

In a city dominated by private universities, UDC makes a pitch to District residents: 'We are affordable and high quality.'

Lauren Lumpkin



Students, faculty and guests gathered last week at the student center at the University of the District of Columbia during a celebration of the public school's founding 44 years ago. (Michael Robinson Chavez/The Washington Post)

Hundreds of people gathered to celebrate the founding 44 years ago of the only public university in the District. A student choir sang the black national anthem — "Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing" — and graduates paid homage to the school they say helped lift them.

But in a city crowded with higher education offerings, the University of the District of Columbia has struggled to stand out. That is why campus officials are embarking on a campaign to heighten awareness of the university — an initiative the school's president, Ronald Mason Jr., said last week he hopes will deliver the financial might of a traditional state university.

"We are affordable and high quality," Mason said. "You can get an engineering degree here for a total of about \$60,000 with a job at the end of the process. That's less than one year's worth of tuition at many of the schools in the District."

Part of the school's recently announced campaign involves raising money. Mason has not set a fundraising target, but he outlined ambitious plans: train students who can meet the city's employment demands, upgrade campus facilities, increase faculty wages and expand academic programs. Mason estimates he needs about \$565 million to accomplish his goals.

UDC has forgone some of the facilities commonplace at wealthier universities. There are not enough staff to meet enrollment demands. Much-needed technology upgrades have been delayed.

Other challenges loom, too: Just 16 percent of first-time, full-time students pursuing bachelor's degrees graduate within four years, federal education data show.

And the campus routinely loses the District's top-performing students to other schools, Mason said. Through the D.C. Tuition Assistance Grant — known by the acronym DCTAG — students can receive as much as \$10,000 a year to attend public universities outside the city, or up to \$2,500 to enroll in a private college in the Washington metro area or at any historically black college or university across the nation.

The District's sole public university can't perform its job without the appropriate investment, said Michelle Asha Cooper, president of the Institute for Higher Education Policy, a nonprofit education research group.

"If we really care about the students who live here and we want to make sure they have viable options that put them on the path to economic security and economic mobility," the city should invest in rigorous, high-quality public higher education, Cooper said.

More than 4,200 students attend the flagship UDC campus in Van Ness, the law school and the community college, enrollment data show. UDC offers dozens of degrees — from associates to doctorates — and university leaders are refining sought-after health-care, technology and teacher-training programs to respond to the city's economic needs.

UDC serves the District in the same way a land-grant university serves its state, Cooper said. Those schools, she said, "were founded many, many years ago and they were created to serve a public mission to really help educate the citizens of the state and allow the institution to be a very viable economic engine to really help create opportunities for those graduates to then enter the workforce of that particular state."

"If we really want to invest in the education of our long-term residents, we should be investing in UDC," Cooper said.

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Mason pointed to the economic prospects of most of the students UDC educates, with 60 percent of its student body coming directly from the city's public schools. Despite a flourishing economy, black workers in the District earn significantly less than their white counterparts, and unemployment rates exceed prerecession numbers, according to a recent [report from the D.C. Fiscal Policy Institute](#), an independent research group that analyzes economic data in the District.

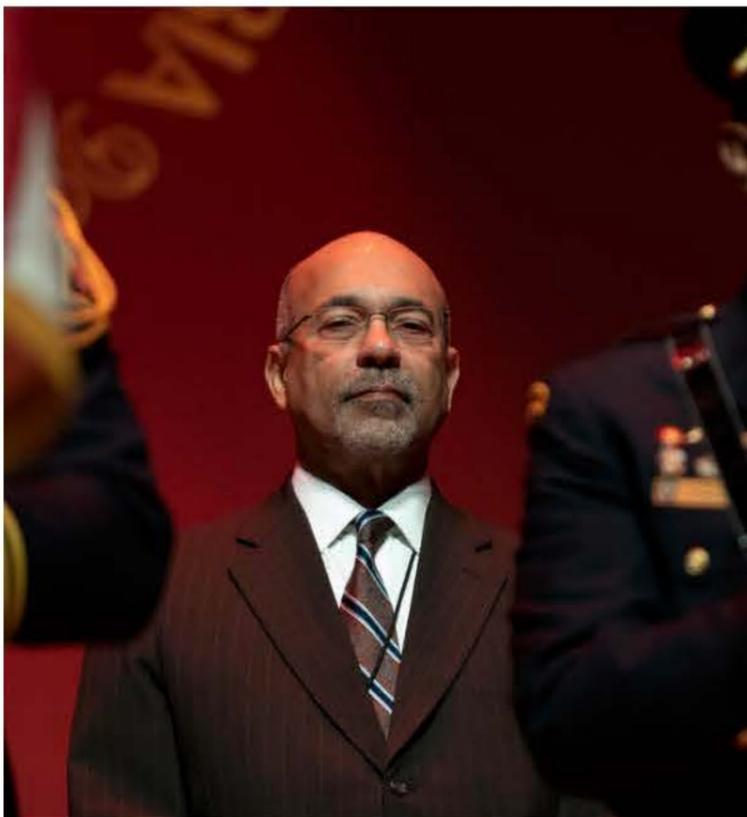
Mason compared that report's findings to data produced by the institute in 2017 that also showed black people in the District fare worse financially than white people. He argued that, with more resources, UDC could help produce better economic prospects for black Washingtonians.

"If the University of the District of Columbia had been there and healthy and doing the work that it's capable of doing, it's clear to me that the picture would not have been worse three years later, it would have been better," Mason said. "The question is, what's it going to look like three years from now?"

Mayor Muriel E. Bowser (D) said UDC should be the "first choice for our students graduating from D.C. public schools." Bowser was on campus last week to receive the school's Myrtilla Miner Award for Exceptional Service to Society, the university's highest honor.

"We're engaged in our budget discussions for the upcoming year right now," Bowser said. "Public education is frequently the number one demanded item in all of our budget engagement forums."

In the current budget year, the D.C. government has allotted \$90 million for public higher education, a 3.4 percent increase from the year before.



UDC President Ronald Mason Jr. wants to upgrade the campus and academic offerings. (Cheriss May)

When Mason arrived at the university in 2015, the school was in crisis. A 2014 [audit](#) had found that UDC awarded student loans in excess of federal limits, and failed to obtain high school transcripts and proof of residency needed for the government's student aid programs. The school set forth a cost-saving plan that called for the elimination of nearly two dozen programs and the addition of majors that fit the District's economic priorities.

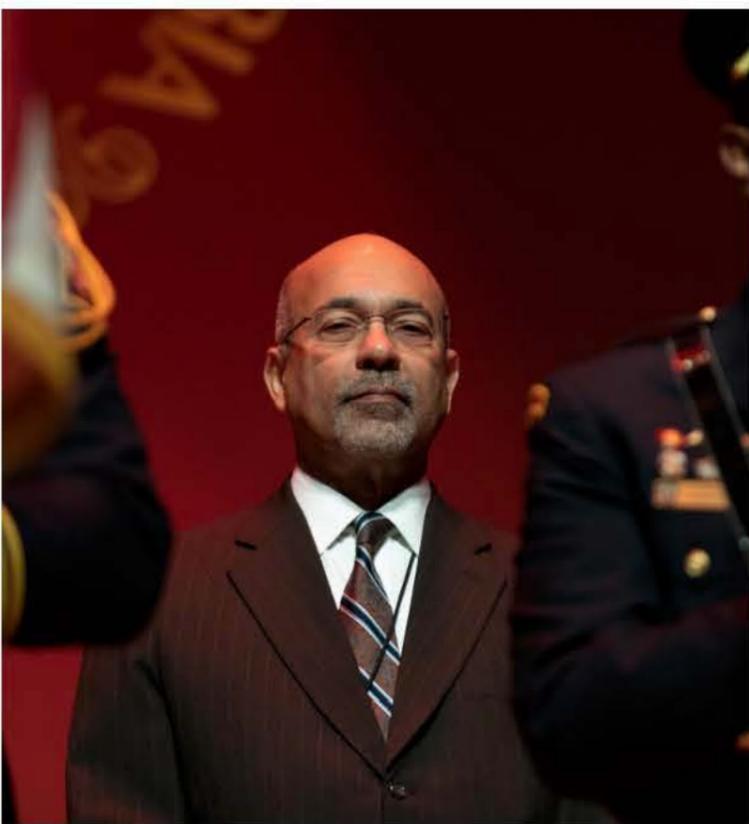
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Mason's priorities include developing majors that will lead to careers in the city. In recent years, the school has hired 80 new faculty members, forged a research partnership with Pennsylvania State University and garnered more than \$17 million in awards from agencies and organizations such as NASA and the National Science Foundation.

Through a new strategic plan, university leaders hope to triple the school's graduation rate, expand enrollment to nearly 9,000 students and help more students land jobs after graduation.

For Mason, a more robust investment in UDC is not just a matter of his own survival. The District's residents depend on it.

"I don't think the District can be a sustainable, resilient, equitable city without a strong public institution of higher learning," Mason said. "And we're it."