Summary of interviews: Table 8 (March 20 workshop) [Jelmir Atkins, David Goldblum, Giuseppe Muzzupappa, Susan Oppenborn, Mike Pittsley, and Dawn Sibley]

“SUITCASE CAMPUS”

The six members of Table 8 interviewed 13 students comprised of transfer and native freshmen. Students were primarily in CLAS and Engineering, a few were student athletes. When asked why they attended NIU several were from DeKalb/Sycamore and wanted to stay near home, several had relatives (siblings) already on campus, and others came for in-state tuition.

About half of our students knew of friends or floormates who had left NIU, the most common reason mentioned for leaving was financial issues, in some cases students left to be at a campus with more active social environment.

When asked what they did on the weekends it was a fairly even mix of “go home” and “stay in DeKalb”. For those students who are from DeKalb both would apply. Although not all students had heard the term “suitcase campus” they generally agreed that it was an apt description. The dorms were described as being generally empty (“ghost town”) on the weekend, and the commonly students stated that when they moved into off campus housing (after their Freshman year) some still go home on the weekends rather than stay in DeKalb. This was not universal though, several students do stay in DeKalb on the weekends, but ALL comment on the (real or perceived) lack of campus activities available for undergraduate students. There was a near universal dissatisfaction with the social/dining/entertainment venues in DeKalb and the geographic separation of campus from what does exist in downtown DeKalb. Some suggested that Lucinda Ave. is a disappointing retail strip that would provide a natural link between the dorms and main campus. Furthermore, students found downtown DeKalb lacked an attraction for students in part because of no transportation link, but also few venues of interest. Several students who leave on the weekends mentioned that DeKalb can’t compete with the much larger retail/social/entertainment areas available in the suburbs (Aurora, St. Charles, Naperville, etc.) and the city of Chicago. Moreover, for those students whose families are from the suburbs there is quite a pull related to family ties, entertainment options, and in some cases jobs that take them away from NIU on the weekends.

Solutions volunteered by students and provided by Table 8 to the “suitcase campus” problem included:

- Train connection with Chicago (or advertise campus buses to Elburn more)
- Promote more restaurant/shopping choices accessible to campus, create places to “hang-out” (retail areas) around campus
- More attractive campus environment
- Greater diversity of activities on campus, and spread out events for new students a bit more and continue throughout the entire school year
- Attract concerts/shows to campus on weekends,
- It takes activities 7 days a week. Build a calendar that includes and promotes: NIU’s organized trips, recreational programs, community events and student interests.
- Work with the Campus Activities Board (CAB), DeKalb City Council to help them build community relationships that promote student interests.
- Student athletes mentioned a program they do in athletics called "Huskie Pups" where an upper-classman is assigned to an incoming freshman student (facilitates a new student’s connection to NIU). This could be run through departmental majors or residential communities.
- Better places for students to congregate. Outdoor space with benches, tables and a shade structures. Indoor space like the Grind where students can eat and study.
- Better transportation to venues that do exist in town.