



# Associated Colleges of Illinois

## **True to Its Mission: Dominican University Educates Diverse Study Body, Maintains Top Academic and Value Rankings**

**President Donna M. Carroll now in her 25<sup>th</sup> year**



## DOMINICAN UNIVERSITY

"50-50-50" is a theme that [Dr. Donna M. Carroll](#) frequently uses when she describes [Dominican University](#), where she has been president for 25 years. "We are 50 percent Latino, 50 percent Pell-eligible, and 50 percent first generation in college," she says. "In terms of the distinctive demographic and the impact of the institution, I think that really says it."

Dominican University, in River Forest, Illinois, an embedded suburb of Chicago, is also known for academic excellence, a Catholic Dominican mission that drives social justice advocacy on issues such as immigration reform, undocumented students, affordability and equity, plus commitment to the poor and respect for the individual. These and other qualities have led the institution to a unique position as a top Midwest university educating a significantly diverse student body. For some in higher education, this can be a bit "risky," says Carroll. However, it is true to Dominican's mission – "grounded in the compatibility of faith and reason, which affirms the dignity of the human person and concern for the common good."

"We educate many, many students who can barely afford an education," Carroll says. "We choose to take risks on students who financially otherwise would be unable to attend college. We have many partners who value us because of that risk and help us support students."



*President Donna M. Carroll  
(Dominican University photo)*

Founded in 1901 as St. Clara College in Sinsinawa, Wisconsin, the college for women relocated to River Forest in 1922 and was renamed Rosary College. It later established one of the nation's first study-abroad programs, launched graduate programs and became coeducational. The college was renamed Dominican University in 1997. Today it offers more than 50 undergraduate programs, more than 25 master's programs, one doctoral program and seven professional and pre-professional programs. Its student body totals about 3,000 students, including about 2,100 undergraduates and 900 graduate students. Most are from the Midwest, though some come from other places for specific programs or athletics, and a significant number are commuters. The university offers classes in River Forest and other Chicago-area locations, plus online academic courses. A variety of faith traditions are represented in the student body.

### **University expands mission, attain high rankings under president's leadership**

Carroll became president of Dominican University in 1994, the first lay president of the university. She previously has been secretary of the university at Fordham University, New York City, and vice president, dean of the college and dean of students at Mount Vernon College, Washington, D.C. During her presidency, Dominican has doubled its full-time faculty, established new schools and programs, increased its operating budget four-fold and expanded its physical plant. Three fundraising campaigns under her leadership have raised more than \$150 million, including a recent campaign expected to raise more than \$70 million. She has been named one of 20 Chicago "Women to Watch," by *Crain's Chicago Business*, "100 Women of Influence" by *Today's Chicago Woman*, and was recognized for her leadership by the *Chicago Sun-Times* and *Chicago Tribune* and honored for her support of undocumented students and immigration reform by the Archdiocese of Chicago and Faith in Public Life.

"I will never forget my first year. The freshman class was 123 students. Now it's about 500," she says. Other successes she points to include the name change to Dominican University, which "spurred growth and gave us a larger stage upon which to build," Carroll says. Another is high academic achievement coupled with high value for the cost of tuition.

"I personally take pride in the fact that we rank 11th of 172 Midwest regional institutions



*About 3,000 students attend Dominican University, including 2,100 undergraduate students and 900 graduate students. (Dominican University photo)*

and first in Illinois in value," she says. "We educate a diverse first-generation-to-college student body with high academic metrics. That commitment to inclusive excellence is important for us. It's one that ties to mission, and it's one that we live out and that our metrics indicate we do well. I'm proud of that." The *U.S. News and World Report* ranking measures outcomes, retention, graduation rates, class sizes, alumni engagement and average cost of attendance.

One of the longest-tenured college presidents in Illinois, Carroll remains committed to Dominican's mission and its short- and long-term success. "It is an unusual opportunity to be a president, to be responsible for the strategic leadership of an institution and still get to know students – and in many cases, be able to give them their diploma and knowing them by name," she says.

### **Arts and humanities, sciences together important to student success**

Students enroll at Dominican University for academic programs in the physical sciences, psychology, nursing and other health sciences, neuroscience and business, among other programs. The completion of Parmer Hall in 2007 propelled the university's science programs forward, housing teaching and research facilities, plus state-of-the-art laboratories.



*President Carroll says the university's relationship with River Forest, the Chicago suburb where it is has been since 1922, is significant. "It is important to be perceived as an institution that brings value to the community," she says. (Dominican University photo)*

"I think it is emblematic of a healthy institution to have a strong science program, and I think it's important that you always talk about the arts and humanities, *and* the sciences together," Carroll says. "The sciences alone do not ground the institution. But the two together make it a rich, well-rounded education. And, in our day and age, STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) is a big part of the growing academy, and it is part of where a lot of good jobs are."

To help fund its programs, Carroll says the university has secured support from donors, foundations and federal grants. "In the last three years, we have earned close to \$10 million in federal grants that support social work, STEM, scholarships and teacher education," she says. "We've been able to align a number of our programs with important high impact federal initiatives that enable us to get substantial grants." For example, in 2017 Dominican secured a \$2.75 million Department of Education Title V grant, the only one awarded that year in the Midwest, titled "Strengthening Advising, Teacher Education and our Hispanic Serving Institution Identity."

### **Dominican University an original ACI Peer Mentoring campus**

As an ACI-affiliated institution, Dominican University is one of 26 member institutions, and is a founding institution for the ACI Peer Mentoring Program. The ACI program helps first-generation, low-income students remain in college by matching upper-class first-generation students with freshmen to serve as mentors, particularly through the important first year in college. At Dominican, peer mentoring is critical for student success. The ACI program augmented an already strong peer mentoring program at the university, Carroll says. Dominican employs a team approach, including peer mentoring, peer advising and seminars for freshmen, with consistent faculty and staff support.

As for physical improvements, Dominican University's next planned project is to create a student center, which it does not presently have, by renovating and building out space in a former convent on campus. An initial phase of the project is funded, and later phases of the project are dependent on future funding, Carroll says.

### **River Forest relationship important to university**

Also important to Dominican is its relationship with River Forest. The university was there when the area was farmland, and now, it is surrounded by residential neighborhoods. "The institution is deeply embedded in the community," Carroll says. "We look to be the neighborhood university, and have a large performing arts series, a number of lectures and the like. It is important to be perceived as institution that brings value to the community. Everybody in this community has someone with a relationship to the university." Carroll was honored last year as the River Forest "Villager of the Year," for helping to secure approval for a "Welcoming Village" ordinance.

It's not unusual to hear stories about Dominican students and faculty who remain in touch with each other for many years, even decades after graduation, Carroll says. "It's

amazing how that connection with faculty as mentors in the classroom has sustained them. I think that's a special piece. It is because the faculty are caring. It is surely not because they're easy. It is a challenging classroom and students remember it as having a real impact on shaping their lives."