

OPPORTUNITY COLLEGES & UNIVERSITIES



UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS CHICAGO





University of Illinois Chicago

Where World-Class Research Meets Student Access

The conventional wisdom in higher education has long held that institutions must choose: serve elite students and achieve high outcomes or provide broad access and accept modest results. The University of Illinois Chicago (UIC) has rejected this framing entirely. At UIC, faculty arrive because they want to change the trajectory of students' lives — and they have world-class research programs to prove it.

This is what excellence looks like when access is the mission: half a billion dollars annually in research funding and a student body that is 56% Pell Grant-eligible and half first-generation learners.

That mission — providing the broadest access to the highest levels of educational, research and clinical excellence — is what Chancellor Marie Lynn Miranda calls UIC's "superpower." It's also what earned UIC its designation as an Opportunity College and University in the Carnegie Student Access and Earnings Classification, which recognizes institutions that excel both at access and economic outcomes for its students.

The Carnegie Classifications — the nation's gold standard for over 50 years — now determines institutional excellence based not on prestige or student selectivity but on how well schools set their students up for success. The new Student Access and Earnings Classification framework evaluates institutions on these two critical metrics, with unique geographic contextualization. With more than 470 institutions nationwide designated as Opportunity Colleges and Universities (OCUs) for providing high access and competitive earnings, it's time to measure what matters most — student outcomes.

The OCU designation was designed to help ensure that higher education becomes an even more vital engine of economic mobility — particularly for students furthest from opportunity. Colleges and universities are reviewed every three years, and there is no limit to how many colleges can become OCUs.

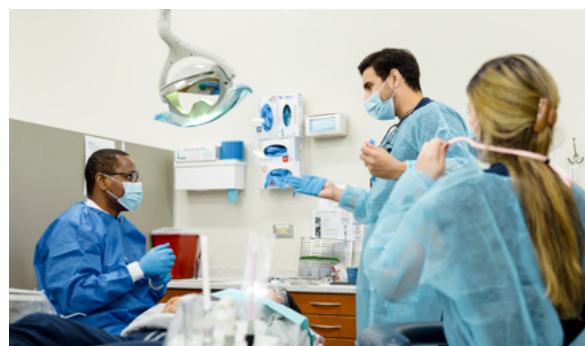
Access and Excellence – Not Access or Excellence

With undergraduate median earnings of nearly \$62,000 a year and designations as both an AANAPISI and HSI, UIC demonstrates that a research university can maintain rigorous academic standards while serving students from the full spectrum of backgrounds.

The numbers tell the story. Over the past decade, UIC has increased its four-year graduation rate by 46% — with even more dramatic gains for low-income and underrepresented students: 58% for Pell Grant recipients, 75% for Latino students, 62% for Black students. Perhaps equally important, 56% of graduates now leave UIC without any student debt, and those who do borrow carry an average debt of just \$21,000. UIC graduates earn an average of \$32,000 more than those with a high-school diploma alone.

Research as a Vehicle for Economic Mobility

What truly distinguishes UIC is how it leverages its R1 status for very high research activity to accelerate students' career trajectories. While many institutions treat undergraduate research as a nice-to-have enrichment activity, UIC positions it as a core strategy for economic mobility — one that currently reaches 28% of undergraduates. Research participation functions like a job for UIC students. The experiences help them develop responsibility, create networks of mentors at every level — from faculty to graduate students to senior undergraduates — and build a community among learners.



The challenge, UIC recognizes, is making research accessible to students who need to work to support themselves. The institution is actively building infrastructure to fund undergraduate research positions, leverage federal work-study and help faculty understand how to financially support student researchers.

A Middle Schooler, a Professor and Goose Droppings

The culture of mission-driven engagement extends beyond campus. Dr. Brian T. Murphy, a professor in the College of Pharmacy – Pharmaceutical Sciences, works with a local Boys & Girls Club on a science program focused on drug discovery. When Dr. Murphy asked middle-school students where they might find biologically active compounds, one suggested goose droppings. They tested the hypothesis, and the result is a peer-reviewed paper on a potential new antibiotic component, co-authored by the middle schooler who proposed the idea. This is the UIC culture in action: Faculty arrive drawn to the mission, observe colleagues living it out in diverse ways, and find their own path to contribute. Dr. Murphy's work with middle school students wasn't in his job description, but it emerged from an environment where community engagement is modeled and celebrated.


Building Seamless Pathways

UIC's commitment to access extends far beyond its own admissions. Through a groundbreaking partnership with Chicago Public Schools and City Colleges of Chicago, UIC is building seamless transfer pathways for students that eliminate the silos typically separating K-12, community college and four-year research universities.

The partnership has already created six degree pathways — with more in development — that coordinate advising practices across all three education institutions. Students starting at City Colleges know exactly which courses will transfer, how they count toward their intended major and the applicability of guaranteed admissions criteria. The Transfer Admission Guarantee program provides direct admission to specific degree programs — not just the university — for students who meet requirements.

"We loved transfer students before transfer students were cool," Chancellor Miranda said.

This fall, UIC enrolled a record 2,500 transfer students — and the institution's goal is to scale up its Chicago model across the state of Illinois to address one of the largest inequities in higher education: transfer student success.



Marie Lynn Miranda, Chancellor UIC

We loved transfer students before transfer students were cool.

Data Informed, Student-Centered Support

UIC's approach to student success is distinguished by its intentionality. Every incoming student — first-year and transfer — completes an assessment of their college readiness, including their academic mindset, sense of belonging, time management and healthy behaviors. This profile is integrated into the advising system, so when students arrive for their first advising appointment, their advisor already has insight into their potential challenges and strengths.

The university employs proactive advising and reaches out to students rather than waiting for them to seek help. Summer programs target students at risk of losing financial aid due to credit hour shortfalls and provide scholarships to make up credits before the fall semester. For incoming students, the Summer Edge program provides academic workshops in gateway courses like math, writing and chemistry, with participating students showing measurably stronger first-year retention.

Critically, this support doesn't stop at commencement. UIC has adopted distinctive language for its student success goals: not just getting students "to and through" college, but "to and through and placed" into a good first job. Faculty see themselves as partners in this effort, helping students develop skills that make them attractive to employers — a mindset reinforced by the research and mentoring culture across campus.



An Institution That Holds Itself Accountable

UIC has articulated eight essential elements for student success: recruitment and degree pathways, pre-matriculation programming, financial support (including the UIC Aspire program that ensures grants cover tuition and fees for families earning \$75,000), proactive advising, teaching and learning innovation, responsive academic support, research and experiential learning, and health and well-being.

What makes this framework meaningful is the institution's commitment to measurement. Programs begin as pilots, are rigorously assessed and then scaled, modified or discontinued based on results. The institution has set a concrete goal: Increase graduation rates by 10 percentage points over a decade.

A Model for What's Possible

UIC's Carnegie designation as an Opportunity College and University validates what the institution has long known: Access and excellence are not in tension. With world-class research, intentional student support and a mission embraced across every level of the institution, UIC demonstrates that a research university can be a powerful engine of opportunity.

For institutions seeking to improve both access and outcomes, UIC offers a compelling blueprint: Hire for mission, invest in support systems, leverage research as a tool for student development and hold yourself accountable to results.



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LEARN MORE



University of Illinois Chicago

Located in the heart of one of the world's great cities, the University of Illinois Chicago is the city's largest university and only public research institution. Its 16 academic colleges serve nearly 36,000 undergraduate, graduate and professional students. UIC is recognized as one of the most ethnically rich and culturally diverse campuses in the nation, a leader in providing access to underrepresented students. With one of the largest colleges of medicine in the nation, and colleges of dentistry, pharmacy, public health, nursing, social work, and applied health sciences, UIC is the state's principal educator of health professionals and its academic health system, UI Health, is a major health care provider to underserved communities. UIC students become professionals in fields ranging from law and business to engineering to education, liberal arts and sciences, urban planning, law and social work, as well as architecture, design and the arts. UIC is an integral part of the educational, technological, and cultural fabric of one of the world's greatest cities.

Learn more at: <https://www.uic.edu/>.



Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education

The Carnegie Classification® is the leading framework for recognizing and describing institutional diversity in U.S. higher education. The Carnegie Commission on Higher Education developed the classification in 1973 to support its program of research and policy analysis. In 2022, the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and the American Council on Education partnered to re-envision the future of the Carnegie Classifications and better reflect the public purpose, mission, focus, and impact of higher education. The 2025 Carnegie Classifications were the first release through this partnership. The Carnegie Classifications will be updated next in 2028.

For more information, please visit <https://carnegieclassifications.acenet.edu>.



Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching

The mission of the Carnegie Foundation is to catalyze transformational change in education so that every student has the opportunity to live a healthy, dignified and fulfilling life. Established by an act of Congress in 1906, the Foundation has a rich history of driving significant change in the education sector, including the creation of TIAA-CREF, the Education Testing Service (ETS), the Graduate Record Examination (GRE), Pell Grants and the Carnegie Classifications for Higher Education. Today, the Foundation is dedicated to the transformation of the American high school and making the postsecondary sector a more vital engine for economic mobility.

Learn more at: www.carnegiefoundation.org.

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