

# UIC Applied Health Sciences

## MAGAZINE



### Compassion and courage

New dean of AHS shares his  
vision for the college

SUMMER  
**2022**

The IGNITE  
campaign comes  
to a close

Students partner with community  
organizations for real-world  
disability-focused projects

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On Aug. 15, the UIC College of Applied Health Sciences welcomed Carlos J. Crespo as its new dean.

Crespo is nationally known for his work in undergraduate and graduate education, his commitment to diversity and inclusion in the health disciplines, and his research on minority health issues.

He is experienced in academic leadership and strategic planning, as well as interdisciplinary and inter-institutional collaboration.

Crespo, whose research focuses on the epidemiology of physical activity in prevention of chronic diseases, was among the top-ranked principal investigators funded by NIH in 2021. He has written more 100 published articles and contributed to five textbooks on minority health and sports medicine. He is the author of more than 20 government reports, including the 1996 Surgeon General's Report on Physical Activity and Health.

Crespo received a U.S. Secretary of Health Award for Distinguished Service. He was named a Minority Health and Health Disparities Scholar by the National Institute of Minority Health and Health Disparities.

He serves on a CDC advisory committee for the Community Guide for Physical Activity and the Built Environment; the Physical Activity Alliance Diversity Equity and Inclusion Committee; the Executive Steering Committee of the Diversity Program Consortium of NIH; and the Oregon Latino Health Coalition. He is a fellow of the American College of Sports Medicine.

Crespo earned a DrPH in public health at Loma Linda University, a master's in sports health at Texas Tech University and a bachelor's in chemistry from Inter American University in Puerto Rico.

The new dean recently sat down with the magazine to discuss his goals for the future, his passions, and how he wants to make an impact at UIC.

**Learn more about Dean Crespo at [go.uic.edu/AHSDeanCrespo](https://go.uic.edu/AHSDeanCrespo).**

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UIC

## **What did you find most appealing about coming to UIC?**

There are many good things about UIC. It's an urban, research-serving institution. I come from Portland State University, which is similar. I understand the important roles this kind of institution plays in the lives of its students. UIC is critical in advancing the career goals of many different types of students: those who cannot afford to move away from home, those who are interested in working and going to school, and those who are place-bound to their families and other commitments.

The other thing I found very appealing is that UIC is a Hispanic-serving institution. Some universities check the box that they're Hispanic-serving institutions, but they absolutely do not have a huge institutional commitment from top to bottom. That wasn't the case at UIC.

And the last thing I'll say is that it's a comprehensive university. You have liberal arts. You have professional schools. You have a medical school. And it's in a great city. I don't want to keep talking about where I came from, but at Portland State University, there's a motto: "Let knowledge serve the city." If you're not interested in serving the city, it's not a good fit. And I think UIC has that in its DNA, too.

## **Some of your research has focused on health disparities and inequities, and you've worked throughout your career to enhance opportunities for underrepresented students. How do you intend to leverage those experiences as dean?**

You're right that this is personal for me; I've been doing this work for decades. Suddenly, it's fashionable to talk about diversity, equity and inclusion. It took COVID-19 to lay bare the fact that we've had health inequities all along. It took a disease where everybody was dying, but some people were dying at a higher rate—people of color, people in rural areas, people with disabilities—to pull up the curtain. Why? It's access, it's lack of diversity in the workforce, it's priorities.

This is partly why we need a diverse workforce. That's where UIC comes in. Our patients are diverse, and we need to match that. I'm talking about race and ethnicity, but it's also urban and rural, religion, gender. I think we are probably the best positioned university to prepare health care professionals—not just for Chicago, but for the entire state. We need to make the connections and be a partner to help make sure that happens.

I also want to mention something else about inequities and the pandemic. The pandemic left some students behind. Universities everywhere moved to online teaching, and then we realized students didn't have computers, didn't have internet. We can't let that happen again. We only hurt ourselves if we continue to provide the best education to those who have the most resources. We need an equitable infrastructure that serves all our students.

## **As you step into this role, what are the most pressing priorities?**

Enrollment is a big hallmark. Funding is determined on how many students are coming in, how many students graduate. We're in a good place, but there is a challenge coming our way: we have fewer students graduating from high school now than 10 years ago. That's something we can't change—we call it the demographic cliff.

So that's an immediate challenge. How do we retain students? How do we graduate them? How do we build the pipeline? It's going to require developing collaborations with community colleges and high schools and establishing partnerships built on trust. That's at the undergraduate level. At the graduate level, we might want to think about new programs. Are we content with what we have or are there opportunities to grow?

I'm like a kid in a candy store because there are so many things we can do. But we have to prioritize. We need to have logs in the fire and others ready to go in.

## **If someone asked you to make the case for higher education, and, specifically, a degree in the applied health sciences, what would you say?**

There are not a lot of places where the primary goal is to take your brain, your capacity to think, to the next level—to help you learn how to think and solve problems. You go to college because you want to learn more, so you can serve society, serve humanity and do good.

The major problems we have as we grow are physical and mental health problems. If you are genuinely interested in helping people, the applied health sciences might be the right fit for you. The No. 1 thing you need for this degree? To be a compassionate human being. We have amazing faculty and labs. We can teach you the rest. But you have to be compassionate and committed to help others.



# POP QUIZ

on **CARLOS J. CRESPO**

## Do you have a message for the alumni reading this magazine?

I do. Alumni are very, very important members of this family, and I look forward to getting to know them. I want their input and feedback about what we need to upgrade, what's changing in their fields, whether we need to do things differently. Their voices are crucial.

And our students need mentors. They need people who have been in their shoes and are now willing to give back. I'm not talking about money—I'm looking for commitment. I'm looking for role models. That's priceless.

## What are you most excited about?

The people! I don't have to have all the answers myself. We will work together to find solutions. There's a lot of good we can do for faculty, students and the city. And that's exciting.



*This interview has been edited for length and clarity.*

Which of the following might you find in his home office?

- A** A photo of his family
- B** Bongo drums
- C** Dog treats
- D** A bike helmet

**Answer:** All of the above!

Crespo's wife, Ellen Smit, is an epidemiologist. Their family includes two daughters, a son and four grandchildren. He loves Latin percussion and owns bongo and conga drums. He has two dogs, a golden retriever and a cocker-spaniel/poodle mix ("One is cute and smart; the other is ... cute."). Lastly, he enjoys biking and he's ready to explore Chicago on two wheels.