

University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
Ramah College Network
Summary of Survey Results

General Demographics

Seven Ramahniks at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign responded to the survey. The students have all attended Camp Ramah in Wisconsin or Ramah Day Camp in Chicago.

The Search Process

The Impact of Ramah on the College Decision

Some of the students who responded to this survey indicated that they had already planned on attending a school with a decently sized Jewish population, however their experiences at Ramah reinforced that decision. One student wrote: “it influenced my study abroad decision as I may be able to study abroad in Israel.”

Other Schools Considered

University of Wisconsin, University of Maryland, University of Michigan, Indiana University, Ohio State University, Syracuse University, Northwestern University

Attributes Looked for in a School

Ramahniks who responded to this survey looked for a big school that had strong academics but also a strong social life. Students wanted to be close to home “but not too close.” They also wanted to attend a school with a large Jewish population and an active Hillel.

Best Aspects of the School

Many students responded that the size of the school is one of the best aspects of U of I: “It is so big that there are so many different people to meet and so many different things to get involved in.” At the same time, individual academic interests help to make the school smaller and more manageable: “My department is small and the professors are very caring. The school is very large but the department makes things much smaller.” A number of Ramahniks also indicated that U of I’s social life, especially its Jewish Greek life, is one of the school’s best aspects.

Jewish Life on Campus

Kosher Dining Options

One student explained the kosher options at the University of Illinois: “1. Hillel meal plan for dinners and Shabbat. 2. Chabad Shabbat lunches and dinners are free. 3. Public dorms on campus offer packaged kosher meals in the dining halls. 4. Local stores carry kosher meat and other products (they are at a driving distance).” Students recognized that although it is not as easy to keep kosher at U of I as it is at some other schools, the school is still relatively accommodating to the needs of kosher students. Some students noted, however, that they wish that there were at least one kosher restaurant in the area.

Worship/Services

Students at the University of Illinois have a number of options for religious services: Conservative, Orthodox, Reform, Reconstructionist, and Chabad. Students estimate that on Friday nights about 60 students attend services at Hillel and about 35 students attend services at Chabad. Shabbat mornings are slightly smaller, with students estimating that about 30 students go to Hillel and 20 students go to Chabad. Most students are satisfied with these options; between Hillel and Chabad, the “davening needs of virtually every student” are met, with “something for everyone.” One student noted that “it would be nice if there was a stronger observant community.”

Jewish Studies

Some of the students who responded to this survey recommended the following classes: Modern Jewish Literature, Yiddish Storytelling, and History of Judaism. Hebrew language classes are also recommended. One student noted that students who would like to pursue informal Jewish studies are encouraged to set up a time to study with the Hillel or Chabad rabbi individually.

Jewish Social Life

One Ramahnik wrote of the Jewish social life at U of I: “One must seek it out. A Jewish social life is alive and strong on this campus but it isn't too large.” However, besides formal organizations that encourage Jewish social life, “a lot of the Jewish people on campus hang out together and there is a nice Jewish circle that is created.”

Hillel Activities

Hillel sponsors many activities, including religious services, social programs, Israel programming, study opportunities, and social action (tzedek) opportunities. One student described Hillel as “very strong, busy, active, fun, inviting, and helpful.” Another student wrote: “It is a central meeting place for Jewish people. They plan many events, most of which are casual—BBQ's, pizza parties, challah making...”

Other Options for Jewish Social Life

Chabad is very active at U of I, featuring Shabbat meals and services, as well as learning and social opportunities. Greek life is also a central focus of social life at U of I, with three Jewish fraternities and two Jewish sororities. There is also a dorm called Illini Tower which students say is predominantly Jewish.

Antisemitism and Anti-Israel Activity on Campus

Nearly all of the students have witnessed or experienced antisemitism on campus, including “a brief case of vandalism at Hillel in the spring of 2006.” Most students also reported anti-Israel activity on campus, including anti-Israel campaigns launched by the pro-Palestinian groups.

Ramahniks' Advice to Prospective Students

Ramahniks at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign encourage prospective students to visit U of I for a weekend to get an idea of what it's like to be a student there.

“Visit the campus and spend Shabbat. Tour the campus and walk around to get a feel for it. Also make some friends while here for Shabbat. Only by coming to campus can one learn if it's the right fit.”

“Visit the schools that you are thinking about to get a good feel for them. I came to UIUC and fell in love with the people, the atmosphere, and the strong Jewish presence. If a big, in-state school, with a strong Jewish life, that is very social, sounds good to you, then I recommend coming here and meeting with a counselor or advisor to find out how you can fit in here.”

To receive contact information for Ramahniks at the University of Illinois (or another college on the Ramah College Network), please email Shana Zions at ramahdesk@jtsa.edu. Please include your name, your Ramah affiliation, and the college(s) for which you would like contact information.