

**Cannabis
Research
Institute**

D P I DISCOVERY PARTNERS INSTITUTE
PART OF THE UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS SYSTEM

FROM SEED TO SOCIAL IMPACT

2025 ANNUAL REPORT

Prepared by

Reginald Gaudino, Quetzalli Laidley, and Christina Sansone

go.illinois.edu/CRI

The story behind our logo

Our logo depicts the CBG molecule (cannabigerol), often called the “mother molecule” of cannabis.

Why CBG?

CBG is the chemical foundation from which all other cannabinoids are created. Compounds like THC, CBD, and CBC all begin as CBG. Once the plant converts CBG into these other molecules, there's no going back. CBG represents a unique moment of **potential, transformation, and direction-setting** in the cannabis plant's life cycle.

How this connects to Cannabis Research Institute

At Cannabis Research Institute (CRI), we see CBG as a symbol of our mission.

Foundation for discovery

Just as CBG is the starting point for all cannabinoids, our work provides the groundwork for scientific, community, and policy advancements in cannabis.

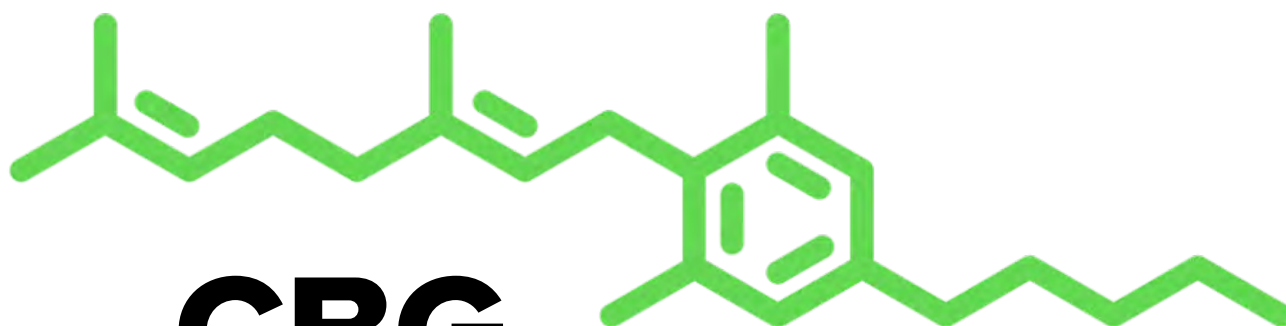
Catalyst for transformation

Like CBG's irreversible shift into other molecules, our research and partnerships aim to create lasting change that can't be undone.

Transparency in growth

The clear, recognizable structure of the molecule reflects our commitment to making cannabis research accessible, transparent, and collaborative.

In short, the CBG molecule in our logo represents origins, potential, and irreversible progress, the same values that guide CRI's work at the intersection of science, community, and impact.



CBG
Cannabigerol

Table of contents

Introduction

- 04. A note from our director
- 05. Why Cannabis Research Institute matters
- 06. Mission, vision, & values
- 07. Our state partners: Driving cannabis research forward
- 08. Initial funding

Year one: Putting down roots

- 11. First year by the numbers
- 12. First year in review
- 13. Partnerships
- 14. Strategic communications & collaboration
- 15. Community engagement to inform research

- 16. Insights from community listening sessions
- 17. Experiential learning: Cultivating future talent

Year two: Continuing to grow

- 20. Advisory Committee
- 21. Transparent communication, lasting relationships
- 22. Growing our community engagement initiatives
- 23. Advancing equity-centered research through engagement
- 24. Creating experiential learning opportunities
- 25. Supporting cannabis education in community colleges
- 26. Advancing laboratory research
- 27. Growing with gratitude



A note from our director

When offered the position as the inaugural director of Cannabis Research Institute, my first thought was “Are we really leaving California for cold Illinois winters?” The once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to develop a state supported academic research institute dedicated to research on all aspects of cannabis, its potential, and the impact on society quickly overruled any concerns about snow and cold, and we relocated to Illinois in Spring of 2024.

I believe both that cannabis has the potential to do tremendous good for society, and that potential harms related to human consumption should be explored and discussed in a way that grounds them in the unbiased, nuanced complexity of the plant and human physiology. However, federal policy that criminalizes cannabis use and a legacy of public misinformation campaigns means research on cannabis and hemp is limited. Further, the research conducted on cannabis largely does not reflect cannabis products available in today's markets.

Cannabis Research Institute affords Illinois the opportunity to expand the research base on impacts of human consumption, begin repairing the harm caused by criminalization, and explore research on non-human consumption uses of the plant.

I am grateful for the trust placed in me as the Cannabis Research Institute steward and look forward to learning and growing together.

R Gaudino

Reginald Gaudino, PhD

Why Cannabis Research Institute matters

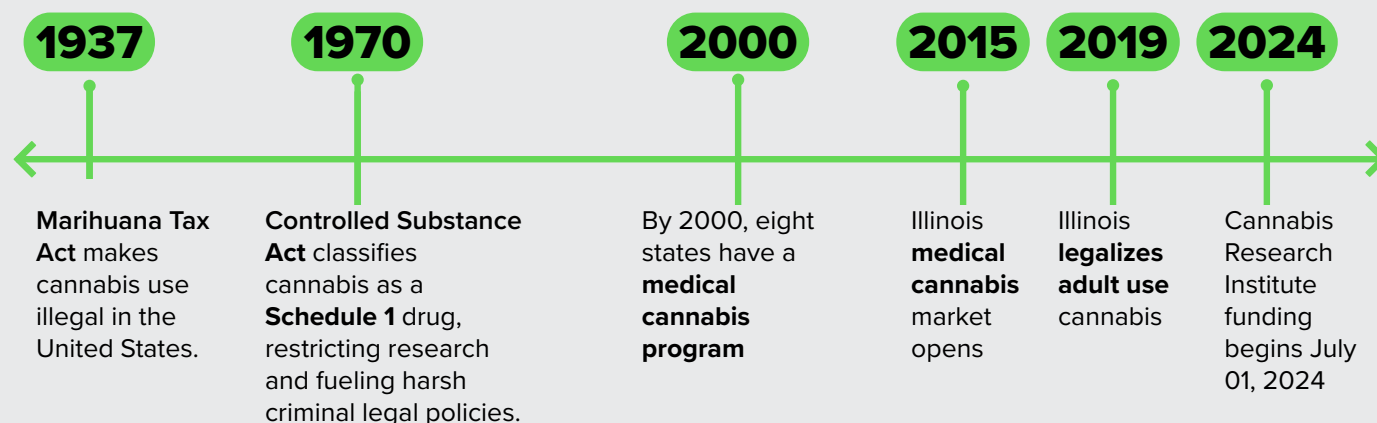
Almost 90 years ago, the **Marihuana Tax Act of 1937** made cannabis and hemp use illegal in the United States, and Congress began passing laws further regulating cannabis that culminated in the **1970 Controlled Substance Act** which placed cannabis as a **Schedule 1 drug** with “no currently accepted medical use and a high potential for abuse.” With this one Act, the federal government laid the groundwork for over five decades of increasingly harsh criminal legal policy and simultaneously created a narrow and restrictive research environment for cannabis.

By the early 2000s, states began opening **medical cannabis programs** and exploring **adult use markets**. In **2015**, **Illinois'** medical cannabis market opened and in **2019**, became the **first state to legalize adult use cannabis via legislation** and not ballot initiative. Illinois' landmark **Cannabis Regulation Tax Act (CRTA)** included provisions to center equity and allocate tax revenue to invest in communities disproportionately harmed by federal policies that criminalize cannabis.

While the CRTA included provisions to begin repairing the criminal legal harms perpetuated by federal policy, **the research gap persisted**. To address this gap, **Cannabis Research Institute (CRI)** was announced in December 2022 as a partnership between the Division of Behavioral Health & Recovery, Illinois Department of Human Services, and the University of Illinois.

The Division of Behavioral Health & Recovery funded CRI for **\$7M over three years** to develop a research program that embeds community engagement, supports unbiased, data-informed decision making, and centers opportunities for communities most disproportionately impacted by criminalization.

Cannabis Policy & CRI Timeline



Mission

Cannabis Research Institute conducts community-centered, rigorous cannabis research that fosters public understanding, informs policy, and promotes equity.

Through a collaborative, interdisciplinary approach, CRI turns science into impact.

Vision

To be the leading, trusted institute for community-informed, interdisciplinary cannabis research by setting scientific standards, informing policy, and advancing equity and sustainability.

Values



Community centered engagement

Community centered engagement

We at CRI foster ongoing, meaningful dialogue with diverse communities to ensure our work is responsive to their needs and informed by lived experience. This intentional, sustained engagement shapes both what we study and how we study it.



Rigorous, transparent, and compassionate science

Rigorous, transparent, and compassionate science

We at CRI conduct high-quality, evidence-based research rooted in transparency and compassion. We are committed to producing accurate, accessible, and non-partisan information, with deep respect for the communities our work impacts.



Collaborative and inclusive culture

Collaborative and inclusive culture

We at CRI cultivate a welcoming, interdisciplinary environment that values diverse perspectives, prioritizes collaboration over competition, and breaks down silos. Internally and externally, we lead with trust, empathy, and cultural humility, fostering innovation through mutual respect and shared purpose.

Our state partners: Driving cannabis research forward



On November 15, 2024, CRI officially launched with a live-streamed panel discussion featuring remarks from University of Illinois System President Tim Killeen and Governor JB Pritzker. The event marked CRI's public debut and highlighted its mission to advance transparency, research, and community engagement in the cannabis sector.

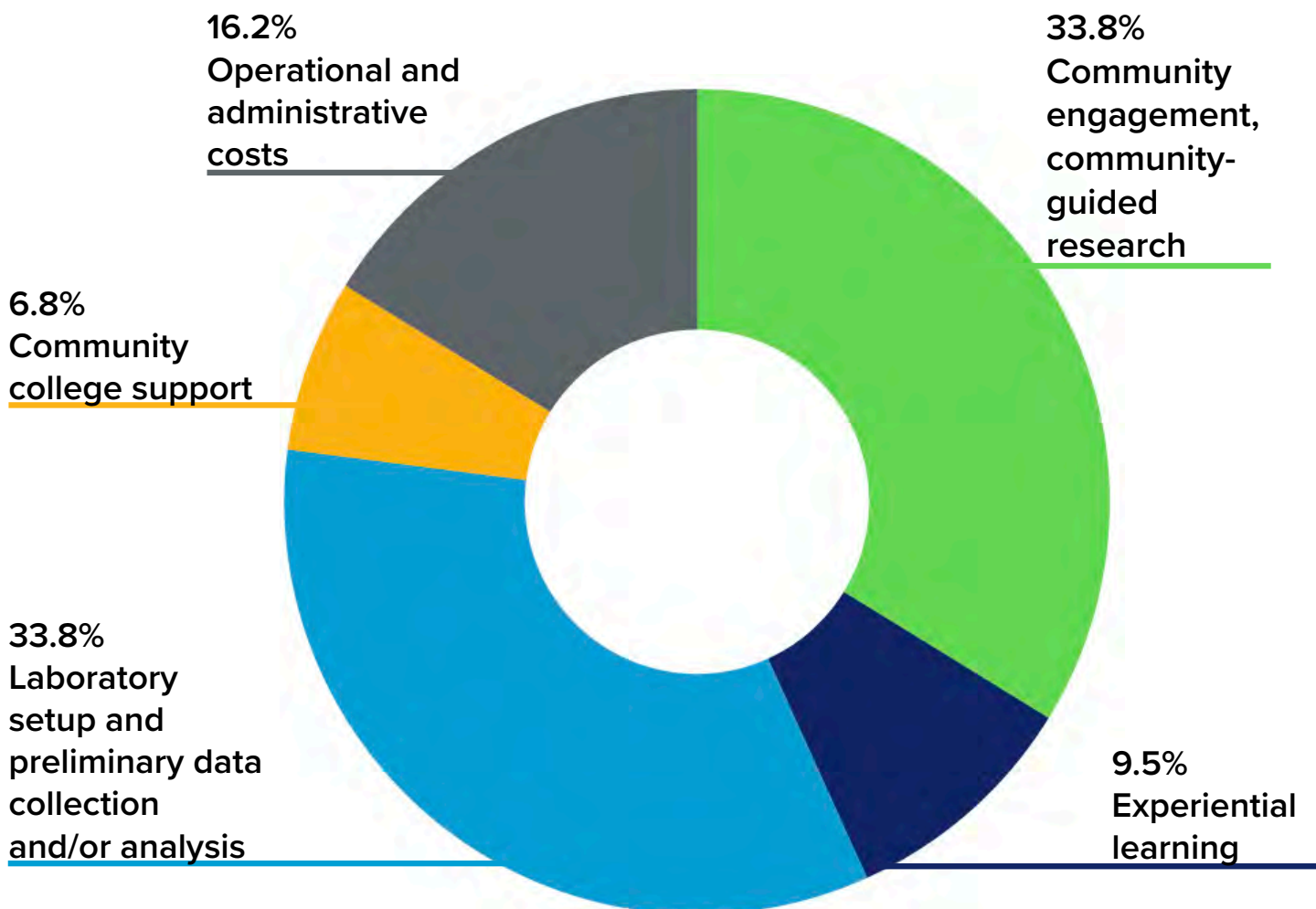
From left to right: Illinois Governor JB Pritzker, University of Illinois System President Tim Killeen, CRI Director Reggie Gaudino, Representative Eva-Dina Delgado, Deputy Cannabis Regulation Oversight Officer Nathaniel Inglis Steinfeld, IDHS Behavior Health Policy Advisor Donell Barnett, and IDHS Secretary Dulce Quintero.



Initial funding

CRI was funded for \$7 million over three years to develop a sustainable cannabis research program and create infrastructure that supports programmatic priorities. Our budget is best viewed holistically, with community engagement, communications, and lab-based initiatives providing foundational support for overlapping areas of work. For example, experiential learning opportunities will be offered as a community college support and may include lab-based options.

Given the overlap, the chart below represents the percentage of budget allocated to each area, and includes personnel, support staff, project-based work, and direct funding support provided by CRI.





Year one: Putting down roots

**This year
was about
building
trust and
laying the
foundation
for long-term
impact.**

**Every milestone is a step toward
social impact.**

First year by the numbers

11K+

Impressions: CRI's LinkedIn presence is building visibility and awareness for cannabis research across Illinois and beyond.

17

Media highlights: Director Reggie Gaudino and CRI quoted, honored, and featured in press across the field.

5

Interns: Participated in CRI's pilot lab-based internship in Summer 2025, offered through the DPI summer internships. They split their time between gaining foundational lab knowledge and skills, and remote learning about basic data skills.

3

Federal grants submitted: Positioning CRI to expand Illinois-led cannabis research on the national stage.

3

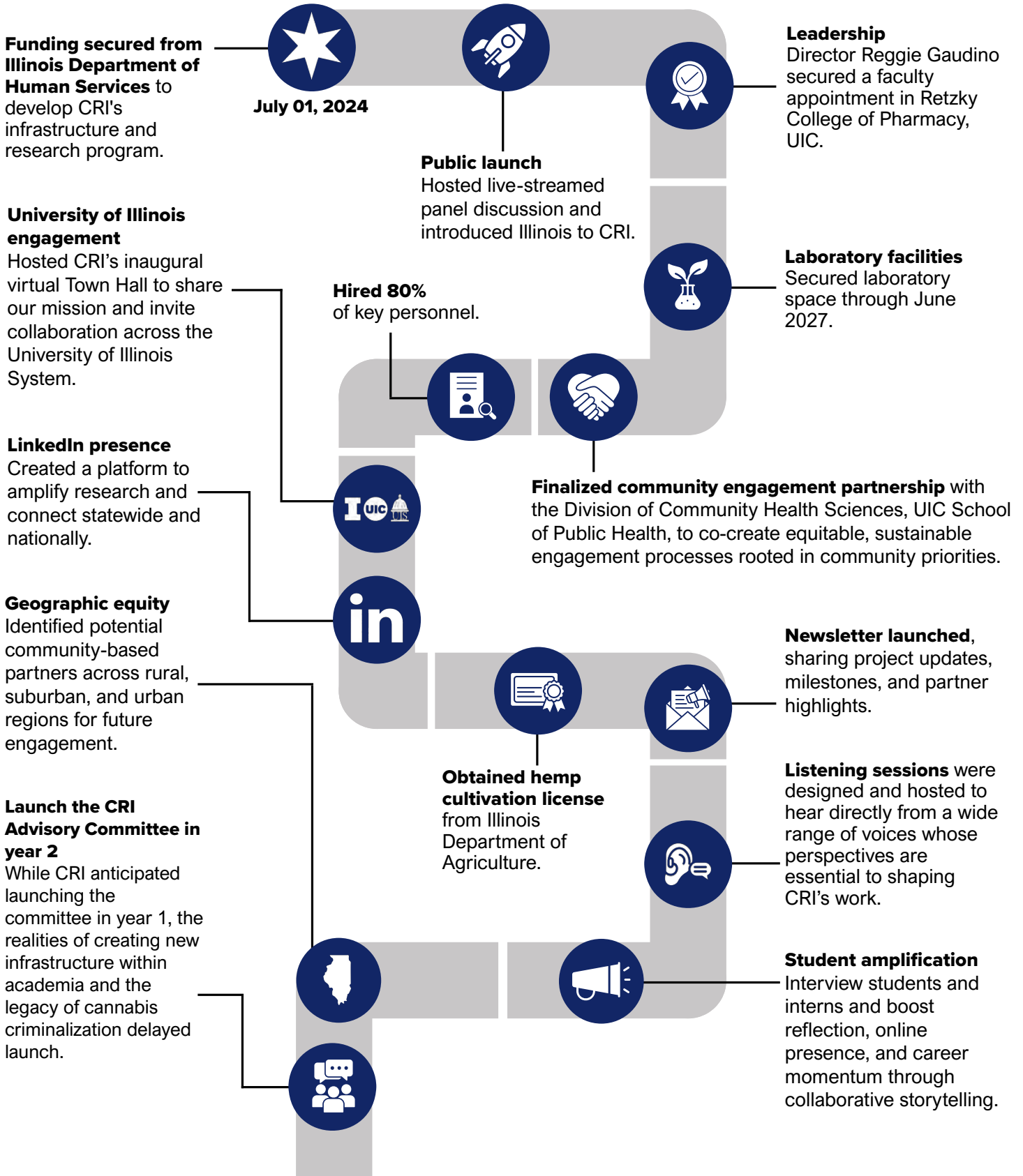
Major events: Launching CRI with the Riverside Chat, hosting our first Town Hall, and kicking off the Spotlight Series.

2

Newsletter issues: Released to the community to inform them about CRI's work.

First year in review

From establishing our foundation to expanding research, engagement, and partnerships, each point on our path represents progress made possible through collaboration and commitment. As you move through the rest of this report, you'll see how these milestones connect to the experiences, lessons, and impacts that define CRI's first year.



Partnerships

RETZKY COLLEGE OF PHARMACY

Department of Pharmaceutical Sciences

Reginald Gaudino, PhD

secured a faculty appointment, which allows CRI to support graduate students.

UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS COLLEGE OF MEDICINE

Department of Pediatrics

Jagadeesh Ramasamy, PhD

Research exploring the ability of cannabinoids to mitigate pain and inhibit the progression to blindness in patients with sickle cell disease. Submitted two proposals to National Institutes of Health, one for pain mitigation, one for inhibiting the progression to blindness.

Center for Dissemination and Implementation Science

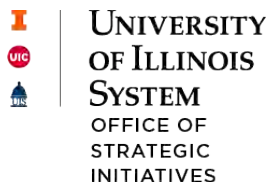
Julie Bobitt, PhD

Co-leads community engagement that will inform community-guided research funded by CRI. Will create and oversee a low-barrier proposal and funding process, and develop a Community Advisory Council to support community-guided research.

SOCIAL WORK

James Swartz, PhD

Principal Investigator, The Cannabis Regulation & Tax Act Evaluation Study, which evaluates the public health impacts of legalizing adult cannabis use in Illinois.



Office of Strategic Initiatives

Providing an in-kind contribution of ~3,000 square feet of laboratory space and equipment at UIC's Incubator Laboratory Facility through June 2027.

PUBLIC HEALTH

Division of

Community Health Sciences

Benjamin Shaw, PhD

Co-leads community engagement that will inform community-guided research funded by CRI. Will create and oversee a low-barrier proposal and funding process, and develop a Community Advisory Council to support community-guided research.



Department of Accountancy

Justin Leiby, PhD

Scholar in Residence at CRI, and lead partner to Cannabis Regulation Oversight Office on statewide initiative to annually survey cannabis industry stakeholders. The survey initiative supports state decision making and provides real-world learning opportunities for undergraduate and graduate students.



Northern Illinois University

Department of Biological Sciences

Barrie Bode, PhD

Cancer research focused on natural product small molecule drug discovery. Proposal submitted to National Cancer Institute to explore anti-cancer properties of specific hemp cultivars.



Spain's Institute of Agrifood Research and Technology and the Center for Research in Agricultural Genomics

Develop genetic tools for cannabis/hemp crop improvement. Data will help create hemp cultivars better suited to Illinois and the Midwest, and can potentially serve as a resource for licensed cultivators seeking to create novel cultivars. CRI is currently negotiating a joint development agreement to support long-term research projects which will be the basis for future NIH and USDA research proposals.

Strategic communications & collaboration

Building trust

At CRI, communication is essential to transparency, accessibility, and community-building. By embedding communication in our approach, we make our work visible, clarify our role, keep partners informed, and demonstrate CRI's value.

Transparent outreach

As a statewide institute, CRI is committed to bridging the gap between academic research and the public. Effective communication means engaging Illinoisans through clear, concise, and relatable outreach that invites participation and builds trust across.

We translate complex research into plain language, sharing data and findings in ways that are accessible to non-research audiences, while reserving technical detail for the scientific community.

Communication that resonates

Our communication approach seeks to correct decades of cannabis misinformation while fostering shared understanding. Transparency and trust grow when we create dialogue about who we are, what we do, and how we partner.

We amplify voices by showcasing the contributions of interns, researchers, and community partners. We also promote shared learning through stories, profiles, and updates that connect community, academic, and governmental perspectives.

Geographic equity

Illinois is often described as a microcosm of the United States, with demographic, cultural, and geographic diversity that reflects the nation as a whole. By

engaging communities statewide, CRI not only serves Illinois residents equitably but also creates a model for how inclusive, equity-driven research can inform the broader national landscape.

Community engagement

We strive to ensure that those most impacted by cannabis policy have meaningful opportunities to inform, participate in, and benefit from our work. Our engagement is relationship-based, trust-driven, and statewide, with clear boundaries about our role as an academic research institution. This positions CRI as a connector, educator, and research partner.





Community engagement to inform research

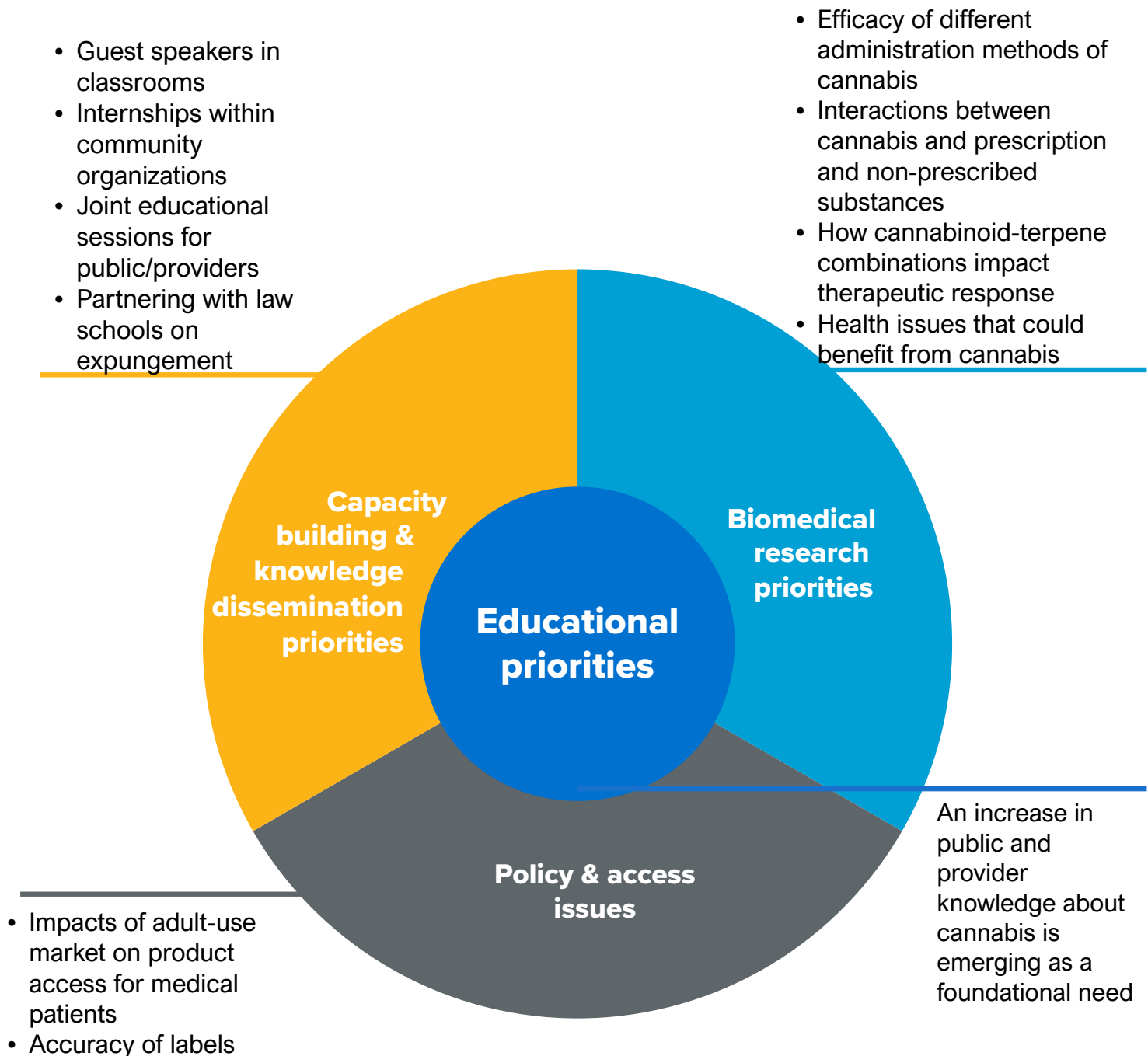
CRI's community engagement partner is the Division of Community Health Sciences at the UIC School of Public Health (CHS). The collaboration will create a community engagement framework that ensures research funded by CRI resonates with Illinois communities, especially minoritized communities and those marginalized or affected by the war on drugs.

Specific activities include forming a community advisory council, identifying research priorities through community input, and launching a call for proposals for equity-centered research projects as well as capacity building and knowledge dissemination projects that address community identified priorities. Our community engagement lays the groundwork to co-create meaningful cannabis research opportunities and foster a more equitable and responsive cannabis research ecosystem, setting a precedent for future projects across the nation.

Nothing about us without us

Insights from community listening sessions

The Division of Community Health Sciences hosted three listening sessions designed to give Illinoisans the opportunity to share their priorities for cannabis research across the state. Participants included community members, researchers, healthcare providers, advocates and community-based organizations, media, educators, community colleges offering cannabis-related programs, and caregivers for medical cannabis patients. The items below represent feedback shared in these listening sessions.





**Practical work
experience,
transferable skills, and
expanding professional
networks**

Experiential learning: Cultivating future talent

Experiential learning often provides a critical pathway to explore career options, learn new skills, and develop a professional network. For students without an existing network, or career-changers, these opportunities can provide invaluable career benefits but may be daunting to navigate.

Cohort zero

In Summer 2025, CRI piloted a lab-based internship with undergraduate students via the Discovery Partners Institute (DPI) Summer Tech Internship. Interns split their time gaining foundational lab knowledge and skills, remote learning about basic data skills, and in DPI-led professional development activities.

Interns and CRI staff were invited to share what they enjoyed and what they may change for future cohorts.



Internships that offer rotations through related aspects of the lab would expose students to career options they may not know about



Interns and staff felt that a longer internship would help students gain greater proficiency with lab skills and increase their confidence



Year two: Continuing to grow

Community-centered engagement is not a side project, it is how we do our work.

Rigorous, transparent, and compassionate science is our standard.

Advisory Committee

In Fall 2025, we will launch our Advisory Committee which will serve as a cornerstone of governance and accountability. While planned for launch in Year 1, the realities of building new infrastructure within academia, and the legacy of cannabis criminalization, required a more deliberate timeline.

Advisory Committee members will reflect the diversity of Illinois' cannabis landscape: scientists, educators, nonprofit and industry leaders, public agencies, representatives from state agencies, and

individuals with lived experience of the impacts of the ongoing war on drugs. Individual with lived experience are eligible to receive an annual stipend to ensure they are compensated for their time.

The Committee will guide CRI's strategy, review project plans, advise on new research areas, and strengthen external networks across universities, communities, and government.

CRI will create bidirectional engagement mechanisms between the Community

Advisory Council and CRI Advisory Committee to ensure community perspectives are included and the Advisory Committee understands the community-guided research funded by CRI.

Together, these connections anchor the Advisory Committee as a key accountability mechanism, grounding CRI's growth in transparency, equity, and shared expertise across Illinois.



Transparent communication, lasting relationships

Moving from early visibility to sustained, statewide engagement in year two.



Continue the newsletter

Publish quarterly issues highlighting partner updates, student and intern profiles, and research milestones, increasing both reach and accessibility.



Continue student amplification

Feature every CRI intern and student collaborator through co-created content that uplifts their contributions, builds their professional networks, and sustains positive career momentum.



Expand LinkedIn engagement

Grow CRI's online presence by showcasing team and partner expertise, amplifying student and intern voices, and sharing timely updates that demonstrate impact.



Feedback Mechanisms

Design every outreach effort and event as a two-way conversation. From live polls and post-event surveys to follow-up conversations, this allows us to continuously refine our approach, so our programs remain responsive, relevant, and rooted in what matters most to the people of Illinois.



Maintain responsive communications

Deliver timely, audience-appropriate materials in response to partner requests, emerging opportunities, and evolving context.



Growing our community engagement initiatives



University-wide engagement

Strengthen connections across UIC, UIUC, and UIS to advance cannabis equity research and foster interdisciplinary partnerships.



Build relationships with CBOs across Illinois

Targeted engagement with community-based organizations statewide, building authentic, trust-driven partnerships rooted in local priorities.



Research spotlight series

Designed to showcase research within the University of Illinois, deepening understanding of CRI's mission, fostering transparency, and sparking collaboration across campuses.



Public research series

Designed to share research, invite dialogue, and spark collaboration across communities, welcoming the **general public**, colleagues from other universities, community partners, and policymakers.



Community-guided internships

Create CRI-supported internships within CBOs, boosting local capacity and connecting grassroots priorities with statewide cannabis research and education.



Geographic equity

Extend engagement into new rural, suburban, and urban communities, ensuring regional diversity and inclusion of historically excluded groups.

Advancing equity-centered research through engagement

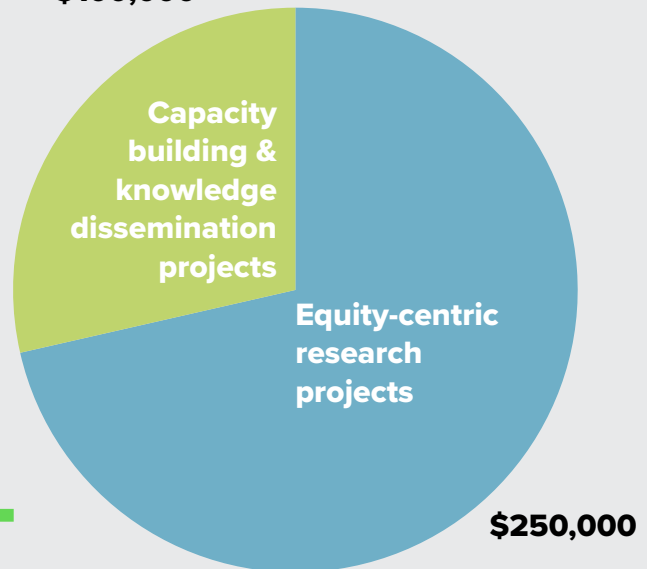
Listening sessions will continue in year two, including a larger in-person convening in Springfield. These listening sessions aim to refine research priorities and recruit members for the Community Advisory Council (CAC), ensuring representation across multiple sectors, interest groups, and geographic regions of Illinois.

The CHS team and the CAC will co-create a new seed grant funding pathway that solicits proposals from partnerships of community organizations and academic researchers across Illinois.

Two types of proposals will be requested: 1) innovative equity-centric research projects that address significant knowledge gaps related to the effects of legal cannabis in Illinois; and 2) community-academic partnerships that support capacity building and knowledge dissemination throughout the state. Both types of proposals must include a community collaborator; research proposals that include an early career researcher will be prioritized.

Seed grant funding for year 2

\$100,000



With CAC approval, we will allocate \$350,000 as follows:

Equity-centric research projects: \$250,000

- \$200,000 for projects led by teams of researchers and community-based organizations.
 - \$25,000-\$50,000 per project
- \$50,000 for projects led by graduate students.
 - \$5,000-\$10,000 per project.

Capacity building and knowledge dissemination projects: \$100,000

- Potential funding areas may include supporting internships within community organizations, funds for academic institutions to host speakers in classes, and funds for academic institutions and/or community organizations to host education sessions for public and practitioners.

Creating experiential learning opportunities

CRI is committed to offering experiential learning opportunities for that center the student experience, provide mentorship, and create space for peer-to-peer learning.



Non-lab, statewide cohort model

We will develop and pilot a year-long model that places interns in community-based organizations across the state, working as a cohort to explore one question/issue with the flexibility to adapt to the local context. The final model will be co-created with CBOs using a framework to set program parameters.



Lab-based opportunities

Based on student and staff feedback from Summer 2025 Cohort Zero, CRI will explore capacity to offer two tracks: a longer internship that includes rotations through other aspects of CRI that connect to the lab work (9-12 months), and a summer intensive experience focused on foundational lab skills (8 weeks).



Community college opportunities

We are conducting a needs assessment to explore how CRI can best support community colleges and, based on preliminary outreach, anticipate offering an experiential learning opportunity. The final offering will be guided by what we learn from the needs assessment.



Supporting cannabis education in community colleges

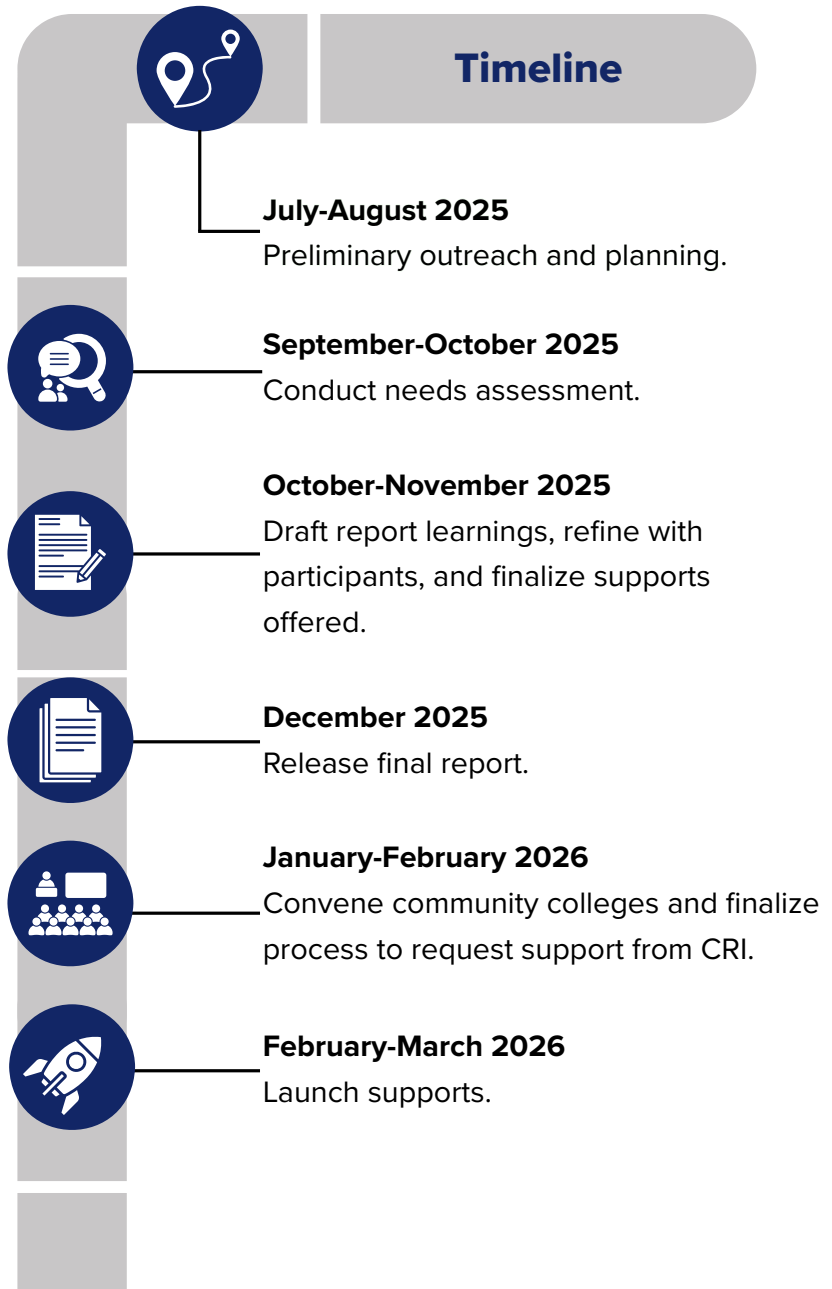
The CRTA authorized the Cannabis Vocational Training Pilot Program and included a provision for repeal on July 01, 2026 that requires a report be provided by December 31, 2025.

Currently, 12 community colleges in Illinois offer cannabis-related programs that result in a certificate or associates degree.

CRI is charged with supporting the community college ecosystem in IL and we are conducting a needs assessment (NA) to inform the types of support and technical assistance we may provide in these areas:

- Static menu of supports that community colleges can request from CRI
- Experiential learning opportunities for community college students
- Facilitating peer support and learning opportunities
- Faculty supports and learning opportunities

We're applying an iterative and participatory approach to determine the engagement methods, ensure materials and recommendations reflect participant needs, and determine the final technical assistance options CRI offers.



Advancing laboratory research

CRI secured a hemp cultivation license that enables us to conduct work with raw plant material for research projects. With this ability, Director Gaudino is pursuing partnerships and funding for lab-based studies, with a particular focus on non-human consumption and the non-intoxicating aspects of hemp. Below are the projects CRI is exploring:

Molecular & biomedical research



Options to fund an economic impact assessment of the Illinois hemp market to determine the most promising paths to a robust local ecosystem in a way that leverages opportunities beyond human consumption.



Targeted sequencing of terpene, cannabinoid, and flavonoid genes to support future projects.



Developing 3D protein modeling approach to better understand potential effects of different cannabis varieties.



Expanding on existing genetic assays that can be used to accurately characterize or identify hemp and cannabis cultivars.



Exploring impacts of cannabinoids on sickle cell disease and cancer with partners at UIC and Northern Illinois University.

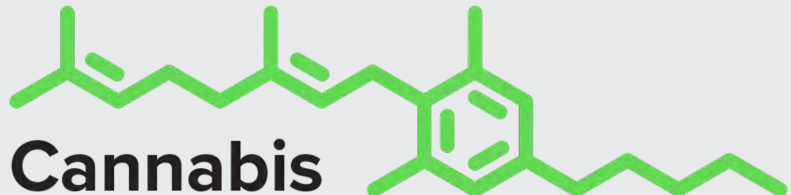


Growing with gratitude

We are grateful for IDHS' partnership as we embark on the adventure to launch CRI. The journey takes us down a non-linear path in an area that is complex and nuanced, spans many disciplines, and is set within the legacy of federal and state regulations that imposed harsh criminal penalties and impede scientific research.

Our year two journey continues as we navigate evolving federal frameworks and funding priorities, while building research partnerships and seeking funding to grow our research portfolio. At the same time, we'll be busy launching the Advisory Committee this fall, engaging with community colleges, piloting experiential learning opportunities, and opening community-guided research seed funding.

As we grow amidst the federal uncertainty, we ground ourselves in gratitude for the partnership and support of IDHS. We look forward to sharing our progress next year!



Cannabis Research Institute



DISCOVERY PARTNERS INSTITUTE
PART OF THE UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS SYSTEM

Curious about what's next?

Email us at csanso2@uillinois.edu,
scan the QR code, or
visit go.illinois.edu/CRI to discover
programs, events, and ways to
collaborate.



**Your voice can shape the future of
cannabis research.**

Funding

Funding for Cannabis Research Institute and this report was provided by the Illinois Department of Human Services, Division of Behavioral Health & Recovery through an intergovernmental agreement with the Board of Trustees of the University of Illinois.

Suggested Citation

Gaudino R, Laidley Q, Sansone C. From seed to social impact: 2025 Annual report. Cannabis Research Institute, Discovery Partners Institute, University of Illinois System; 2025.
<https://dpi.uillinois.edu/applied-research/cannabis-research-institute/annualreport25>

Photography Credits

Brock DuPont on Unsplash — page 19
Fred Zwicky / Board of Trustees of
University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign — page 9
Jenny Fontaine / University of Illinois Board of Trustees — page 3
Mike Rivera / Mike Rivera Photo — page 7
Quetzalli Laidley / Cannabis Research Institute — pages 4, 16, 17, 23
UIC Creative & Digital Services — page 14
University of Illinois Board of Trustees — pages 20, 21, 25