

# OPPORTUNITY COLLEGES & UNIVERSITIES



# UNIVERSITY OF WEST ALABAMA



Carnegie Foundation  
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Education





## University of West Alabama

Where Nearly Two Centuries of Mission Meet a Region's Greatest Needs

In the heart of Alabama's Black Belt, a region defined by rich soil, deep history and persistent poverty, sits an institution that is unlike others in the state. The University of West Alabama is a nearly 200-year-old university that has built itself around the specific needs of one of America's most economically isolated regions.

When the 2025 Carnegie Student Access and Earnings Classifications designated UWA as an Opportunity College and University (OCU) — institutions that excel at both access and economic outcomes — the response from President Todd G. Fritch, Ph.D., was characteristically direct:

"We're often excluded from conventional categories in higher education. When we received this designation, I was genuinely elated, because an Opportunity College and University is exactly what we are. We provide opportunity. We create generational change for so many first-generation students from majority-minority, low-income communities. Our work is, and has always been, transformational."

UWA is one of only five institutions in Alabama, and one of three public universities in the state, to earn the OCU designation. The recognition didn't change the institution's mission. It simply gave UWA a category that finally fits.

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.

## Economic Engine: Built for the Region

UWA operates in a region where the university is not merely an educational institution — it is one of the largest employers and a primary economic driver. A recent economic impact study demonstrated a 4:1 return on investment for every taxpayer dollar appropriated.

That return stems from a deliberately different model. As a rural regional public university, UWA could easily fit the traditional profile of a comprehensive institution: four-year degrees, some graduate programs, relationships with regional employers. Instead, it has built itself around the specific needs of the Black Belt economy.



“Many who lead public universities like ours would look at our focus on associate-level workforce education and say, ‘That does not seem like it’s your mission.’ But because of where we are located and the students we serve, it is very much a part of our mission,” says Dr. Fritch.

While many four-year institutions do not offer associate-level workforce education, UWA leans into it through partnerships across nearly every discipline and field of study. Through these partnerships, students leverage job shadowing, apprenticeships and internships that provide them with hands-on, real-world experiences. For example, a new two-year degree in forestry technology is designed specifically for the region’s timber and paper industries — and a developing partnership is embedding workforce training directly into the curriculum, ensuring that graduates are prepared for high-wage jobs the day they finish. The philosophy is straightforward: Give students the opportunity to earn a credential that leads to immediate employment, then create clear pathways for them to continue their education while they work.

The model extends to healthcare, where UWA has built pathways connecting Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA) programs to Licensed Practical Nurse (LPN) opportunities at community colleges, which in turn feed into UWA’s Associate of Science in Nursing (ASN) and its Registered Nurse (RN) to Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSN) program, which is available completely online. Partnerships with rural healthcare providers, including Ochsner Health, DCH Health Systems and Whitfield Regional Hospital, connect students to clinical opportunities while

addressing critical workforce shortages. The result is a stackable credential system designed to meet students where they are and move them forward, one credential at a time.

The university is also investing in on-campus growth, with plans to add 1,000 residential students over the next decade. This is a strategy designed not only to expand undergraduate access and improve the student experience but also to multiply the institution's economic impact on the surrounding community.



### **Access as Architecture, Not Aspiration**

UWA's commitment to access isn't rhetorical, it's structural. The university has held tuition flat for nine consecutive years, a decision that reflects both its mission and its understanding of the students it serves. With a student body that is majority Pell-eligible and 49% of students come from underrepresented backgrounds, affordability isn't a talking point; it's the foundation of everything the campus leaders deliver.

Online education has been a significant driver of success. UWA built its online infrastructure well before the pandemic, starting in 2002. The assumption that online programs primarily serve students in distant states doesn't hold here — more than 80% of UWA's students are Alabamians, and the vast majority of those Alabamians study online.

This represents a different kind of access: access through flexibility. For working adults who cannot relocate to campus, online education from a regional public university provides a pathway to credential attainment without leaving their communities or their jobs.





**“The OCU designation recognizes what UWA has been building for nearly two centuries: pathways from poverty to prosperity in one of America’s most economically isolated regions.**

UWA serves nearly 2,000 online undergraduates alongside 1,200 on-campus undergraduates — meaning online is the primary pathway to a bachelor’s degree, not a secondary option. The university’s nearly 4,000 graduate students are almost entirely online. This portfolio reflects how access must take multiple forms to reach the regional population that needs it most.

And that access is producing results. UWA’s Black student enrollment is approximately 35%, and the institution serves 70% more students from underrepresented backgrounds than would be typical for a university of its type. Eight years after enrollment, graduates earn a median of nearly \$40,000 — 62% more than expected, given the regional economy. For the lowest-income families, net cost runs under \$14,000.

### **The Next Frontier: Completion**

UWA’s leadership is clear-eyed about where the institution must focus next. The university excels at access; the primary focus now is ensuring that more students complete their credentials and move into high-wage employment.

“We excel at opening doors,” says Fritch. “The strategic priority now is bringing the same intensity to outcomes and completion that we bring to access. Students who finish here secure strong employment, and our OCU designation confirms that. Our challenge is ensuring that more students continue to cross that finish line.”



To address this, UWA is developing a four-year college and career program that integrates employability skills throughout the undergraduate experience. The model embeds competencies from the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) into general education, connects co-curricular activities to skill development, and creates transcript-ready credentials that demonstrate workplace readiness to employers.

The university is also working to scale the best practices from federal programs like TRIO Student Support Services to support completion. With the majority of UWA students qualifying for TRIO-like support but enrollment-limited programs only serving 160 students against proposed federal program cuts, the institution is embedding those high-impact practices into everyday operations so that all students benefit.

### **A Model That's Existed All Along**

For regional and rural institutions seeking models of opportunity and economic mobility, UWA offers something distinctive: evidence that this work doesn't require reinvention. It requires commitment to mission, responsiveness to regional needs, and a willingness to build programs that meet students — and employers — where they are.

The OCU designation recognizes what UWA has been building for nearly two centuries: pathways from poverty to prosperity in one of America's most economically isolated regions.







Dr. Todd G. Fritch, President UWA

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## LEARN MORE



### **The University of West Alabama**

The University of West Alabama is a state-supported, coeducational institution of higher learning governed by a Board of Trustees appointed by the Governor. As a regional institution, the University's foremost commitment is to meet the educational needs of the State and particularly of the West Alabama area. The primary mission of the University is to enrich lives through education, service and outreach by providing opportunities for students to pursue a quality education through associate, baccalaureate, master's, education specialist and doctoral degrees in liberal arts, natural sciences and mathematics, nursing, technology, business and education. Importance is placed on providing opportunities within the curricula for the development of enhanced skills in critical thinking, communication, leadership and computer literacy. The University also seeks to provide students with opportunities for growth beyond the classroom through a wide range of extracurricular activities, programs and services and through the maintenance of an environment of cultural and intellectual diversity.

Learn more at: <https://www.uwa.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**

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](http://www.carnegiefoundation.org).



