



**Northern Illinois  
University**

Office of the President

November 7, 2022

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

Since the world shut down in March 2020, we have all been riding a roller coaster, with our climbs and falls punctuated by sharp, banked turns. The constant balance required to navigate profound economic and social change has been emotionally taxing and exhausting for everyone. In both 2020 and 2021, I began my annual summary of accomplishments not only by acknowledging the profound disruption produced by the global pandemic, but also by expressing deep appreciation for the resiliency of the university community in the face of great uncertainty and continually changing social and economic conditions. This past year, our students, faculty and staff continued to respond admirably as we emerged from a tumultuous period, reset and responded to conditions that we have not previously faced.

Like other institutions of higher education in Illinois and across the nation, NIU has faced increased challenges attracting and retaining talent. Aspects of our mission and constraints on our resources prevent us from mirroring what the corporate sector can offer employees. We are identifying and responding to opportunities for increased flexibility, collaboration and technology implementation, but we recognize that organizational change takes time.

Pandemic-related stresses caused students to lose focus and disengage from their classes and the support networks designed to help them succeed. NIU's first-year and overall undergraduate retention have not yet recovered to pre-pandemic levels. As noted below under Student Recruitment, Student Success and Student Experience, the university community has implemented a number of initiatives designed specifically to support student success, retention and persistence.

In this context, I am incredibly proud of the myriad ways that members of our university community have recognized that great change can bring great opportunity and embraced shared leadership. I remain deeply grateful for the resourcefulness, courage and compassion of NIU students, faculty and staff, as well as the support of our Board of Trustees. NIU is moving forward on a positive trajectory, and my husband and I are committed and proud to continue our annual practice of donating \$25,000 to support student scholarships.

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.

### **Empowerment and Shared Responsibility**

Shared leadership was a common thread throughout the AY2021-22 (FY22) university goals, along with a multiyear commitment to invest in professional development, access to information and team-based work. These aims align with NIU's [strategic action planning framework](#), which emphasizes supporting the development of leaders; communicating transparently and effectively; and creating a culture of shared responsibility. Shared leadership and campus-wide collaboration supported multiyear initiatives that were completed this past year, including those pursued in response to lasting COVID impacts on our operating environment. [NIU's Remote Work Policy](#) was revised to expand work-from-home options to be more modern and inclusive. Our original [Strategic Enrollment Management \(SEM\) Plan \(2019-23\)](#) was updated to address pandemic-related challenges for student recruitment and retention.

Importantly, shared leadership and shared governance continued to generate positive change at our university. Working together, we have developed new resources for members of the university community, including [new guidance and support](#) for anyone experiencing cyberbullying, and new professional development programs for [staff members](#). Moreover, we have committed to shared leadership, responsibility and accountability as we change our culture to support enhanced equity, transparency and sustainability through initiatives described in more detail below, including the transition to multiyear budgeting and the implementation of a shared equity leadership framework.

NIU is proud to have been recognized for a second consecutive year by [Great Colleges to Work For](#) in the category of Shared Governance. This recognition reflects our Huskie community's positive perceptions of the university's collaborative governance processes and decision-making, as well as the significant level of faculty and staff engagement. To celebrate and reward our employees for their innovation, collaboration and leadership, the university is working to increase the number and variety of recognition opportunities. Accordingly, I am delighted by your willingness to establish a [Board of Trustees Staff Excellence Award](#) to honor staff members who are instrumental in the success of our university. The new award is an appropriate companion to the previously established Board of Trustees Professorship.

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

NIU had continued success enrolling new freshmen as a direct result of the admissions policies and partnerships we have developed to make an NIU degree even more accessible, equitable and affordable. These include test-free admission and merit scholarship processes; the Huskie Pledge; Rockford Promise; and Hope Chicago. NIU saw its new freshman enrollment climb this fall by nearly 7% over the same time last year—the sixth straight year of growth in the size of the freshman class and the largest freshman class since 2014. These Huskies arrived with an impressive average high school GPA of 3.42, the highest average for new freshmen on record. The new freshman class is also the most diverse in university history with rising percentages of Asian and Latinx students, and strong representation among Black students. In addition, more than half are the first in their families to go to college. Total international student enrollment also rose from 743 students last fall to 966 students, a 30% hike and the highest international enrollment since 2018.

We are proud of the growing numbers of new, high-achieving students from diverse backgrounds, and also pleased at the early evidence of mounting student engagement. New and returning Huskies recognized the value of living on campus, and NIU Housing and Residential Services reported the highest occupancy rate since the fall of 2015. The University Honors

Program enrolled 283 freshmen—a 50% jump over last fall. Attendance at our Week of Welcome events consistently exceeded expectations.

Disappointingly, even though NIU made significant gains in the size of its first-year class and achieved a total enrollment in our established target range of 15,600 to 16,100, the university experienced a 3.6% drop in overall Fall 2022 enrollment. This modest slip from a year ago is largely attributable to impacts of the prolonged pandemic, including steep declines in the pipeline of community college students; pandemic related stresses on students' social, emotional and physical well-being; and a strong job market that might have enticed some students to delay their education. For a second year, retention of new first-year students was significantly lower than pre-pandemic. These struggles of NIU first-year students reflect nationwide trends.

Accordingly, across the university, we're taking many steps to support and engage our students, with a focus on alleviating barriers that hinder student success, retention and persistence. For example, we:

- Launched Student Financial Advising Services to help students navigate finances during their college journey.
- Revamped Week of Welcome events and implemented a university-wide proactive and comprehensive communications strategy that targets first-year students to heighten their engagement and sense of belonging.
- Launched the Learning Commons, effectively relocating academic support units to one centralized and inviting location in Founders Memorial Library.
- Are using a sophisticated tool (Navigate) to track the progress of first-year students throughout their first semesters, with targeted interventions for students who are struggling.
- Designed and deployed Huskie First Surveys, administered during the first two weeks of each semester to incoming students and continuing students to identify needs of students and allow follow-up to connect them with appropriate resources.
- Are centralizing advising for first-year students to provide consistent service tailored to their needs.
- Are using a \$1 million grant received from the Illinois Board of Higher Education (IBHE) to greatly enhance our efforts to expand programming focused on mental and emotional health and wellness.
- Are offering our faculty [training in equitable pedagogical practices](#), including the opportunity to earn a micro-credential in “Inclusive Teaching for Equitable Learning.”
- Have created a cohort of faculty who teach introductory, prerequisite courses and have provided [focused and scaffolded support](#) aimed at improving student success in those courses.

These actions are consistent with the strategies prioritized in NIU's updated SEM Plan 2.0, specifically our emphasis on (1) effective student transitions into the Huskie Family, (2) holistic support to ensure student success and (3) attention to the mental, physical, social and emotional

needs of students. Moreover, they are supported by a strong vice president for Student Affairs who joined NIU in June 2022. We will close equity gaps and achieve our retention and completion goals by centering students in our work and accepting shared responsibility for their success.

In addition, we will continue ensuring that NIU offers students significant opportunities to build skills, confidence, experiences and networks that enhance their transition to strong first jobs and achievement of personal and professional success. Over the course of the past year, NIU has taken a number of actions toward this end. The [Student Code of Conduct](#) was revised to ensure an educational and developmental conduct process aligned with the university's mission, vision, core values and community standards. A [collaborative effort](#) among NIU Greek alumni and students representing the Interfraternity Council, National Pan-Hellenic Council, Panhellenic Association and Multicultural Greek Council, the university and the NIU Foundation developed recommendations to inform a long-term plan for revitalizing Greek life at NIU. NIU also partnered with [Braven](#), a national non-profit organization, to offer students career-accelerating experiences as well as opportunities to develop leadership skills and engage in an accessible and extensive professional network.

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

NIU remains focused on achieving excellence and impact through student success; innovative research and artistry; and partnership with our communities. The university recognizes the importance of evolving our degree offerings to provide our undergraduate and graduate students with programs and experiences that are relevant, inclusive, integrated and transdisciplinary so they are prepared to become leaders in emerging fields. Additionally, we know these aspirations will require change, specifically the dismantling of structural barriers that inhibit transdisciplinary scholarship and discourage curricular innovation and experimentation at NIU.

This past year, two dedicated task forces appointed by the provost shared actionable recommendations about how to remove existing barriers and how to promote and support transdisciplinary scholarship and curricular innovation through policy changes and redirection of resources to supportive infrastructure such as an Office of Research Development. We have identified responsible units and appropriate timelines for implementing the short- and long-term recommendations, and these will inform the university goals for AY2022-23 (FY23) and beyond. NIU's commitment to expanding support for transdisciplinary scholarship and scholars is strong and recognized externally, as evidenced by the support from the State of Illinois for the Northern Illinois Center for Community Sustainability (NICCS), the selection of NIU's vice president for Research and Innovation Partnerships to lead the Illinois Innovation Network (IIN) Council and our success in attracting a talented transdisciplinary scholar to the College of Law and the Center for the Study of Women, Gender and Sexuality through the Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Postdoctoral Fellowship Program.

The past year also saw continued progress in our multiyear effort to strengthen graduate programs and enhance the graduate student experience. An assessment of graduate student programs and experiences was completed using program typology and metrics appropriate to the purpose and mission of graduate education at NIU. Actionable recommendations reflect four major themes: create a graduate student community that supports its success; align tuition waivers to support graduate student success; set expectations for graduate student stipends and

mandatory fees; and ensure adequate resources for strong and strategic programs. Responsible units and appropriate implementation timelines have been identified, and these will inform university goals going forward to AY2024-25 (FY25).

The work described above reflects NIU's commitment to supporting and enhancing the academic and career aspirations of Huskie undergraduates, graduate students and faculty, as well as our desire to discover and develop innovative solutions to complex problems. In addition to these ambitions, the university seeks to ensure that our academic programs meet the needs of our region and state. Accordingly, we have been collaborating with other institutions of higher education to expand degree and credential opportunities available to non-traditional students and improve service to the incumbent workforce. Most notably, NIU has been participating in the [Early Childhood Access Consortium for Equity](#) to improve the accessibility of degree completion pathways to serve the needs of the incumbent workforce in early childhood.

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

NIU's overall commitment, progress and accomplishments related to diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging were again recognized nationally in 2022. For a second consecutive year, the university received the [Higher Education Excellence in Diversity \(HEED\) Award](#) from INSIGHT Into Diversity magazine, and earned recognition by [Great Colleges to Work For](#) in the category of Diversity, Inclusion and Belonging. In addition, for the first time, we were named by Campus Pride as one of the [Best of the Best Colleges and Universities](#) for LGBTQ+ students.

We are proud to be acknowledged for the progress we have made advancing equity, diversity and inclusion through our outreach, initiatives, programs, policies, and practices, and we will continue effective practices that promote access, opportunity and inclusive excellence. We also know that there is [more work to be done](#), and NIU is committed to addressing systemic inequities and fostering a culture of belonging. The university has developed, and is implementing, [a shared equity leadership model](#) that sets long-term goals; promotes continuous learning and awareness; and builds capacity for accountability; because it is important to connect individual, local and organizational efforts. For example, we know that continued progress in recruiting, retaining and developing faculty, staff and administrators from diverse backgrounds will require planning across the university—and our model provides a framework for this work and holding ourselves accountable.

We are passionate about engaging more people in pursuing transformational outcomes and structural changes. Certainly, this is reflected in the continued progress to advance NIU's Truth, Racial Healing and Transformation (TRHT) Campus Center. This center was established last year when NIU was selected as host institution by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U). This year, a team of faculty, staff and graduate students represented the university at the 2022 Institute on THRT Campus Centers. That event attracted 75 participating institutions, and NIU was among 35 with an existing TRHT Center. The institute helped our team establish strategic goals that align with both NIU's vision and the TRHT framework, identify steps needed to achieve these goals and develop detailed plans for evaluation, communications, engagement and sustainability.

Guided by our Huskie core values, and the THRT framework focused on narrative change,

racial healing and relationship building, NIU's center aspires to create a culture of truth-telling, connection, conversation, accountability and growth toward a future where every Huskie belongs. The associated work will be supported by three pillars: (1) shared language, communication and dialogue; (2) narrative change, truth-telling and engagement; and (3) community, partnerships, and relationship building. This coming academic year, the TRHT will host programs focused on these pillars to promote cross-cultural dialogue. For example, NIU recently presented a multidisciplinary theater experience and a Rebuilding Democracy Lecture focused on equity in American democracy and the long-term consequences of slavery and segregation. Our hope is that the THRT Center will strengthen cross-racial and cross-cultural ties between members of our communities from many diverse backgrounds, and that Huskies will value the changes inspired and driven by these coalitions as part of our legacy and our future.

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

NIU remains committed to using our expertise and resources to prepare our students and the communities we serve for a century of change. In this context, our faculty, staff and students are advancing innovation and community collaboration while responding to complex challenges, such as environmental and ecosystem change and adaptation; rapidly advancing technology; shifting demographics; and systemic inequality. In FY22, NIU faculty and staff secured \$48.6 million in sponsored external funding. Their endeavors advance NIU's standing among Carnegie High Research Activity (R2) universities, strengthen our designation as a Carnegie Community Engagement institution and enhance the recognition that NIU has received from the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities as an Innovation and Economic Prosperity University.

Since its announcement in October 2018, [NICCS](#) has attracted external support for research and engagement projects focused on food systems innovation, water resources stewardship and environmental change. Diverse and innovative research efforts range from computer modeling of the coupled social and ecological systems of the greater Chicago area to field studies focused on the impacts of prairie restoration on groundwater. NICCS has also stimulated a series of facilitated dialogues to inspire research, scholarship, artistry and entrepreneurship focused on topics related to sustainable agriculture and the future of food systems.

In July 2022, the State of Illinois announced that it will seek formal bids from architecture and engineering firms to begin the design phase of the NICCS building. This news was welcomed by the university. As NIU's hub in the IIN, NICCS will support the network's objective to drive inclusive and integrated research, innovation and economic development across Illinois. NICCS will also anchor west campus development and serve as an attractor for additional facilities to enhance opportunities for interdisciplinary research, innovation, engagement, and experiential learning. NICCS has positioned NIU to harness the untapped potential of our location and become a leader in advancing peri-urban sustainability. Conversations with potential partners are ongoing, evolving and being incorporated into grant strategy and campaign planning. We are engaging the DeKalb community to link and leverage this work and ensure meaningful local impact. Thanks to Community Project Funding facilitated by Sen. Durbin and funded by the Small Business Administration, we have a variety of food-related education and outreach activities underway. These include community-based entrepreneur support, training programs and an "Edible Campus" pilot project connecting NIU with local gardens.

Maximizing the catalytic power of NICCS for NIU and the region is a priority of the [Strategic Development Team](#) (SDT). Its engagement with university and regional partners is helping to identify and create opportunities to strengthen the innovation ecosystem and NIU's leadership role within it. The SDT models the type of shared leadership being fostered throughout the institution and creates important infrastructure for partnership creation, transdisciplinary research and impactful collaboration. This work is multiplying NIU's impact on the students and the region that we serve.

## **Resource Development and Fiscal Responsibility**

NIU's public mission requires us to be good stewards of university funds, as well as to be student-centric, equity-minded and true to our mission, vision and values. Accordingly, the university is committed to upholding an academically responsive, fiscally responsible budget. We continue to advocate for reliable, equitable and sufficient funding from the State of Illinois, but we recognize the need to be proactive in addressing annual budget deficits to secure our future. To this end, we are pursuing long-term financial sustainability through a combination of financial planning, fiscal discipline, innovation and collaboration, and working to build these elements into the processes used to pursue strategic priorities and set targets for expense reduction, revenue generation, resource reallocation and philanthropy.

The [AY 2021-22 \(FY22\) University Goals](#) notes the importance of empowering cross-functional teams to share leadership in development of a transparent, inclusive university budget planning process. As a first step toward advancing this multiyear goal, three knowledgeable and respected senior university leaders were asked to serve a budget resource-planning function to research effective practices, gather feedback from diverse stakeholders and formulate recommendations for presentation to NIU's president, executive vice president and provost, and vice president for Administration and Finance/chief financial officer. We have embraced the group's suggestions about how to achieve an equitable, multiyear budget process that addresses our financial realities and provides the flexibility necessary to adjust to future conditions and opportunities. Their specific recommendations are being integrated into annual and multiyear university goals. In the coming year and beyond, we will take the following actions:

- Hire a permanent vice president for Administration and Finance/chief financial officer who understands NIU's mission and core values. This senior leader will help implement the changes needed to transition to multiyear budgeting and support long-term financial sustainability.
- Collaborate across units of the university to remove impediments to multiyear budgeting embedded in our current policies, processes and practices. We have already identified the need for better ways to encumber funds and bridge fiscal years along with a more effective deployment of technology for planning and analysis and a longer timeline to accommodate an iterative, inclusive budget process.
- Maintain an innovation fund distinct from the operating budget and solicit ideas for revenue generation from the university community. Investment in innovation will encourage Huskies to think creatively about how to use and grow our limited resources.
- Implement gainsharing strategies that incentivize local entrepreneurship and recognize the importance of multi-funds budgeting to support mission-critical, student-centric programs.

To ensure that NIU can fund strategic priorities, our budget model needs to support growth of both local and centrally controlled funds.

- Expand education, training and data sharing with appropriate support and opportunities for dialogue. A shared understanding of reports, forecasts and financial drivers is essential for transparency, accountability and change.

Our commitment to transparency also underlies the university's practice of providing the Board of Trustees with (1) quarterly updates about NIU's financial performance and progress toward a multiyear budget and (2) periodic reports about our progress to advance [facilities](#) and [technology](#) priorities. The public nature of the presentations promotes accountability and provides a valuable opportunity for dialogue about how our investments align with the university's mission, core values and strategic priorities. For example, at the [June 2022 board meeting](#), the university presented the board with an FY23 internal budget request as well as an initial strategy for achieving a balanced structural budget via multiyear planning through FY25.

This past year, NIU was thrilled to see advancement of two major state capital projects—the Health Information Technology Center and NICCS—along with six capital renewal projects to support boiler replacement and structural repairs to our steam tunnels and academic buildings. There is enthusiasm throughout the university community for the replacement of our outdated, legacy telephone system with Microsoft Teams Voice. There is also optimism across Illinois' 12 public universities that the enhanced collaboration by our CIOs will lead to shared purchasing and shared services agreements that are mutually beneficial and financially advantageous.

Our university community is energized by our multiyear comprehensive fundraising campaign, which officially launched June 30, 2022. The NIU Foundation (NIUF) annual fundraising achievement for FY22 was strong, with a total of \$23.3 million raised on the goal of \$22.5 million. This 51% improvement over the FY21 achievement of \$15.4 million outperforms the university's objective that annual fundraising increase by 30% year over year. This also aligns with the campaign planning study recommendation that NIU and NIUF move forward with the campaign leadership phase while working to refine the case for support and develop a collaborative resourcing plan scoped for an ambitious campaign target. We look forward to progress in this quiet phase, followed by a successful public launch, continued donor engagement and achievement of our campaign goal.

## **Looking Forward**

Although there is much work to be done, our university can be proud of what we have achieved: the ways we continue to improve access and opportunity for academically accomplished students, including students from underserved and resourced communities; the continued success of faculty and staff in securing external funding to advance the academic, research and engagement missions; and the national recognition that we have received for our commitment to creating and sustaining a community that embraces diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging. These accomplishments reinforce a strong foundation for our future. I look forward to sharing the AY 2022-23 (FY23) university goals Thursday, Dec. 8, during the next regular meeting of the Board of Trustees.

It is an honor and joy to serve as NIU president. I am inspired by the collaborative spirit of our community, the creativity of our faculty and staff and our students' commitment to making a difference. I am grateful for the numerous ways the Board of Trustees supports our amazing university. Together, we are making a difference in the lives of our students and contributing to positive change in our region and our world. We are Huskies who 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 extending to the right.

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



November 7, 2022

**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  
Timothy Moore  
Robert Pritchard

**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 2021-22/Fiscal Year 2022 (FY22). 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's website (<https://www.niu.edu/board/>) and shall collectively serve as a written record of your performance evaluation for FY22.

We find that your overall performance in FY22 met or exceeded your goals. The university community continued the challenging work of balancing the need to respond to the pandemic with a commitment to future-focused planning, while also acknowledging and accepting the many ways NIU's operating environment has been permanently altered. We agree with your characterization of our main challenges. These include attracting and retaining faculty and staff and recruiting and retaining students whose higher education aspirations coincide with a time of great upheaval in the provision of education and the related effects of isolation and disengagement.

Fortunately, we observe a university community, led by you, that is focusing on these core challenges across several operational areas and priorities. We join you in expressing appreciation for the resiliency and creativity of the NIU community, and wish to express our profound gratitude to all who have contributed to the progress made across these six strategic themes.

**Empowerment and Shared Responsibility**

Your goals in this area were to foster a more collaborative and transparent, and less risk-averse, culture to inspire innovation and deal with the demands of a changing higher education environment in Illinois and the country. The collaboration and progress made possible through empowerment and shared leadership are evident in the achievements you have shared with us, and demonstrate that the goals you established for this area were met or exceeded in FY22.

Many priorities have been advantaged by intentional efforts to empower campus leaders to work together to achieve goals. You have shown us that it takes a shared vision and sense of responsibility across campus to lead the university through changes in the work environment and to create efficiencies that help us better align systems and practices with the needs of our students, faculty and staff. You have successfully established cross-functional teams and reached out beyond our university to leverage partnerships to achieve our goals.

Furthermore, we understand and appreciate the importance of enhancing skills and competencies to foster shared leadership and accountability and of recognizing achievements that are aligned with NIU strategic priorities.

We applaud the number and depth of practices, policies and procedures that were transformed, simplified or eliminated through such collaboration. We recognize the role of empowerment and shared responsibility especially in several respects. The Strategic Enrollment Management Plan 2.0 updated SEM objectives to account for the challenges to student recruitment and retention brought on by the pandemic. Managing through the pandemic, we set up remote work policies that are now being adjusted through collaborative efforts of all leadership in the university to better serve our students, faculty and staff. We are also continually achieving administrative efficiencies through increased use of new technology and by reducing the number of procedures in the Academic Policies and Procedures Manual.

Through this approach to leadership, NIU has earned recognition for its capacity for shared governance and diversity, equity and belonging among our peer institutions. We appreciate the opportunity to participate directly in efforts to recognize excellence through the new Board of Trustees Staff Excellence Award, and to continue our support of outcomes of university level collaborations that come before the board as information or for action.

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

Overall, the goals established for this area have been met. The university was in the low end of the target range of its total enrollment goal. However, there is much to be proud of within this data, particularly concerning the new freshman class.

Total new freshman enrollment increased by 155, or 6.8%, over the Fall 2021 numbers. This achievement marked the sixth year NIU experienced an increase in its freshman class and the largest freshman class since 2014. Data for this cohort also indicates it has the highest high school GPAs the university has recorded (3.42); 472 of new freshmen are receiving merit scholarships of \$7,000 per year after earning 4.0 GPAs in high school; 38% of freshmen earned a high school GPA of 3.7 or above; and the University Honors Program enrolled 283 freshmen – a 50% increase over last fall. The new freshman class is also the most racially diverse in university history, and more than half are the first in their families to go to college. NIU also experienced an impressive increase in international student enrollment – up by 223, or 30% – over Fall 2021 numbers (and the highest international enrollment since 2018). NIU also increased the number of doctoral enrollments (up by three students from Fall 2021) and the number of new College of Law enrollments (up by three students from Fall 2021). Residence hall occupancy rate has also increased.

The positive nature of the new freshmen numbers points to the university's success implementing several freshman recruitment strategies and admissions policies. These include test-free admissions and merit scholarship processes, the Rockford Promise Program at NIU, NIU's Huskie Pledge program and Hope Chicago (a program committed to investing \$1 billion over the next decade in postsecondary scholarships to Chicago Public School students and their parents). Among campus leaders, the direct relationship between these strategies and positive results should also build confidence that their robust participation in collaboration and innovation – driven by fidelity to NIU's mission, vision and values – can have profound impact on the long-term success of the institution.

Despite this success, you recognize the need for more attention in the areas of recruitment and retention. The Fall 2022 total enrollment represents a decrease of 585, or -3.6%, in total student population from Fall 2021. You have noted how this decrease in students is largely attributable to impacts of the prolonged pandemic, including steep declines in the pipeline of community college students and stresses on students' social, emotional and physical well-being. Similarly, Fall 2021 undergraduates have re-enrolled for Fall 2022 at lower rates than previous cohorts. Re-enrollment totals are reflective of nationwide trends. Moreover, the number of new transfers has decreased by 240 students, or 16%, from Fall 2021 and the number of new master's/professional degree enrollment has also decreased by seven students, or .8%.

We recognize that several actions have been taken to plan and launch a re-enrollment campaign targeting students who attended NIU over the past five years, and to continue efforts to make an NIU degree more accessible, equitable and affordable. These include researching our existing online degree completion programs and what we could do to enhance these opportunities; the hiring of a re-enrollment coordinator to work with returning students; and the creation of a re-enrollment workgroup to create and disseminate targeted re-enrollment messages to the continuing students who have yet to register for courses for the upcoming semester. We further recognize that an effort was undertaken by your administration to pursue equity goals articulated in NIU's Higher Learning Commission Quality Initiative Proposal and Illinois Equity in Attainment (ILEA) Equity Plan. Initiatives aimed at improving student success and reducing equity gaps in gateway courses are examples of thoughtful and targeted approaches to improving retention rates.

Finally, we are pleased with the steps to support and engage our students, with a focus on alleviating barriers that hinder student success, retention and persistence. These include NIU's partnership with Braven and focused attention to student life that will have long-standing positive impacts, such as the hiring of a new vice president for Student Affairs, reform of the Student Code of Conduct and efforts to revitalize Greek life at NIU.

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

The goals you outlined for academic excellence and curriculum innovation have been met or exceeded. We have previously recognized the impact these reforms 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 also expressed our hope that leaders engaged in this work would sustain and escalate the pace of these improvements. We are pleased to see what a year of collaboration and focused attention can produce.

Efforts to identify and begin removing structural barriers that inhibit transdisciplinary scholarship and discourage curricular innovation and experimentation are well underway. Outcomes of these efforts include detailed findings (structural, resource and cultural barriers) and short- and long-term recommendations from task forces focused on transdisciplinary scholarship and transdisciplinary curricular innovation; timelines have also been developed for the recommendations. We appreciate the devotion of personnel resources to, and involvement of the Faculty Senate Social Justice Committee in, the review and reassessment of tenure and promotion processes and related consideration of annual faculty evaluation and the environment for early-career faculty. The particular transdisciplinary research initiatives (social, racial and ethnic inequities; environmental justice; and STEM education and artificial intelligence/machine learning) contemplate student-centered outcomes and formal support for faculty research through the proposed Office of Research Development (ORD).

Initiatives geared toward strengthening graduate programs and enhancing the graduate student experience have been outstanding, and we applaud those who have engaged in this excellent work. A completed assessment of graduate student programs and experiences offers an impressive set of actionable recommendations in close alignment with the objectives of this sub-goal. We understand how this process is helping NIU support the academic and career aspirations of the graduate students who matriculate at NIU as well as the programs that most closely align with NIU's mission, vision and values.

We continue to be excited about the potential to bring to life innovative online degree and credential opportunities available to non-traditional age students and to improve service to the incumbent workforce. Collaborations with other institutions of higher education – we note particularly the Early Childhood Access Consortium for Equity – are underway. The lessons and technology enhancements that accompanied NIU's response to the pandemic could prove to be valuable to this endeavor. Moreover, NIU's equity lens and the curricular innovation discussed above will likely impact its contemplation of new cohorts who can be served by the institution and how best to meet their needs.

### **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 continues to be an exemplar within the Illinois higher education community. NIU's commitment to diversity, equity, inclusion, belonging and social justice across our mission, vision and values is – without question – one of the strongest characteristics of our university community and campus.

In FY22, one of the key initiatives of this goal area was to create and expand a Shared Equity Leadership (SEL) model. Evidence that this was met, if not exceeded, lies in the formation of a formal NIU Equity Community of Practice (ECoP), including measurements of accountability by ECoP participants. This shared leadership model will engage departments, committees and commissions across our campus community. The Shared Equity Leadership draft model was presented to the board at our August 18, 2022 meeting by Vice President Vernese Edghill-Walden.

In 2021, NIU was chosen by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) to host a new Truth, Racial Healing and Transformation Center (TRHT). Another subset of this goal involved the development of this Center. Although the center is not yet operational, the framework, strategic plan and training has been completed. Ten people attended the summer TRHT training institute, and the strategic plan for the center is being finalized and submitted to the AAC&U for approval. This center will provide space on our campus for social justice, racial healing and restorative justice work.

Also, in FY22, NIU continued its efforts and progress toward increasing the recruitment, hiring, retention and professional advancement of diverse faculty, staff and administrators. We applaud the establishment of the new executive director of Equity and Inclusion who will aid department and college diversity planning. Faculty mentoring continued to be a focus of this administration, including the establishment of a faculty mentoring website. Over the past two fiscal years, 70% of incoming faculty requested and were assigned a mentor, thus helping to ensure their success in the classroom and on our campus.

NIU's overall commitment, progress and accomplishments in diversity, equity and inclusion has also been recognized nationally. Among this recognition is the prestigious HEED Award (Higher Education Excellence in Diversity), a national honor recognizing U.S. colleges and universities that demonstrate an outstanding commitment to diversity and inclusion.

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 across all aspects of the university.

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

NIU's position as a national research university continues to be a critical element of its success. This is clearly understood by the university's faculty and leadership, and it's exemplified by the significant progress and completion of your articulated goals in this area.

With your leadership, the development of the Northern Illinois Center for Community Sustainability (NICCS) and the west campus acreage have significantly advanced. Strong and coordinated advocacy has resulted in the release of initial funding; potential collaborators and partners have been recruited; momentum has been maintained through the development of consistent lectures; and programs and innovative planning for auxiliary uses continues. This wholistic and comprehensive approach will ensure the completion of a major addition to NIU's research portfolio; pave the way for NICCS to function as an anchor on the west campus to attract additional facilities to enhance opportunities for interdisciplinary research, innovation, engagement and experiential learning; and enhance NIU's prominence as a center of research and innovation.

The consistent commitment of you and your staff to diversity, equity and inclusion is embedded in the goal of supporting research and innovation. Particularly, the task force on transdisciplinary research, as noted above, recommended the development of an Office of Research Development. The draft review of this office is being examined. This step and two other articulated initiatives highlighted under this goal emphasize the

continuing efforts to consistently strengthen the university's research position and move the university forward. You are applauded for meeting the goals as outlined and – specifically – for infusing DEI in all aspects of the work.

Your outreach and partnerships with both internal and external stakeholders have clearly elevated the community collaboration and engagement in NIU's innovation ecosystem. You have successfully met the goal of reframing the strategic purpose of outreach, engagement and regional development through multiple initiatives. Of note and particular interest to the board are the relationships formed with the City of DeKalb, regional entities and the State of Illinois. The result of these partnerships in addition to the work of the NIU Foundation, is enhanced funding that allows the creation of innovative programming such as the Barb City STEAM Team, the Career and Technical Improvement Project and the Illinois Migrant Education Program, to name a few. All this activity clearly illustrates your understanding of the essential need for a university to serve, and be an integral part of, its surrounding environments. This benefits both the region and the students we serve.

Finally, we note the groundwork that has been laid for the design and implementation of the Carnegie Engagement Task Force. This was done to allow for better coordination with other independent efforts. The project will be assessed in the following year's evaluation, and we look forward to the team's implementation of the action plan that will be executed in coordination with independent efforts in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences.

As we reflect on the goals in this area that have been met and, in some instance, exceeded, we observe substantial and real progress; moreover, we notice how such progress has been accomplished adhering to the university's core values of commitment to DEI and true collaboration. NIU's position as a crucial and important national research university continues to excel under your leadership.

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

Overall, the goals in this area were met or exceeded. Despite a year of continued uncertainty due to the pandemic, economic volatility and geopolitical extremes that have occurred during FY22, the university – with your leadership – worked extremely hard to achieve a slightly positive balanced budget for FY22. We recognize that budget results are inclusive of federal relief funding that is not expected to carry over into future years.

We were pleased to see continued efforts to make our campus community aware that it will take everyone's effort and sacrifice to enact the structural changes needed to achieve financial sustainability. Moreover, and following the shared leadership model, you appointed a Budget Resource Planning Group for the purpose of seeking stakeholder input, ideas and recommendations to achieve balanced budgets and long-term financial health. In June, you presented the board a three-year plan, complete with high-level actionable and reasonable plans, showing a sustainable, balanced budget by Year 3 (which would be FY25). We are very pleased to see senior leadership focused once again on multiyear budgeting following the past few years of individual annual budgeting under the economic constraints presented by the pandemic.

The university also made good strides in providing resources for more actionable data and decision-making support for the campus community. This is evident in the expanded use of several tools, most notably Tableau, Academic Performance Solutions and 25Live. Specifically, Tableau licenses were increased from 250 to 400. We also appreciate the development of enrollment prediction models that inform the new Strategic Enrollment Management Plan 2.0. The new three-year plan focuses on brand identity, access and affordability as well as student success, persistence and graduation. We look forward to the benefits of this plan resulting in stabilizing, and then growing, our enrollment and student success over the coming years.

We recognize that the university continues to make progress in achieving Business Enterprise Program (BEP) goals through increased awareness, engagement and training of NIU business staff. But we also must acknowledge that we continue to fall short of State of Illinois targets. We expect that increased focus on this

important area among our campus business leaders and staff will encourage not only efficient procurement practices but also will continue to improve the amount of business we do with BEP-eligible contractors.

Substantial progress in facilities and technology planning efforts was obvious in FY22. We were very pleased with the identification and subsequent execution of prioritized projects, such as the planning for the Health Information Technology Center. The NIU Department of Information Technology made great progress in FY22 in the planning and initial migration from an extremely out-of-date campus telephony system to a new Microsoft Teams Voice platform. We are pleased to be serving as a model that other public universities can follow in this regard. We also recognize that efforts were made to expand joint purchasing and shared services to reduce administrative costs through the Illinois Partnership to Advance Technology in Higher Education (IPATHE). Ideally, continued negotiations will produce more significant savings for the university.

Finally, the NIU Foundation exceeded its fundraising goal for FY22. Congratulations to the leadership and staff, and thank you to our donors! While the initial goal was to increase fundraising by 30% over the previous year, the actual increase was 51%, or \$23.3 million. We look forward to receiving and reviewing the full campaign engagement plan soon, as the campaign was officially launched July 1, 2022. A comprehensive campaign engagement plan is critical.

As you have stated throughout the year, adapting to the changing operating environment has and will continue to require courageous leadership, organizational alignment and hard choices. Accordingly, NIU must rescale our fiscal model to match student enrollment, 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, and our, deep appreciation for the sacrifices endured by members of the university community. We continue to be optimistic that NIU is well positioned under your leadership, and the foundation has been laid for longer-term fiscal sustainability and responsible resource management.

## **Conclusion**

In summary, during FY22, we continued to adapt to changing operational dynamics brought on by a significant public health disruption. The goals you established for yourself and the NIU community have been met or exceeded. As we consider the six themes under which you have pursued a number of initiatives during FY22, we recognize the advantages of a shared leadership system through which collaboration and innovation is occurring and decisions are being made; of strategic initiatives to support student success, retention and persistence; of curricular innovation and scholarship that crosses disciplinary boundaries; of an operational culture that weaves diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging into all university pursuits; of a research and innovation enterprise that fosters interdisciplinary research, engagement and experiential learning within fields and subjects that challenge and excite; and of fiscal and facility planning designed to ensure a sound and responsible future. Across all this activity, the university operated in accordance with its mission, vision and values. During this time, you continued to function as a vigilant advocate for the interests of NIU students, faculty, administration, staff, alumni and local communities. You continue to serve as a role model for your leadership team, and we consider you to be one of the most creative, imaginative and hardworking presidents in the State of Illinois and in the higher education community overall.

Forward, Together Forward!