OCU Profile Series | September 2026

COLLEGE OF SAINT MARY

# OPPORTUNITY COLLEGES & UNIVERSITIES



## COLLEGE OF SAINT MARY

CARNEGIE CLASSIFICATION OPPORTUNITY COLLEGES & UNIVERSITIES OF INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION

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# College of Saint Mary

Where Opening Doors for Women is a Century-Old Promise

For a century, the College of Saint Mary (CSM) has operated on a belief its founding Sisters of Mercy held as self-evident: that education is justice in action. The sisters opened the institution in 1923 to give women in Omaha, Nebraska something many had never been offered: voice, independence and a path to leadership. Over 100 years later, the mission hasn't changed. But the institution is at an inflection point — one its president, Heather Smith, describes not as a departure from that founding purpose but as its fulfillment.

For most of CSM's century, the Sisters of Mercy were the engine — recruiting women, supporting them, pulling them forward. Smith's vision is different: a campus where "it's women supporting women and pulling each other up." The distinction is structural, not sentimental — a shift from benefactor to community, from charity to collective strength — and it is the animating idea behind a broader transformation underway at this small Catholic women's institution on the western edge of Omaha. With roughly 750 students, a freshman class that grew 44 percent last year, and more than half of its programs in high-demand health fields, CSM is building something its faculty and staff had long wanted: a campus that is no longer Omaha's "best-kept secret," but a visible, unapologetic case for what happens when access and outcomes are pursued as one.

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.

## Where Everybody Knows Your Name

Smith likens CSM to a beloved local bookstore or coffee shop — a place defined by recognition and belonging. The institution can deliver something larger campuses cannot: a president who knows students by name, professors who notice when someone misses class and then check in, a culture where a late assignment triggers a conversation, not a penalty.



And because CSM is an all-women's campus, the dynamic is distinct in ways that even other small institutions cannot replicate. Students aren't competing for space or voice — they are leading, collaborating and supporting each other from day one. That builds a sense of community rooted in shared ambition and mutual respect — one that reinforces the confidence students carry into clinical placements, internships and careers.

That culture is formalized through a team of student success advisors who work alongside academic advisors to track momentum: flagging missed classes, late assignments, and signs that a student may be struggling before small problems become insurmountable ones. The advisors also coach first-generation students on the practical mechanics of college life — how to use the library, how to find a printer, how to budget time for assignments.

The institution's CSM Advantage program makes this support intensive and early. Designed for first-generation students or those who are nervous about the transition to college, the three-day program runs before freshman year begins and covers everything from navigating campus resources to building the habits of a successful student. It started with 20 students, doubled last year, and CSM plans to keep it growing. Its first- to second-year retention rate is a lofty 94 percent.




Heather Smith, President CSM

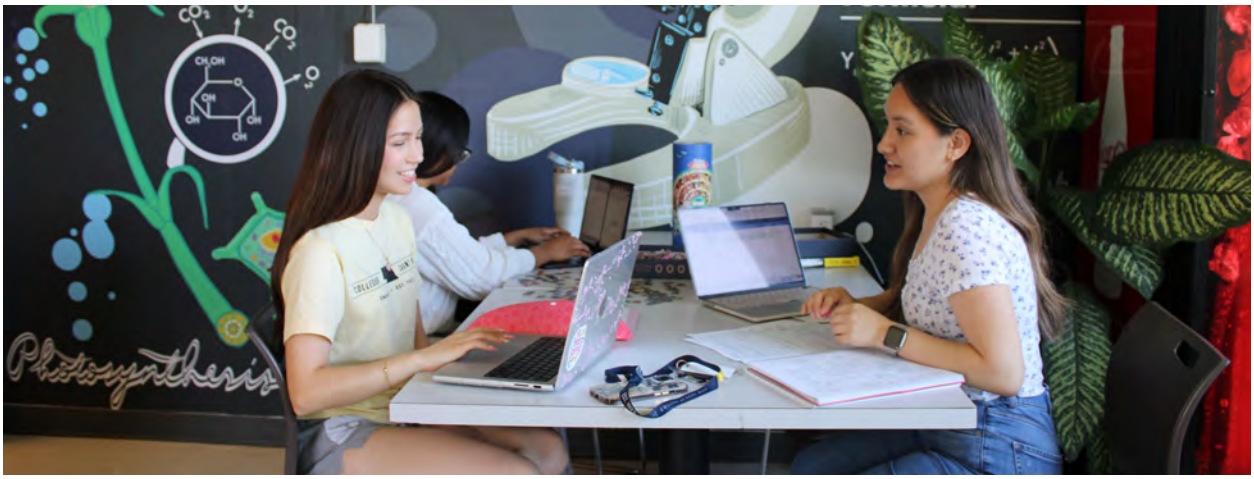
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## Dismantling the Idea That Access Alone Is Enough

Smith arrived at CSM two years ago from a 25-year career in healthcare administration — a background she credits with shaping her approach to institutional leadership. “Working with doctors, you just learn that you bring smart people to the table, you tell them what the problem is, and they help you solve it.” She applied that same inclusive approach to her first months on campus, conducting listening sessions with every faculty and staff group, running focus groups with external stakeholders, and asking a deceptively simple question: What do people think of us?

The answer was consistent and clarifying: overwhelmingly positive feelings about CSM, paired with near-universal anonymity. “We’re sick of being a hidden gem” was the refrain from inside the institution; from outside, it was “the best-kept secret.” Enrollment had dipped significantly. The identity needed resetting.

But the shift Smith initiated went much deeper than marketing. “We needed to dismantle the idea that access alone is enough,” she says. “True access means access to outcomes, not just enrollment.” The institution had long been committed to opening doors for women. Smith’s argument to faculty and staff was that those doors needed to lead somewhere real and that saying so out loud didn’t diminish the mission. “Economic mobility doesn’t weaken our mission; it strengthens it,” she told them. “It doesn’t replace our academic values; it fulfills them.”




That reframing became the foundation of a strategic plan organized around four pillars: strategic enrollment, efficient operations, reimagined identity and financial stewardship. Each pillar now carries a shared commitment to access, affordability, accountability and workforce readiness, and has become the institutional vocabulary of a campus that has stopped treating access and outcomes as separate conversations.

## Pathways That Stack, Partners That Stay

CSM starts setting students up for success before they even declare a major. In Nebraska, only about 28 percent of high school graduates meet college-ready math benchmarks — a gap that, at most institutions, delays students from graduating, adds cost and derails momentum. Rather than route underprepared students into noncredit coursework that extends time-to-degree, CSM implemented a paired, accelerated pathway that allows students to build readiness and earn college credit in the same semester. The result is momentum instead of delay — and an early signal to students that the institution is designed to move them forward, not hold them back.

More than 50% of CSM's programs are in health-related fields including nursing, biology and physician assistant studies, and the institution has invested heavily in making those programs navigable. Students don't just choose a major; they see a visual pathway. A young woman interested in biology can trace her options from an undergraduate degree through to graduate programs and specific careers. A student on the Physician Assistant Studies (PA) track knows the benchmarks she'll need to hit to hold her place in the graduate program upon completing her undergraduate work.

The most striking example of this pathway thinking is the institution's Licensed Practical Nursing (LPN) program. What was once a stand-alone certificate has been redesigned as the entry point of a stackable continuum. A woman can complete a one-year LPN certificate, enter the workforce to support her family, and return when she's ready to pursue a Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSN) through a seamless LPN-to-BSN bridge — no lost credits, no redundant coursework.

That stackability extends beyond CSM's own walls. The institution recently signed a 2+2 agreement with Metropolitan Community College in Omaha, creating an automated transfer pathway for nursing students who complete two years at Metropolitan and transition directly into CSM's program. This partnership reflects a deliberate effort to remove the friction of transfer — and to give community college students a clear line of sight to a bachelor's degree and the economic mobility that comes with it.

On the employer side, CSM is in an enviable position: more internship opportunities than students who need them. A newly created Office of Community Partnerships is building what Smith calls a "library of internships," with the goal being that every student who wants hands-on professional experience not only has access to an internship but genuine choices among them. In a landscape where many institutions struggle to find enough employer partners, CSM's surplus speaks to both the strength of Omaha's healthcare labor market and the reputation its graduates carry into it.

## Mission in Motion

As a Catholic institution rooted in the Sisters of Mercy tradition, CSM's commitment to access and economic mobility is inseparable from its spiritual identity. Catholic social teaching places the dignity of all humanity at its center.

When graduates step into strong careers, they gain agency, voice and the capacity to serve others — what President Smith calls "mission in motion." And the impact extends well beyond the individual. CSM graduates become healthcare providers, community leaders and mothers who model professional ambition for their own children. Educating women, in this framework, is an investment in the social fabric of Omaha and beyond.

The conviction that the world needs strong women now more than ever is the core of CSM's identity reset. The institution is no longer content to be a hidden gem. It is leaning into its story, rebuilding enrollment, and making a public case that access and outcomes are not competing values but a single promise that the Sisters of Mercy made a century ago — and a promise that the women of the College of Saint Mary continue to make to each other to this day.



> **“At 750 students, the institution can deliver something larger campuses cannot: a president who knows students by name, professors who notice when someone misses class and then check in, a culture where a late assignment triggers a conversation, not a penalty.**

# LEARN MORE

## College of Saint Mary

Founded by the Sisters of Mercy, College of Saint Mary educates women to lead with courage, compassion, and integrity. Our mission calls students to pursue excellence, seek justice, and use their education to strengthen families, communities, and the world. College of Saint Mary offers 75+ majors, minors, programs, and pathways that combine strong academics with hands-on experiences to prepare students for high-demand careers and meaningful impact. A CSM education is shaped by three powerful forces: the strength of a women's college, the values of the Mercy tradition, and academic programs designed to prepare students for meaningful careers and leadership in their communities.

Learn more at: https://www.csm.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.

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