1983; and

WHEREAS, these students will pursue undergraduate studies in engineering disciplines such as aerospace and biomedical sciences, mechanical and computer engineering; and

WHEREAS, funding for this program is provided by several major multi-national industries and corporations; and

WHEREAS, upon completing the Early Identification Program, students have entered institutions of higher learning at a rate of 100 per cent per class; and

WHEREAS, these 1983 graduates will join a list of former students who have completed over two years of supplemental college work, and all have worked diligently to achieve their goals:

NOW, THEREFORE, I, Harold Washington, Mayor of the City Chicago, hereby declare Friday, August 12, 1983 to be EARLY IDENTIFICATION GRADUATES DAY IN CHICAGO, and direct all parents and concerned parties to congratulate the students and express pride in their splendid academic achievement.

Dated this 9th day of August, 1983.

  
Mayor

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