Approved by the Board of Trustees

January 23, 2025

**10**

Board Meeting

January 23, 2025

# AWARD HONORARY DEGREE, URBANA

**Action:** Award Honorary Degree

**Funding:** No New Funding Required

The University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign Senate has nominated Thomas J. Burrell for conferral of honorary degree award at the Commencement exercises in May 2025. A biographical sketch follows. The chancellor, University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, and vice president, University of Illinois System, recommends approval of this nomination.

Thomas J. Burrell, founder, Burrell Communications Group– the honorary degree award of Doctor of Humane Letters

Thomas Burrell is the founder of Burrell Communications Group and one of the most recognizable African Americans in the history of the advertising industry. He was born and spent his professional life in Chicago, Illinois, moving from the South Side of Chicago to the heights of the advertising industry. Burrell is also legally blind, but, despite his significant visual impairment, he thrived in the world of advertising.

Burrell is unquestionably a pioneer in the field of advertising. He created an approach to advertising, “Positive Realism”, that is still utilized today in the field. In doing so, he helped to normalize the image of African Americans in advertising. As an entrepreneur and advertising creative, he also created an agency that provided an entry point into the industry for hundreds of people. Moreover, his ideas and his agency have contributed much to the Chicago advertising and business community.

Burrell has been elected to the American Advertising Federation Hall of Fame, one of the industry’s highest honors. He also received the Albert Lasker Award for Lifetime Achievement in Advertising and the Missouri Honor Medal for Distinguished Service in Journalism. In 2017, he became the first African American creative elected to the One Club Creative Hall of Fame. *Advertising Age* magazine named him to its “50 Who Made a Difference” and “Top 100 Advertising People” lists

The Board action recommended in this item complies in all material respects with applicable State and federal laws, University of Illinois *Statutes*, *The General Rules Concerning University Organization and Procedure*, and Board of Trustees policies and directives.

The executive vice president and vice president for academic affairs of the University of Illinois System concurs with this recommendation.

The president of the University of Illinois System recommends approval.