



**Northern Illinois  
University**

Office of the President

November 1, 2021

Dear Chair Wasowicz and Members of the Northern Illinois University (NIU) Board of Trustees:

I began last year's summary of accomplishments with an acknowledgment of the profound disruption experienced by NIU because of the global pandemic, and a sincere expression of appreciation for the resiliency of the university community in the face of great uncertainty and continually changing conditions. Twelve months later, as we emerge, reopen and reunite, I remain deeply grateful for the resourcefulness, courage and compassion of our university's students, faculty and staff, as well as the support of our Board of Trustees. NIU is moving forward on a positive trajectory despite the persistent social, economic and health impacts of COVID-19. My commitment to our beloved university is strong, and my husband and I have continued our annual practice of donating \$25,000 to support scholarships.

The past year demanded not only that we balance the immediacy of COVID management with more future-focused planning, but also that we acknowledge and accept the myriad ways that our operating environment has been permanently altered. This includes recognizing and addressing the trauma and setbacks experienced by members of our community over the past 20 months. The university's efforts to rise to these challenges are evident in what we have accomplished and the goals we are working toward. Below, I highlight our progress across six strategic themes: empowerment and shared responsibility; student recruitment, student success and student experience; academic excellence and curriculum innovation; diversity, equity and inclusion; research, scholarship artistry and engagement; and resource development and fiscal responsibility. I connect NIU's AY2020-21 (FY21) performance to the [goals we have established for AY2021-22 \(FY22\) where relevant](#).

**Empowerment and Shared Responsibility**

NIU senior leadership engaged internal and external expertise to help us overcome challenges associated with planning on multiple horizons, find new opportunities embedded in present circumstances and enhance our success at attaining annual and longer-term objectives. In this context, strategic partners that use research, technology and consulting to address obstacles within the education industry were engaged. They supported NIU efforts to prioritize initiatives focused on administrative efficiency and to resume multi-year planning.

Significant progress was made toward simplification of academic and administrative processes and workflows in several areas prioritized by the university community. In the academic setting, strides were made to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of classroom scheduling, academic

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program review and assessment of student learning. Additionally, the policies historically maintained in the Academic Policies and Procedures Manual (APPM) are undergoing significant modification with appropriate policies made available through the Policy Library and the goal of retiring the APPM. In the administrative context, there has been headway automating the processing of additional pay, reimagining student billing and modernizing post-award grants management and accounting. These efforts have had positive impacts on our students and employees.

I am particularly pleased with the instances where campus-wide collaboration powered change. To inform our administrative efficiency project, feedback was solicited from more than 80 employees across the university to help identify existing time-consuming, paper-based processes that if automated or digitized would enable staff and faculty to spend their time on more fruitful efforts. Seventy potential projects were identified. A cross-functional team then narrowed down the list to 21 and prioritized these high-impact projects. We have completed moving the submission of student financial aid forms to an automated process that increases security, makes the financial aid application process more accessible to students and their families and enhances efficiency in the Financial Aid and Scholarship Office by greatly reducing the amount of staff effort devoted to document-processing. Most of the other Tier 1 projects are well underway with half already in the execution phase.

Campus-wide collaboration also drove the productivity of the [Remote Working/Flexible Scheduling Task Force](#). Members reflected on lessons learned from COVID-19 and resulting conditions, mined internal NIU experiences, collected models from external resources and offered recommendations for NIU operations moving forward. The guiding principles developed by the group embody Huskie core values and include prioritizing students' needs and service to students; promoting flexibility to enhance the recruitment, retention, health, well-being and engagement of a diverse and talented workforce; ensuring fairness and equity among employees; and ensuring or strengthening operational effectiveness and efficiency. Currently, the task force recommendations are being implemented as we revise the university's human resources policies to expand work-from-home options to be more modern and inclusive.

The work described is ongoing defined in the AY2021-22 (FY22) university goals and completion will happen over the course of the next several years. Other multiyear initiatives that progressed this year and are represented in next year's goals include design and construction of the Health Informatics Technology Center, planning and launch of NIU's comprehensive strategic fundraising campaign and delivery of a revised Strategic Enrollment Management (SEM) plan.

### **Student Recruitment, Student Success and Student Experience**

Guided by our [2019 Strategic Enrollment Management \(SEM\) Plan](#), NIU developed and introduced new programs and strategies designed to make an NIU degree even more accessible, equitable and affordable, such as test-free admission and merit scholarship processes, the Huskie Pledge and Rockford Promise programs, as well as the elimination of domestic out-of-state tuition premiums. Moreover, in AY2020-21 (FY21), NIU continued to collaborate with committed partners in support of academic equity planning, including the [Partnership for College Completion](#), [the Equity Working Group for Black Student Access and Success in Illinois Higher Education](#), [the Illinois Board of Higher Education \(IBHE\)](#) and the [Higher Learning Commission](#).

**Your Future. Our Focus.**

The positive impact is reflected in growing numbers of new and high-achieving students. For Fall 2021, the freshman total of 2,285 is 325 students more than the original SEM plan target (1,960), and the average high school GPA of the Fall 2021 freshman class is 3.34, the second highest for an entering freshman class at NIU in 10 years. Furthermore, for the first time in recent years, NIU enrollment of U.S. students from outside of Illinois exceeded 1,000.

Disappointingly, even though NIU made significant gains in the size of its freshman class and is experiencing other highly positive enrollment trends, the university experienced a modest decrease in its overall Fall 2021 enrollment, largely attributable to pandemic-related challenges. Switches in learning modalities (online, in-person, hybrid) and technology deficiencies, along with financial, time-management and personal stresses brought on by the pandemic, made it challenging for our students, particularly freshmen and first-generation students, to stay focused on their studies and engage with support networks designed to help them succeed. Retention of first-year students dipped about 5 percentage points below the pre-pandemic level. These struggles of NIU first-year students reflected nationwide trends.

To respond to the disruptions introduced by COVID-19, the university is revising our original Strategic Enrollment Management (SEM) Plan (2019-23) to ensure that the proposed tactics and activities continue to support our overarching enrollment and equity goals. And, we have already taken steps to help with undergraduate retention. For example, the university resumed the majority of in-person classes while expanding and enhancing tutoring, advising and student financial-planning services. We have also increased our focus on enhancing the student experience outside the classroom. For instance, we have increased the resources available to support high-impact programming by the cultural diversity centers for all NIU students, and we are working toward reducing barriers experienced by students who plan and host social events. To specifically address adverse COVID impacts on persistence, NIU plans to stay in touch with first-year students who first enrolled in 2020 and did not re-enroll in 2021 to offer our continued encouragement and assistance. These actions and others are needed to respond to our dynamic operating environment, to continue to improve outcomes for all students and to respect our mission, vision and values.

Notably, when we established the [AY2020-21 \(FY21\) enrollment goals](#), we acknowledged that those multi-year plans might need to be updated to ensure that our strategies, tactics and activities continue to support the three overarching SEM goals: 1) strengthen our distinctive identity as a public university that combines educational opportunity with student engagement; 2) achieve student enrollment that respects our mission and values while positioning NIU for fiscal sustainability; 3) support equitable access, opportunity and success for students from diverse backgrounds where diversity is defined broadly. To respond to the disruptions introduced by COVID-19, the university is revising our original Strategic Enrollment Management (SEM) Plan (2019-23) to ensure that the proposed tactics and activities continue to support our overarching enrollment and equity goals. The university goals for AY2021-22 (FY22) project that a revised SEM Plan for 2023-25 will be delivered to campus in February 2022, and the NIU Board of Trustees will be updated at its March 2022 meeting.

Moving forward, we will continue to grow and stabilize NIU enrollment by attracting new students and improving retention rates for continuing students, and we will maintain our focus on closing

**Your Future. Our Focus.**

equity gaps in retention rates and graduation rates. We will also track social mobility outcomes by monitoring not only the graduation rate of Pell grant recipients but also the ratio of the graduation rate of Pell grant recipients to the graduation rate of the overall student body. In addition, we will increase our focus on understanding and addressing post-graduation equity gaps.

### **Academic Excellence and Curriculum Innovation**

The COVID-19 pandemic and the accompanying social and economic turmoil have underscored our need to provide our undergraduate and graduate students with academic programs and experiences that are relevant, inclusive, transdisciplinary and integrated. Current events have also highlighted the ways that working adults have been left behind by higher education and have inspired discussions at NIU about how to provide expanded degree opportunities for adult learners and place-bound students using the technology and experience acquired over the course of the past 20+ months. This past year, we began working to realize these aspirations, recognizing that achieving our objectives would be a multi-year endeavor. Our efforts to date are summarized below.

In AY2020-21 (FY21), we embarked on an ambitious effort to identify and begin removing structural barriers that inhibit transdisciplinary scholarship and discourage curricular innovation and experimentation at NIU. Appropriately, this initiative was faculty-led with contributions from not only two dedicated task forces appointed by the provost but also from an active subcommittee of the Faculty Senate that is focused on social justice. Our university community understands that there is overlap between the systems that discourage academic innovation and those that promote inequitable outcomes for faculty from marginalized communities. Moreover, we recognize that our students, faculty and society suffer when inflexible hierarchies and metrics are used either to devalue transdisciplinary research, applied and community-based works or to dismiss scholarship on race, ethnicity and gender. At the same time, we realize that barriers and inequities did not emerge overnight, and that thoughtful dialogue and consideration are necessary to empower champions and implement change. In the context of a multi-year effort, I am encouraged by the ongoing faculty deliberations. Actionable recommendations are expected to be shared this academic year, and the faculty's suggestions about how to remove existing barriers and promote transdisciplinary scholarship and curricular innovation will be used to construct a plan and timeline for achieving the desired outcomes.

The past year also marked the beginning of a multi-year effort to strengthen graduate programs and enhance the graduate student experience. In this context, NIU has developed guiding principles for graduate education. In addition, an iterative process was designed to assess graduate programs with collaboration among deans, graduate faculty and the Office of the Provost. Specifically, in AY2020-21 (FY21), a set of metrics was developed and used to gather program data and stimulate discussions about the graduate student experience. Reports from the colleges are due to the executive vice president and provost in February 2022.

As NIU seeks to improve the quality of programs offered to our current undergraduate and graduate students, we are also working to leverage recent technology enhancements to expand degree opportunities for adult learners and place-bound students. The university is actively researching the numbers and needs of students who might benefit from streamlined pathways to

**Your Future. Our Focus.**

credentials and degrees, including those who have left NIU within the past five years and were within 30 hours of degree completion, as well as those who have never attended NIU but live in the service area. We are also exploring the ways that external partnerships could support an expanded commitment to providing educational opportunities to non-traditional and place-bound students who wish to pursue those opportunities while balancing employment, childcare or other responsibilities. This commitment is seen in our endorsement and active participation in the Illinois Early Childhood Access Consortium for Equity, as well as in the work we have undertaken internally to understand and respond to the realities of the adult degree-completion market. We will continue to update the Board of Trustees about our progress.

### **Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion**

NIU is committed to diversity, equity, inclusion, belonging and social justice. Those traits are woven throughout our mission, vision and values; underpin our efforts to foster a welcoming university community; and inspire us to go beyond to identify, address and eradicate inequitable practices. Our work is summarized in an [active webpage that highlights NIU's diversity, equity and inclusion goals, engagement opportunities, action plans and progress](#). Highlights from AY2020-21 (FY21) are detailed below.

Last year, the university intentionally expanded social justice education training and programs to support an inclusive environment conducive to the success of all students, faculty and staff. Our efforts emphasized increasing faculty and staff participation and building a belonging community in DeKalb. In this context, total participation in programs and workshops increased by 62% and employee participation more than doubled (+111%).

There was also a focus on mentoring diverse faculty as the university supported new and expanded initiatives. The Office of the Executive Vice President and Provost continued to support faculty mentoring initiatives, including the ongoing work of the senior faculty mentor (now associate vice provost for Faculty Mentoring and Diversity) to launch a university-wide faculty mentoring program that supports all faculty with an emphasis on supporting faculty of color and fostering a faculty climate that values diversity, equity and inclusion. There was also continued university support for the initiatives designed to diversify the professoriate in our state, most notably the sixth annual Preparing Future Faculty Conference for Graduate Students of Color that was held in February 2021. Additionally, through the collaborative efforts of the divisions of Academic Affairs and Academic Diversity Equity and Inclusion, plans were developed for a Faculty Academy on Cultural Competence and Equity (FACCE) that includes monthly professional development seminars and a week-long summer institute. A partnership with the Association of College and University Educators (ACUE) provided training in inclusive and active-learning pedagogies to faculty.

The concept of “belonging” was discussed in a community conversation with Dr. John Powell, an internationally recognized expert in the areas of civil rights, civil liberties, structural racism, housing, poverty and democracy. NIU, the City of DeKalb and more than 40 members of the community helped to plan the conversation, which included more than 500 community members. Subsequently, a \$30,000 Healing Illinois grant from the Illinois Department of Human Services and a \$5,000 contribution from the DeKalb Community Foundation were received and directed to

**Your Future. Our Focus.**

work being done collaboratively between NIU, the City of DeKalb, Family Service Agency, the Ellwood Museum and the DeKalb County History Center to advance racial healing.

NIU's overall commitment, progress and accomplishments have been recognized nationally through receipt of three awards:

[Great Colleges to Work For](#)-Category of Diversity, Inclusion and Belonging. This recognition category is reserved for program participants demonstrating an institutionalized commitment to diversity, as reported through the experiences of faculty and staff. It is based on measures of individual experiences of inclusion and belonging, as well as measures of the impact of institutional diversity policies and procedures at the individual level.

[2021 Higher Education Excellence in Diversity \(HEED\) Award from INSIGHT Into Diversity magazine](#). The INSIGHT Into Diversity HEED Award, open to all colleges and universities across the U.S. and Canada, measures an institution's level of achievement and intensity of commitment in regard to broadening diversity and inclusion on campus through initiatives, programs and outreach; student recruitment, retention and completion; and hiring practices for faculty and staff. NIU was among 101 award recipients in 2021.

[NIU selected as a Truth, Racial Healing & Transformation Campus Center](#). Established in partnership with the Association of American Colleges & Universities (AAC&U) and hosted by colleges and universities, Truth, Racial Healing & Transformation (TRHT) Campus Centers pursue the shared goal of preparing the next generation of leaders and thinkers to break down racialized practices and to dismantle the belief in a "hierarchy of human value." NIU was among 19 institutions selected this year and joins a total of only 49 such centers at institutions across the United States. Plans for the NIU TRHT Center are detailed in the AY2021-22 (FY22) University Goals.

### **Research, Scholarship, Artistry and Engagement**

In AY2020-21 (FY21), the university committed to launching a strategic development team (SDT) for the purpose of advancing institutional research, artistry and engagement priorities. The goal was to improve institutional synergy by promoting higher levels of collaboration and more intentional alignment of research, engagement and resource development. The vision was realized, and our expectations were surpassed by the success of the newly formed team comprised of staff members from the divisions of Research and Innovation Partnerships; Outreach, Engagement, and Regional Development; University Advancement; and the NIU Foundation.

As noted in [the February 18, 2021 report to the Research, Innovation, Legal and Legislative Affairs Committee of the Board](#), the work of the SDT is grounded in the broader university planning and prioritization and underpinned by NIU's mission, vision and values; strategic action planning framework; and annual and multi-year goals. This ensures that emerging opportunities and concepts are contextualized within the whole of ecosystem including planning bodies, existing programs and efforts, and early stage or planned programs.

During its first year, the SDT was successful at establishing its processes, expanding its network and generating high-potential opportunities for both the near and long term. For example, the

**Your Future. Our Focus.**

team discussed and reviewed proposals previously submitted in 2019-2020 for faculty-led emerging research initiatives, immediate opportunities for collaboration with external partners in support of the [Northern Illinois Center for Community Sustainability](#) (NICCS) and long-term possibilities for the development of west campus. Notably, these deliberations led to two successful NICCS-related proposals for Community Project Funding that have been sponsored by [Representative Kinzinger](#) and [Senator Durbin](#). Work by the SDT also informed the transdisciplinary scholarship initiatives related environmental justice, STEM education and artificial intelligence/machine learning that are featured in AY2021-22 (FY22) university goals.

It is important to note that the achievements of the SDT rest heavily on the personnel supported and expertise created by NIU's ability to compete for external funding. NIU's sponsored funding portfolio has steadily increased over the past five years and, this past year, external funding achieved a 10-year high. This is a tremendous accomplishment for the faculty and staff who secured the awards under challenging circumstances, and an advantage for our students who gain distinctive research and experiential learning opportunities.

### **Resource Development and Fiscal Responsibility**

NIU is committed to making resource allocation decisions that are academically responsive and fiscally responsible, and this philosophy influenced decisions about our finances, technology and physical footprint during AY2020-21 (FY21). In this context, collaboration and communication across the university community, including the NIU Board of Trustees, promoted stewardship and responsible management of resources during an unprecedented time. The university leadership engaged the board in a quarterly process to provide updates on the budget and notable changes in assumptions. In addition, NIU leaders communicated transparently with the campus community about our dynamic financial situation, and the priority assigned to the health, safety and well-being of students, faculty and staff.

Budget: The university stayed steadfast in our commitment to refining and implementing the multi-year budget and financial planning process; however, this looked different as the result of COVID. We focused on making decisions with the best available information and prioritizing actions in support of health and safety, while preserving flexibility. This was reflected in our partnerships; our purchases of equipment, materials and services; and the allocation of our limited financial resources to student emergency assistance and technology support for teaching, learning and working. Still, there were specific actions, such as refinancing of the Series 2011 CHF Bonds, taken to provide NIU with flexibility in the transition back to multi-year planning. Notably, this successful refinancing will yield \$76.8 million in savings for NIU without extending the maturity, and of that total savings, about \$26.5 million will be realized between FY22 and FY25.

The university finished FY21 with a deficit of \$925,000 – a significant improvement over the original budget, which was drafted in a highly uncertain environment created by the COVID-19 pandemic and projected a deficit of \$32.1 million. This positive outcome was possible because of actions taken across our university community. I deeply appreciate the sacrifices endured by members of the university community as we delayed non-essential expenditures, including non-critical capital projects, and implemented a hiring chill, a voluntary retirement program for staff and voluntary salary reductions for senior leaders. The receipt of Higher Education Emergency

**Your Future. Our Focus.**

Relief Funds (HEERF) also made a significant difference; absent this federal relief, NIU's year-end performance would have decreased by \$15.4 million.

As noted in the AY2021-22 (FY22) goals, after a difficult period of declining resources, fiscal deficits and operational challenges, including the COVID pandemic, NIU is ready to begin a growth trajectory that reflects additional student success, expanded research impact and enhanced community partnerships and engagement. The successful bond refinance and remaining HEERF funding will allow us to invest in initiatives that support a sustainable future, but these funds are not a permanent solution to our budgetary concerns. Moving forward will require courageous leadership, organizational alignment and hard choices as we rescale our fiscal model to match public support and revenue available from tuition, fees and other sources.

Technology: Classroom and communications technology was upgraded in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. These enhancements support both in-person and remote learning and working capabilities. Moving forward, they can be leveraged to create attractive multi-use spaces and to reduce time-consuming, error-prone, paper-based business processes. For example, Academic Affairs fully implemented 25Live for classroom scheduling. With a few exceptions for specialized spaces, all classes are now scheduled through this software. This capability has reduced the time spent by office personnel in manually scheduling classrooms, improved efficiency in the use of classroom space and allowed us to deploy technology to classrooms efficiently by targeting the most-used classrooms first. Academic Affairs will continue to enhance the data and information in 25Live to add capabilities and extend the use of this platform for scheduling of non-classroom spaces by other campus constituents. And, as noted in the AY2021-22 (FY22) university goals, we will also advance other technology planning priorities including learning spaces technology deployment; Wi-Fi expansion and upgrades; and the telephony project.

Physical Footprint: The university recognizes that space is costly both to build and to maintain, and we continue to be challenged by a growing demand for repairs and modernization. NIU is aligning investment and space objectives by pursuing opportunities to sell surplus property, directing investment into multi-use spaces and striving to modify space use and footprint without increasing square footage. Specific examples include the planned sale of the Hoffman Estates outreach center and the coupling of the Health Informatics Technology Center construction to the demolition of Lincoln Hall. Our intentions to balance investment in new construction, capital renewal and modernization, and to align our physical footprint with evolving demands and priorities, are reflected in the university goals for AY2021-22 (FY22). An update on our facilities planning efforts will be presented to the Board of Trustees this spring.

Philanthropy: Although progress fell short of the overall \$20 million fundraising goal with \$15.4 million raised, important progress was made in FY21. Year over year, individual giving increased 86%; corporate and business giving increased 160%; organizational giving increased 87%; and foundation giving increased 26%. In fact, total new gifts and pledges from these sources together increased 92.5%, with a fundraising shortfall realized only in the category of planned giving. Given the pandemic's adverse impact on meetings, events and celebrations, and the unanticipated level of staff illness and turnover experienced by the NIU Foundation, the results are encouraging and consistent with growing donor support for the university. Planning for NIU's comprehensive fundraising campaign has moved forward with key milestones in the multiyear process achieved on or ahead of time. A full report to the NIU Board of Trustees is anticipated in February 2022.

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**Looking Forward:**

As NIU president, I am committed to driving progress and to ensuring that our university will continue to serve students and deliver on its mission, vision and values for many years to come. I appreciate and am humbled by the continued support of NIU's Board of Trustees, as well as that of our faculty, staff, students, alumni, donors and partners. I am confident that, in the face of myriad challenges and opportunities, we will continue to move this amazing university forward. We are Huskies – and Huskies never quit!

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Lisa C. Freeman". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal flourish at the end.

Lisa C. Freeman, D.V.M., Ph.D.  
President, Northern Illinois University

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Northern Illinois  
University

*Board of Trustees*

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December 3, 2021

**MEMORANDUM**

**TO:** Lisa Freeman, President  
Northern Illinois University

**FROM:** Eric Wasowicz, Board Chair  
Rita Athas, Vice Chair  
Montel Gayles, Board Secretary  
Dennis Barsema  
John Butler  
Veronica Herrero  
Robert Pritchard  
Jacob Sommer

**Subject: Annual Presidential Evaluation**

This memorandum contains commentary by the members of the NIU Board of Trustees concerning the goals outlined by you for Academic Year 2020-21/Fiscal Year 2021 (FY21). This correspondence, along with a self-appraisal of presidential performance in the form of a letter from you to the Board, will be posted on the Board of Trustee's website (<https://www.niu.edu/board/>) and shall collectively serve as a written record of your performance evaluation for FY21.

The Board finds that your overall performance in FY21 met or exceeded the vast majority of your goals. We agree with your characterization of the demands of the past year: that the university community must balance the continuing need to respond to the global pandemic with a commitment to future-focused planning, and that we must acknowledge and accept the myriad ways that our operating environment has been permanently altered. We can confidently affirm that NIU has gone beyond managing a crisis during the past year. The university has resumed its multiyear planning, continued to serve students in the way they need to be served, made decisions conscious of a changing operating environment, and built on our commitment to diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging across the broad range of activities that – taken as a whole – point its systems toward a sustainable and exciting future. We join you in expressing appreciation for the resiliency of the NIU community, recognizing the sacrifices of an institution experiencing the multifaceted impacts of COVID-19 and the progress made across the six strategic themes outlined below.

**Empowerment and Shared Responsibility**

The challenges faced in navigating the university through a pandemic are close to the same magnitude of those faced in emerging from one. With your leadership, the university was able to pivot from crisis response back to multiyear planning and a focus on future thinking. We recognize the importance of empowerment and shared leadership as a means to learn, innovate, perform, and adapt in response to a rapidly changing operating environment. The collaboration and progress made

possible through empowerment and shared leadership demonstrates that the goals you established for this area were met or exceeded in FY21.

You successfully prepared the university leadership to address particular challenges by seeking both internal and external resources and partnerships. You were able to align decision making and keep annual and longer-term objectives in mind. This was accomplished through senior leadership participation in a “Crisis Thinking Workshop,” use of the EAB Project Prioritization Framework, and resumption of an emphasis on multiyear planning. In several areas prioritized by the university community, significant progress was made to identify, select, and utilize the appropriate mix of internal and external resources and partnerships. Importantly, in what has become the hallmark of your presidency, the processes and discussions were open, inclusive, and highly collaborative.

The result of these initiatives were tangible deliverables, including prioritized ranking of university wide process automation and digitization, and other multiyear initiatives that progressed this year and are represented in next year’s goals (the design and construction of the Health Informatics Technology Center, planning for NIU’s comprehensive strategic fundraising campaign, development of a revised Strategic Enrollment Management (SEM) plan, and the Remote Working/Flexible Scheduling Task Force). The size and scope of these endeavors are significant. Some are complete and others are in various phases on the way to finalization. The multiyear horizon of these initiatives is completely understandable given the many challenges facing the university. However, the work accomplished in this year has already had a significant impact and must be recognized as a major accomplishment.

In line with this goal, we observe an impressive number and depth of practices, policies and procedures that were transformed, simplified, or eliminated. While not all of these initiatives attract enthusiastic public attention, they are high impact projects that keep the university moving forward and involve impressive levels of campus-wide collaboration, learning, and innovation. The progress made to date is outstanding. Those involved in these initiatives should be recognized for their diligence and dedication and commended for recognizing improvement opportunities across all aspects of the university’s workings.

### **Student Recruitment, Student Success, and Student Experience**

Overall, the goals established for this area have been met or exceeded. Although, the university did not achieve student enrollment numbers equal to or greater than the Strategic Enrollment Management (SEM) plan (2019-23) target number of 17,005, NIU only experienced a modest 3% decrease in population to 16,234 students. This slight decrease, as you have noted, is largely attributable to pandemic-related challenges. Similarly, a decrease in retention percentages of NIU’s first-year students (overall, 5 percentage points below the pre-pandemic level) is reflective of nationwide trends. However, we are still encouraged by the positive trends that can be seen in almost every category of new student. The number of freshman students in 2021 is up 12% – the largest year-over-year percentage increase in the freshman class in more than two decades – and this class is the most diverse in NIU’s history. While the number of new transfer and new Law School students generally remained flat compared to 2020, the number of new master’s level and professional degree students increased by 38%, and new doctoral students increased by 22%.

The growing number of new and high-achieving students follows the implementation of new programs and strategies designed to make an NIU degree even more accessible, equitable, and affordable. These include test-free admission and merit scholarship processes, the Huskie Pledge and

Rockford Promise programs, and the elimination of domestic out-of-state tuition premiums. For the first time in recent years, NIU enrollment of U.S. students from outside Illinois exceeded 1,000 (likely an achievement directly related to the new domestic rate structure). From 2017 to 2021, the number of out-of-state domestic students has increased by more than 50% and the NIU student population now represents all 50 U.S. states.

We are very pleased to see the steps the university has already taken to help with undergraduate retention and to offer NIU's continued encouragement and assistance to 2020's first-year students who did not re-enroll in 2021. And, we look forward to revisions the university will be making to the SEM Plan (2019-23) to account for the disruptions introduced by COVID-19 and to ensure that the proposed tactics and activities continue to support NIU's overarching enrollment and equity goals. These are appropriate actions in response to a changing operating environment.

### **Academic Excellence and Curriculum Innovation**

Overall, and considering the continued challenges to university and faculty life at NIU during the COVID-19 pandemic, the goals you outlined for academic excellence and curriculum innovation have been met or exceeded. We are excited about the ambitious effort to identify and begin removing structural barriers that inhibit transdisciplinary scholarship and discourage curricular innovation and experimentation (and achieve more equitable outcomes for faculty who are BIPOC). Progress of this effort is evident in the formation of the Task Force on Transdisciplinary Scholarship (noting its discussions in the Spring of 2021 continued work into AY2021-22), the formation of the Task Force on Curriculum Innovation (noting its activities in the same timeframe), and formal multiyear planning discussions among senior and academic leaders over the 2021 summer that led to goals in this area for AY2021-22. We recognize the interdependence of the work of these Task Forces and larger planning discussions, the potential for significant reform of curricular offerings and reward systems, as well as curricular efficiencies, that can emerge from shared leadership and collaboration in these areas.

We observe related achievement under the auspices of the Division of Academic Affairs to strengthen graduate programs and enhance the graduate student experience, noting efforts to analyze graduate student experience, develop graduate program data for each college, develop Guiding Principles for Graduate Education (including a focus on minimum rates of pay for graduate assistants and other considerations that might elevate NIU's graduate degree offerings), and examine – toward a longer-term reform initiative – the graduate student experience from recruitment through career placement (including special emphasis on the experience of BIPOC and international graduate students).

Finally, we are thrilled to observe the way NIU is leveraging lessons learned about course modalities during COVID-19 in a manner that have the potential to bring to life innovative degree and certificate programs that enable timely completion (noting particularly programming geared toward the incumbent early childhood education workforce and pathways for paraprofessionals to obtain professional educator licensure in special education), identify target student audiences for the proposed programs, and leverage recent technology enhancements initiated in response to the COVID-19 pandemic to provide expanded degree opportunities.

As collaboration in these areas continues to take shape, we want to clearly encourage those leading in these areas and acknowledge the importance of this work for the impact it will have on the university's ability to attract and retain excellent faculty and the quality and attractiveness of NIU's

undergraduate and graduate programs. Recognizing this as a multiyear initiative, we stand ready to assist in sustaining and escalating the pace of these improvements.

### **Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion**

Overall, the goals outlined in this area have been met, and in many respects exceeded. Under the leadership of you and many others who have devoted themselves to diversity, equity, and inclusion across a broad range of programs, policies, and procedures, NIU has emerged as an exemplar within the Illinois higher education community. This is due to a commitment to diversity, equity, inclusion, belonging, and social justice across NIU's mission, vision, and values, and a body of practical initiatives that foster a welcoming university community, and inspire community members to identify, address and eradicate inequitable practices. An active webpage communicates the university's diversity, equity, and inclusion goals, engagement opportunities, action plans and progress.

In FY21, particular progress was made to expand social justice education (SJE) and training to include anti-racism training and the continued promotion of social justice topics and programs that convey NIU's values. SJE programs and workshops experienced a marked increase in participation and engaged 5,836 total participants representing an increase from 2020 of more than 2,231 participants. The Office of the Executive Vice President and Provost continued to support faculty mentoring initiatives and collaborative efforts of the divisions of Academic Affairs and Academic Diversity Equity and Inclusion have formed a new Faculty Academy on Cultural Competence and Equity.

In 2021, NIU also continued its efforts to increase the recruitment, hiring, retention and professional advancement of diverse faculty, staff, and administrators. Evidence of collaboration towards achieving this goal can be found in documented efforts, and deliberations of several active groups at NIU, that include but are not limited to the Presidential Commission on Race and Ethnicity, the Faculty Senate Personnel Committee, the Council of Deans, the college councils, and college senates. We also applaud NIU's support for the initiatives designed to diversify the professoriate in our state (particularly, Preparing Future Faculty Conference for Graduate Students of Color held in February 2021).

NIU's overall commitment, progress and accomplishments in diversity, equity, and inclusion have been recognized nationally (we note three awards cited in your evaluation materials) and have informed critical local conversations on belonging and racial healing. We continue to praise the creative and tireless efforts of NIU's senior leadership, faculty, staff, and students as they collectively advance a culture of diversity, equity, and inclusion throughout the university community.

### **Research, Scholarship, Artistry and Engagement**

As we hope is illustrated by the Board's regular consideration of the topic of research and innovation through the auspices of one of its standing committees, we consider NIU's standing as a national research university to be a critical element of its success. You have, over many years, expanded our understanding and appreciation of this aspect of university operations, faculty life, and student success. Regarding the specific goal listed under this category, it is arguably one of the most significant steps taken by the university this year. Our assessment is that this goal has been met or exceeded.

With your leadership, a team has been established from the divisions of RIPS, OERD, and University Advancement to link university expertise, networks, and philanthropy. This multi-unit approach crossing and uniting disciplines, donors, investors, and projects will insure that all aspects of research, scholarship, artistry, and engagement continue to thrive and accelerate. We are confident that the establishment of the strategic development team will improve institutional synergy by promoting higher levels of collaboration and more intentional alignment of research, engagement and resource development. Holding regular meetings focusing on current projects, issues, and with an eye to the future provides a heightened level of sophistication. You and the team are to be commended for the establishment of the strategic development team and its initial progress. This process will provide dividends to the university for years to come.

### **Resource Development and Fiscal Responsibility**

Overall, the goals in this area were met or exceeded. Despite a year of significant uncertainty due to the global pandemic, the university with your leadership worked extremely hard to achieve a nearly balanced budget for FY21. This financial result was a significant improvement over the \$32 million loss expected at the beginning of FY21. You and your leadership team managed the changing COVID-19 protocols, the millions of dollars in lost revenue potential from housing and events, and the increased spending on technology to support on-line learning, air filtration, enhanced cleaning protocols for NIU facilities, and other timely needs.

NIU leadership put the needs of the university first in developing a spending plan that reflected the challenges faced due to the pandemic, and then proceeded to spend almost \$30 million less than forecasted while maintaining a safe and healthy environment for faculty, staff, and students. Moreover, your leadership team with its multiyear budget and fiscal planning was successful in refinancing the Series 2011 CHF Bonds which yielded interest savings of over \$76 million for NIU, without extending the maturity date. A significant portion of that savings will be realized over the next 4 fiscal years. Your evaluation materials include other noteworthy achievements that impact the availability and prudent use of university resources, such as the successful implementation of “25Live” for classroom scheduling. The university realized improved efficiency in the use of classroom and facility space, and analysis of this data will assist the university in future decisions on classroom and facility usage and prioritization.

The university also studied and acted upon unused or surplus space and facilities. An example of this was the decision to declare the Hoffman Estates building as surplus and listing it for sale. Significant strides were also made in the planning for the new Health Informatics Technology Center, demolition of Lincoln Hall, and creation of a Community Food, Health and Education Center in collaboration with the DeKalb County Community Gardens.

Finally, although the NIU Foundation goal for fundraising was not met, \$15 million of a \$20 million goal was received during an extremely trying and difficult year due to the pandemic. Results were impacted by factors such as normal meetings and events being cancelled due to safety protocols and personnel dynamics in the Planned Giving area of funding. It is encouraging to note that the Foundation met or exceeded their goals in all other major giving categories which indicates strong donor support for the university. Significant planning also took place during the fiscal year to ready the university for an upcoming capital campaign. A comprehensive feasibility study report is anticipated in early 2022.

In the area of resource development and fiscal responsibility, we are aware that significant sacrifices have been made by personnel across the university. Adapting to the changing operating environment has and will continue to require, as you have stated, courageous leadership, organizational alignment, and hard choices, as we rescale our fiscal model to match public support and revenue available from tuition, fees and other sources. We are immensely grateful for the devotion of so many to the core functions of NIU, and we wish to reinforce your deep appreciation for the sacrifices endured by members of the university community. We are optimistic that NIU is well positioned to begin a growth trajectory, that a foundation is being laid for longer-term fiscal sustainability and responsible resource management.

## **Conclusion**

In summary, Academic Year 2020-21 (Fiscal Year 2021) was a complex year in the life of a university that is robustly pursuing opportunities in the context of a continuing public health disruption. With your leadership, the goals you established for yourself and the NIU community have been met or exceeded. In areas where more challenging aspirations were frustrated by continued disruptions introduced by COVID-19, you and many others within the NIU community responded with the highest level of leadership. Through collaboration and shared responsibility, goals were accomplished, thoughtful plans were constructed, and an exciting future regarding many aspects of the university were envisioned. Across all this activity, the university operated in accordance with its mission, vision, and values. During this time, you continued to function as a fearless advocate for the interests of NIU students, faculty, administration and staff, alumni, and local communities. We view you as a role model for your leadership team, and one of the most creative, imaginative, and hardworking presidents in the State of Illinois, and higher education community overall. We look forward to a productive and inspiring AY2021-22.

Forward, Together Forward!