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Grainger College of Engineering

\$5M DOT grant establishes rail center at Illinois



10/3/2023 - \$5 million grant from the U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT) will establish a new research and development center within the Department of Civil and Environmental Engineering (CEE) at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign (UIUC) with the goal of improving the safety, efficiency and reliability of passenger and freight rail transportation. The funding will be provided through the Federal Railroad Administration's (FRA) Rail Research and Development Center of Excellence program.

"CEE is proud to be the home of the premier railroad engineering program in North America," said Ana Barros, CEE department head. "This latest investment by the U.S. Department of Transportation is sure to pay dividends for years to come in the form of critical advancements in railroad research and education."

The University of Illinois offers the most extensive curriculum in railway engineering and transportation in North America through the Rail Transportation and Engineering Center (RailTEC), the railroad engineering education and research program headquartered with CEE. Led by Professor Christopher P.L. Barkan and George Krambles Director, RailTEC is a global leader in practical and theoretical research advancing the field in a broad range of rail transit engineering and transportation topics. Advanced research investigations are underway in railway safety, systems and infrastructure, addressing dozens of topics that are essential to maintaining the safety, efficiency, reliability, sustainability and resiliency of railroad freight and passenger transportation.

The award was announced September 29, 2023, by U.S. Senate Majority Whip Dick Durbin (D-IL), U.S. Senator Tammy Duckworth (D-IL), and U.S. Representative Nikki Budzinski (D-IL-13) and former U.S. Representative Marie Newman (D-IL-3) sent a letter to FRA Administrator Amit Bose urging him to consider Illinois as a home for the future University Rail Research and Development Center of Excellence. Durbin also established a provision in the bipartisan Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act requiring FRA to establish the center.

“Our railways have always been the backbone of America, connecting communities, powering industries and propelling our economy forward,” Durbin said. “Yet, with the evolving demands of the 21st century, there is an urgent need to modernize and optimize our rail systems. The National University Rail Center of Excellence, led by the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, will harness the collective wisdom of academia, industry experts and government agencies to tackle the challenges facing our passenger and freight rail transportation systems, ensuring safety, efficiency and reliability are at the core of its mission.”

“Modern and safe rail infrastructure is critically important to our state and nation, and this investment will help boost the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign’s efforts to improve our rail systems,” said Duckworth. “I’m proud to see the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law continuing to deliver right here in Illinois, and I’ll keep advocating for federal resources for infrastructure improvements that help working families across our state get where they need to be faster, safer and easier all while helping create jobs in the process.”

“Students and faculty at the University of Illinois lead the way in 21st century research and technology every day – and it’s only fitting we tap their expertise to help bring our rail system into the future,” said Budzinski. “I’m thrilled to see my alma mater selected by the U.S. Department of Transportation to spearhead a National University Rail Center of Excellence with partners across the country. I look forward to seeing the hard work of our Illini improve safety and efficiency in this critical national industry.”

“I am delighted that the Federal Railroad Administration is recognizing Urbana’s expertise in rail research and workforce development,” said Susan Martinis, Vice Chancellor for Research and Innovation at UIUC. “I applaud Sen. Durbin for his work to authorize the Rail R&D Center of Excellence, and for being such a champion of our research enterprise.”

The National University Rail Center of Excellence will be led by UIUC and includes the following partner institutions: University of Illinois Chicago, University of Delaware, Kansas State University, Michigan Technological University, Morgan State University, Rutgers University, University of Texas at Austin, and Tuskegee University. One of the main efforts across all consortium members within the National University Rail center will be the development of structured programs that introduce minority and women scholars to the different facets of rail transportation and provide pathways for them to begin rail facility careers.

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