

OPPORTUNITY COLLEGES & UNIVERSITIES



CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, STANISLAUS





California State University, Stanislaus

The Power of Cariño Meets the Pulse of Possibility

California State University, Stanislaus (or Stan State, as it is affectionately called), has produced some of the strongest social mobility outcomes in the nation. These outcomes emerge from a student body that is 62 percent Latino and 70 percent first-generation learners, drawn from California’s Central Valley — a region where less than 2 percent of America’s farmland produces more than 25 percent of the nation’s food.

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.

Showing Up with Heart

President Britt Rios-Ellis, an ethnographer by training who spent her career in Latino health research before becoming a university president, uses the word “cariño” to describe what makes Stan State different. It translates loosely as “affection” but carries deeper connotations: consistency, accountability and showing up with heart over time.

That ethos permeates the institution. The culture runs on what Rios-Ellis calls familismo — an understanding that family extends to community. Faculty and staff know students’ names, follow their progress and invest in their trajectories. When students step away — often due to financial pressures, work or family responsibilities — the university’s Warrior Re-Engagement Center reaches out directly. Most who return do so within one or two semesters; students credit relationship-centered outreach as the reason they come back.



At Stan State, a student’s identity is welcomed on campus, not something to be turned off at registration. The university advertises in English and Spanish, conducts outreach to farmworker elementary schools and actively welcomes a rising number of Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) students.

Staying and Giving Back

Gloria Duran is a psychology major from Modesto — the oldest of seven children, a mother of four, a full-time medical assistant and a hospice volunteer who provides companionship and Spanish interpretation for families navigating end-of-life care. Gloria lost her first husband at 23. Her education could have stopped there, but instead, she enrolled at Stan State, where faculty like Dr. Esteban Montenegro taught her to see research as more than data, but as lived experience. Her goal is to become a psychiatrist specializing in trauma-informed care for underserved communities. “I want to help families who feel invisible find hope and healing before it’s too late,” Gloria says.

“When a university sees the whole student — their dreams and their struggle and their determination — and honors that holistic experience,” Rios-Ellis reflects, “it becomes the fuel that takes them to the next step.”

Duran’s story is not exceptional — it is the pattern. Industry partners tell the university that while graduates from elite institutions may not often stay in the Central Valley, Stan State graduates do. They become the teachers, healthcare providers and social workers who serve the region that raised them. The university’s service learning programs return millions of dollars to the Valley annually.



Community as Curriculum

Stan State’s partnerships connect academic work directly to regional needs. Serving communities that include federally designated Medically Underserved Areas and Health Professional Shortage Areas, Stan State prepares students to step into critically needed professions that strengthen regional healthcare access, uplift families and expand opportunity across the Central Valley. Through transformative investments from Health Plan of San Joaquin, Health Net and HealthForce Partners, Stan State is expanding access to health and human services education through state-of-the-art advanced simulation and clinical training labs at Willow Hall in Stockton while also supporting scholarships, clinical placements and hands-on internships that prepare students to serve the areas that need it most.

The development of a Physician Assistant Studies program further underscores how the university is helping grow and retain a culturally responsive healthcare workforce while its service-learning and community engagement efforts return millions of dollars in value to the region each year.

Through BEAM Circular, an “action tank” accelerating new solutions through public-private projects, collaborative programs and targeted investments to scale transformative innovations in industrial biomanufacturing, biology students train to help the agricultural industry achieve zero waste — a pressing concern in the nation’s breadbasket. At the Stockton Campus, business faculty and students run the IRS-certified VITA tax program in partnership with United Way of San Joaquin, which provides free preparation services for households earning \$68,000 or less, people with disabilities and limited English speakers. Each year, the program returns more than a million dollars to residents through properly filed returns. The CareerReadyU initiative is designed to provide every incoming student a career-related experience each year, whether through mentoring, job shadowing or internships.

This year, Stan State is launching a mayoral task force — a new model for workforce alignment. Across the university’s six-county service region, mayors and vice mayors will convene twice annually with faculty to discuss workforce needs, thinking collectively about regional prosperity rather than competing town by town. The Carnegie Opportunity College and University designation was part of the impetus — a reminder that access and outcomes depend on aligning what students learn with what the region needs.



Britt Rios-Ellis, President, Stanislaus State

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Showing Up in Stockton

Stan State's Stockton Campus occupies a site with a troubled history. The campus stands on the historic grounds of the former Stockton State Hospital and Stockton Developmental Center — California's first public mental health institution, founded in 1851. Its transformation into a center for higher education and the preparation of healthcare and human services professionals represents a profound act of restorative justice: reclaiming a site once associated with institutionalization and isolation as a place of healing, opportunity, dignity and community empowerment for the Central Valley.

That commitment to restoration extends beyond the campus grounds themselves. The university's name itself carries a story of erasure and reclamation. The name Stanislaus derives from Cucunuchi, a member of the Yokuts tribe who was baptized by Spanish missionaries as Estanislao — later anglicized by settlers to Stanislaus. The university has since dedicated an island on its main campus in Cucunuchi's original name, partnering with Native American communities to use the space for smudging and other spiritual practices. This is an example of honoring identity rather than erasing it.

The themes of visibility, access and restoration also shape the university's relationship with Stockton itself. For decades, Stockton itself was overlooked. California's largest inland port city, anchored by the Port of Stockton, is a deep-water shipping hub that links the Central Valley's agricultural and industrial economy to global markets, yet educational

opportunity remained scarce. Today, Stan State is the only public four-year higher education option in San Joaquin County. A Health and Human Services training wing opened in Willow Hall designed to address acute regional shortages in nursing and social work.

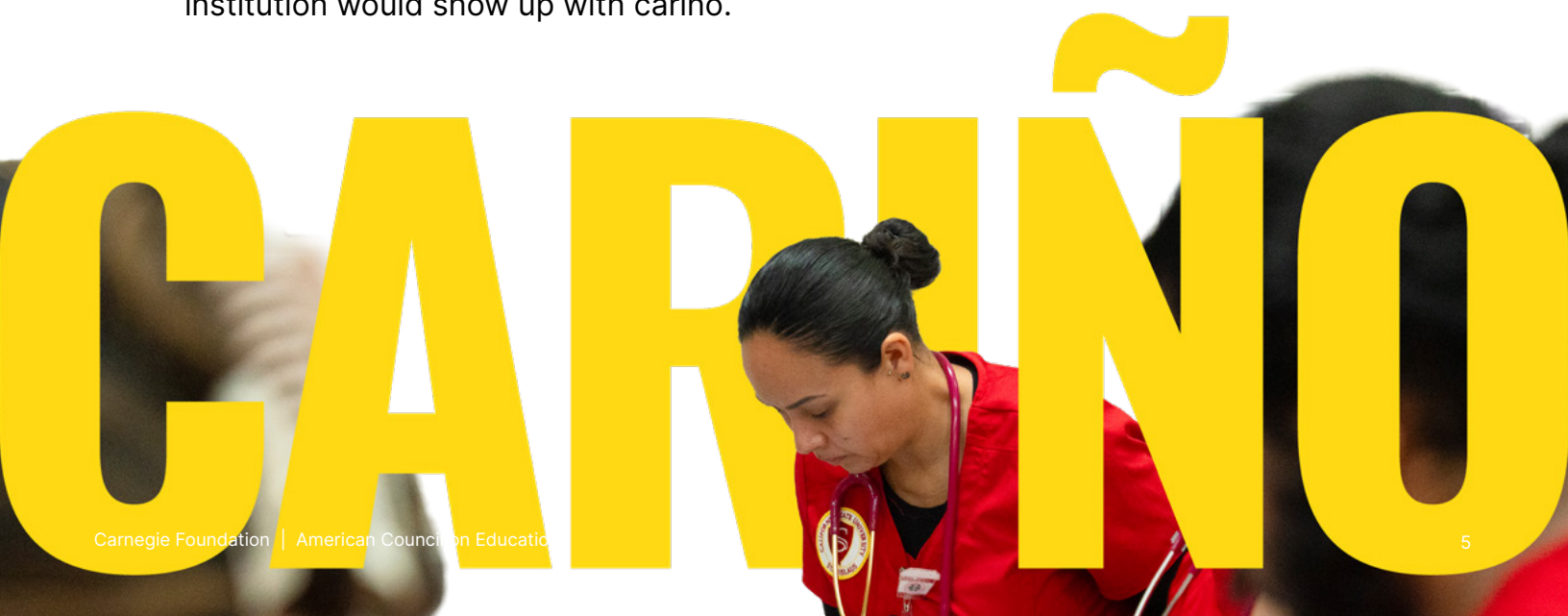
As the university expands its impact in Stockton, community investment and partnership have followed. Like many public higher education institutions, Stan State faces financial pressures, but the support it continues to receive, including a \$2.5 million grant, \$800,000 in another, reflects more than funding alone. The investment in the Stockton Campus signals growing confidence in the university's role as a catalyst for community health and economic mobility, while also demonstrating efforts to build trust and strengthen meaningful community partnerships. For Rios-Ellis, the work is about more than professional workforce development. It is about transforming a site of harm into a site of healing and growth — and preparing students to thrive in their respective communities.

The Pulse of Possibility

At her investiture, Rios-Ellis chose a theme: “Leading with Cariño, Rising with the Pulse of Possibility.” The two ideas, she believes, fuel each other.

“We don’t want to be the best-kept secret in the Central Valley,” Rios-Ellis says. “I want everyone to know about the opportunity we provide.”

The question was never whether students could succeed — it was whether an institution would show up with cariño.



Britt Rios-Ellis, President, Stanislaus State



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LEARN MORE



California State University, Stanislaus

Stanislaus State is a university experience for everybody. All are welcome in California's Central Valley. We represent a diverse group of students who have worked for their successes. We all belong here. Together, as Warriors, we celebrate each other's diverse backgrounds and support our academic goals and achievements. Through hands-on learning, our faculty become mentors and lead our students towards brighter futures. We are committed to ensuring all Stan State students find both challenge and support, so they leave career-ready in the heart of the Central Valley and the communities they call home.

Learn more at: <https://www.csustan.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.

Learn more at: <https://carnegieclassifications.acenet.edu>.



Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching

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Learn more at: www.carnegiefoundation.org.

