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Protesters demand end to military recruiting at UIC

Eric Herman

Chanting, "Hey hey, ho ho, ROTC has to go!" a group of University of Illinois at Chicago students and activists demanded an end to military recruiting on campus Saturday.

The group held a conference at UIC, then marched from Stevenson Hall to the building that houses the university's Reserve Officers' Training Corps program. About 20 students and activists participated. They carried banners with slogans like, "College Not Combat" and "Military Out of Our Schools."

"We don't want the military on our campus," said Sussan Navabi, a 19-year-old sophomore history major and member of Students for Social Justice. "ROTC should be the next target for the anti-war movement because it's the way we're going to demilitarize our schools."

Lt. Col. John Mikos, battalion commander of the Army ROTC program at UIC and five other area colleges, did not return calls.

In addition to an ROTC program, UIC allows military recruiters to operate booths in Student Center East -- something that irks anti-war activists. The recruiters come almost weekly, Navabi said, though she added they stopped for a semester after a protest last year.

"As a public university, we are committed to free speech," said UIC spokesman Mark Rosati. "There's recruiting for all sorts of careers. We're a large public university."

Military recruitment on college campuses and in high schools has become a heated issue as the Iraq war continues, leaving more than 2,100 U.S. personnel dead. On Tuesday, Chicago Police arrested three University of Chicago students and another man for protesting military recruiters at the Hyde Park campus.

'I needed money for college'

Some parents have reacted angrily to a requirement in the federal No Child Left Behind Act that high schools provide names, addresses and phone numbers of all juniors and seniors unless the family requests the information be withheld. Evanston Township High School officials have sent opt-out forms to parents, prompting most to have their data withheld.

Anti-war activist Cristina Martinez said Saturday that Chicago has "the most militarized public school district in the whole country," where recruiters prey on underprivileged and minority teens. While Chicago has 42 junior ROTC programs, there are only five in suburban high schools, she said.

Protesters said military recruiters target public universities like UIC because many of its students might need the financial help the military offers.

"They're focusing on state universities . . . because we're not trust fund kids," said Melissa Howell, a junior majoring in sociology and gender studies.

Eric Ahlberg, 24, now a UIC student, served in the Army from 2002 through 2004. He had finished junior college and realized he lacked money to pay for a four-year university education. The Army gave him \$50,000 for college and a \$14,000 signing bonus, he said.

"For me, it was just kind of like, I need money for college," he said.

But after serving in Iraq and Afghanistan, Ahlberg is disillusioned. "Even though a lot of people think we're helping over there, we're really not. We're causing a lot more problems," he said.

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