



Open Forum Address

By Dr. Lisa C. Freeman

Good afternoon. Thank you for coming out today. It is an honor to be here as a candidate for the presidency of this amazing institution.

I appreciate this opportunity to share with you my passion for NIU, and my vision for our future. Along the way, I hope you'll get a stronger sense of who I am, what I value and what I would offer NIU as its next permanent president.

NIU is distinctive for the ways in which various aspects of our mission intersect and reinforce each other to achieve the greatest possible benefits from the synergy across teaching, scholarship and engagement activities. And, it is how we do this that makes us undeniably special. The passion, drive and at times – sacrifice – that NIU faculty and staff invest in our students to make their dreams reality – is unparalleled.

This past year as acting president, I've had the pleasure of getting to know more of our students and alumni. Their stories about how faculty and staff were their advocates, connectors and champions – both personally and professionally – are authentic and inspiring. Their experiences are testament to our success at promoting – and achieving – social mobility for students and their families.

One of the reasons that these stories resonate so profoundly with me is that my own story, and that of my family, is similar. It explains why I came to NIU in 2010, and why I am so driven to make a difference in this institution and the lives that depend on it.

My father went to vocational school on the GI Bill. My mother was the first woman in her family to go to college because she was given an opportunity to attend The City University of New York tuition-free. She taught first-grade for 25 years. She loved helping the kids in her class learn to read, and she supported my ambitions even when she didn't fully understand them.

I attended Cornell University as an undergraduate at one of New York State's public colleges within that research-intensive university. I worked in a faculty member's laboratory, fell in love with discovery science and, as a result of that experience, I continued on to obtain graduate and professional degrees. I became an educator, a scientist and, ultimately, an administrator.

As a result of my personal and professional experience, I have tremendous respect and appreciation for the faculty and staff members who guide and support students along their transformative journeys. And, I find great joy in helping students from diverse backgrounds see how new knowledge shapes teaching materials, how artwork is created and how they can use their curiosity and creativity to change the world in previously unimaginable ways.

NIU faculty and students excel at knowledge creation and artistry that is impactful and innovative. Whether tracking tornadoes, publishing award-winning books or dancing at the Kennedy Center, their accomplishments get noticed and celebrated. As a result, NIU is attracting new partners, and taking advantage of those relationships as resources. Our willingness to collaborate is a strength that positions us for future success, because no single institution has the capacity to solve global-scale problems – problems such as providing access to all



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who want a quality education, or preventing chronic disease conditions, or addressing food insecurity or water resource scarcities.

When you look at NIU in this light, it is clear that we are ready to respond to the needs of our region, nation and world – and able to bring a wide range of perspectives to bear on any challenge – because of our traditions and our core values.

Our strengths form a firm foundation for our future. And I'm excited about our future.

My vision is that NIU will be recognized as an engine for innovation, creativity and social mobility that empowers students, faculty and staff to make a difference in our globally connected world.

In my vision for the future, we evolve so that:

- NIU is renowned as a first-choice destination for talented students, faculty and staff with different social identities and lived experiences – whose diverse perspectives foster innovation and inclusive excellence across our university community.

so that:

- All NIU students, undergraduate and graduate, residential and online, are immersed in learning environments that encourage them to work across the traditional boundaries that constrain creativity to be innovative, to think critically and to solve complex contemporary problems.

We evolve to make certain that:

- NIU employees feel appreciated and respected. They rate the university as a great place to work because of an affirming culture that emphasizes collaborative governance, professional development and work/life balance.

and that:

- NIU alumni show their Huskie Pride by increasing their engagement as mentors, donors and investors – and our university is stronger for their contributions.

In my vision for the future,

- The success of NIU and the potential of our students are not hindered by severe resource constraints.
- We have modernized the arcane administrative processes that frustrate our progress.
- We have equitable and inclusive policies and practices that promote student success and engage a diverse workforce.
- We have clarity regarding our institutional goals, and we confidently pursue them, energized by future possibilities.
- We spend our time thinking about what's next, rather than dwelling on today's issues.
- We take risks, and are emboldened to achieve our full potential.

To realize this vision, we will need to overcome internal challenges, so that we can respond effectively to external threats.



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Most of these external drivers for change are not unique to NIU; rather, they are in effect for all of public higher education. These include:

- Economic issues related to access, affordability, cost and quality of degree programs;
- Demographic changes in the nature and number of students pursuing baccalaureate and advanced degrees;
- the ubiquity of technology in our society and how it impacts the expectations of students and families; and
- Eroding public confidence in colleges, universities and the value of higher education.

In this context, our strategies for success and for survival must be true to our institutional vision, mission and values.

NIU has ideals that define us, and that should not change:

- Our public mission and commitment to access, affordability and quality;
- Our identity as an engaged, student-centered, research university;
- Our aspiration to model inclusive excellence across the university community.

But this acknowledgement of immutable values does not mean that we can, or should, keep doing what we have always done the way that we have always done it. Our roadmap for the future cannot, and will not, assume that all of the strategies and tactics that served us well for our first 125 years will be effective going forward.

But before I talk about how together we will chart our future, I want to highlight how we are staying relevant to the emerging needs of our students and the global society that we serve. Our pursuit of excellence in all aspects of our mission has provided us with a strong foundation to support our future and a lot to celebrate and to promote.

But the examples that I cite are not chosen merely as points of pride. I selected them to illustrate our ability to take on challenges and create solutions. These are examples of Huskies doing hard things together.

First- let's consider teaching and learning.

A 2018 Bloomberg Next survey of 200 academic institutions and businesses that hire college graduates identified a skills gap with respect to teamwork, analytical reasoning, complex-problem solving, agility, adaptability and ethical judgment.

We are way ahead of other universities in recognizing and addressing this need.

- The baccalaureate goals that NIU established almost a decade ago – critical thinking, creativity and communication – are consistent with the attributes that academic institutions and businesses seek in the graduates they hire.
- And now, NIU PLUS – our progressive learning platform for undergraduate studies – provides multiple pathways for enriching our students' academic experiences, and expanding their opportunities to apply what they learn in authentic and relevant contexts.
- In addition, the diversity of our student body ensures that Huskie graduates gain experience working on teams with individuals who have different lived experiences.



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Today, the employers who hire our students rave about their work ethic and their preparedness for the jobs and the work environments they enter. But those environments will transform rapidly. Occupations that currently exist will disappear, and new ones will be created. To succeed in the future, our students and our university will need to be adaptable, innovative and committed to lifelong education.

We must respond to these needs with even more dynamic academic experiences and advising models. And we are already moving in that direction by updating the curricula of established programs to ensure that they remain at the front edge of their disciplines, and by offering new online programs. For example, the College of Business has introduced new, fully online master's degrees in Digital Marketing and Data Analytics. They've also increased the emphasis on analytics for all undergraduate business majors.

Let's next consider research, scholarship and artistry.

NIU is an R2 university according to the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education. This means that our research program is among the top 10 percent of U.S. colleges and universities. Within this group, we have been highly successful at creating synergy between teaching and scholarship by being intentionally student-centered.

We provide opportunities for all undergraduates, including incoming freshmen, to engage in meaningful research and artistry. And these students are mentored by exceptional members of our faculty and staff who enjoy bringing the fresh perspectives of undergraduates into their laboratories, studios and field sites. Every year, I look forward to Undergraduate Research and Artistry Day to see their work showcased and celebrated. It's such an amazing event, full of energetic people who care deeply about the projects they're presenting.

This past fiscal year, NIU faculty and staff secured sponsored funding awards totaling more than \$30 million. The research funding component showed a 26 percent gain over this time last year, with significant gains across both STEM and non-STEM areas.

As NIU implements our current research vision "preparing northern Illinois and the nation for a century of change," we need to continue to be intentional in the ways that we integrate research and undergraduate education. To this end, our four strategic research emphases –

- Responding to the changing climate;
- Preparing for changing demographics;
- Leading the evolution of technology; and
- Interpreting our changing world,

– reflect regional and national needs and align well with the expertise and interests of our faculty and staff, as well as with the academic pathways of NIU PLUS.

Our continued success will depend on our ability to initiate and sustain academic and research collaborations that cross disciplinary boundaries to engage faculty as well as graduate and undergraduate students to solve local, regional and global problems. We will do this by assembling multi-disciplinary, challenge-based groups of scholars, commonly referred to as research clusters. Our current plan is to increase our capacity for research and innovation by annually initiating at least one cluster.

This year, we will be launching a new center named CREATE (Cross-disciplinary Research on Engaging Advanced Technology for Education). CREATE will be led by the Morgridge Endowed Chair in the College of Education, but will engage faculty throughout the university.



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Building on our history as a normal school focused on producing teachers knowledgeable about pedagogy and curriculum, CREATE will develop innovative research programs that investigate cutting-edge technology to address educational challenges for learners of all ages. Plans include designing a humanoid robot that facilitates collaboration among young children and developing a virtual adviser for underrepresented students in STEM at their community colleges. In these endeavors, the center will engage with practitioners in education and industry, locally and globally.

And, let's now consider outreach, engagement and service:

Because of their considerable human and intellectual resources, universities are well-positioned to collaborate with their larger communities to form long-term relationships where each partner contributes to the development of common goals and the pursuit of mutually beneficial outcomes.

At NIU, we take very seriously our role in enhancing the lives of those who live, work and learn in the communities that we serve. Within northern Illinois, the service area extends beyond DeKalb and Sycamore to Rockford, Naperville, Hoffman Estates, Oregon and other communities where we have a footprint.

In this context, NIU is one of 60 institutions designated by the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities as an Innovation and Economic Prosperity University because of our significant contributions and commitment to economic and community development. In fact, NIU was recognized by that organization with an award for "place development" because of the impact of initiatives focused on P-20 engagement, broadband connectivity and the Rockford-area aerospace cluster.

Collaboration across the academic, government and private sectors will be critical to address the challenges that NIU and our local communities currently face. Accordingly, the university is developing a proposal with the City of DeKalb and the University of Illinois System to create a local hub of the Illinois Innovation Network that will be focused on community sustainability. In June, the network, and the associated Discovery Partners Institute, received approval for \$500 million in capital funds.

As currently envisioned by local stakeholders, including NIU faculty and staff, the hub here in DeKalb will have physical and programmatic components. It will build upon the rich legacy of agricultural innovation in DeKalb County, the academic excellence of NIU and the opportunities to collaborate with public and private partners to catalyze innovation and economic development that will improve sustainable food systems, stewardship of scarce water resources and adaptation to climate change. We expect to announce more specific plans for the hub in the coming weeks in partnership with the University of Illinois System and the City of DeKalb.

As I mentioned earlier, these strengths and opportunities are proof that we can collaborate effectively to innovate and to deliver excellence in all aspects of our academic mission. I have also seen NIU faculty, staff and students come together around other critical initiatives.

Of these, none involved more time, effort and inclusive participation than Program Prioritization. We successfully implemented that process to align mission and budget, and to improve efficiency and effectiveness across the university. The final Program Prioritization report has been issued, but we will continue to take on challenges in a thoughtful and collaborative fashion, integrating attributes of Program Prioritization – such as transparency, accountability and data-informed decision-making – into our planning, budgeting and assessment processes.

The positive outcomes of Program Prioritization have been noted by members of the Illinois General Assembly, as well as by the external team responsible for the assurance review that was just completed for the Higher Learning Commission. To quote their report:



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“The past four years have been transformative for NIU, and the university community is committed to applying what has been learned to improve overall institutional effectiveness and sustainability.”

Program Prioritization was a significant undertaking – one that was possible because the members of the NIU community recognized our collective capability and pulled together.

And speaking of pulling together– our collaborative spirit has been in full view this week as it is every year at this time, when we welcome new students and faculty to NIU.

They come to a beautiful campus made possible by the dedicated employees who maintain our grounds and buildings.

They experience the competence and caring of our staff in housing and dining, and in the administrative units and offices across campus.

We work hard together – in a coordinated fashion – to move students into the residence halls, to put on the presidential picnic and other welcome events, and to help our new students navigate their class schedules and the campus environment.

Each year, we do this better than the year before, because we care about NIU and we take pride in being Huskies.

I absolutely LOVE the beginning of the school year – especially the opportunities to hear from students and parents about their hopes and dreams – and to tell new members of the university community what it means to join the Huskie family and uphold the principles of the Northern Pact. I enjoy every opportunity to demonstrate how we say, “GO HUSKIES!”

That spirit is captured in the profile created by the Presidential Search Planning Committee. That profile also specifically directs NIU’s next president to develop strong working relationships with students, faculty and staff – and to do this not only to respect shared governance, but also to foster their professional development, keep them informed and promote Huskie pride.

I believe strongly that our success as a university will depend on our ability to sustain a culture wherein students, faculty and staff feel heard, valued and empowered, where administrators see themselves as partners who are trusted to listen to constituent concerns and make decisions that advance NIU. Last year, as acting president, I furthered the development and implementation of ideas that came from you – for example, our new welcome events for first-generation college students and the policy library. This year, I plan to follow-up on more of your good ideas.

As president, I will model accountability and mutual respect, emphasize collaboration and focus on collective results. I will also expect the members of our leadership to do the same. In fact, the entire Huskie community will need to work together to achieve and sustain this level of confidence and collaboration across the university. We will support each other, and hold each other accountable for making NIU a great place to learn and work.

So far, I have focused on the positive, because we will achieve success by building on our strengths and minimizing our vulnerabilities. But we can only do this if we recognize and acknowledge internal weaknesses and external threats.

Our operating environment presents major challenges associated with demographic, economic and technological changes. As a result, we are experiencing significant enrollment challenges and financial pressures.



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The Board of Trustees and the Presidential Search Planning Committee expect NIU's next president to inspire innovation and lead change so that we can respond to these challenges and shape our future. I'm wholeheartedly in agreement.

This summer, I convened NIU's senior leaders, academic deans and members of our enrollment management team to identify ways to grow student enrollment and enhance student success. We established high-level goals and strategies. They reflect our aspirations to provide an inclusive and intellectually stimulating environment to students who reflect the rich diversity of our region, nation and world.

Acknowledging the work that must be done to achieve these outcomes, I've charged relevant divisions of the university and the Strategic Enrollment Management Committee with developing and implementing measurable objectives and tactics to support the goals and strategies. And I will remain personally involved to drive this effort.

A multi-year strategic enrollment management plan will be finalized over the course of the next two months. Simultaneously, we will deploy time-sensitive recruitment strategies and tactics. And, we will advance the critical work that is already in progress to close equity gaps and increase retention and graduation rates.

These important efforts will keep NIU moving forward but, to sustain our momentum longer term, we will need a robust strategic plan, one that embeds our research vision and our enrollment goals and that also includes a comprehensive facilities masterplan. This approach will make NIU's vision, direction and goals transparent and accessible to all of our stakeholders, and will help us sharpen our brand identity in a way that resonates with these groups.

The planning process will be collaborative, designed in consultation with shared governance groups and informed by the success of recent efforts within units of the university.

I want and need your help to create the blueprint for NIU's future.

And, I think we can all agree that, to do this well, we need to ensure that our process will neither be painfully long nor generate a product that ends up sitting on a shelf. Our strategic planning process will be successful only if everyone at the university understands our plan and their role in helping NIU reach our goals in the years ahead.

NIU must also have resources sufficient to:

- Sustain our financial health;
- Fund appropriate levels of institutional financial aid;
- Enable investment in our programs and our people and
- Allow us flexibility to respond to the rapidly changing landscape for public higher education.

To achieve a sustainable financial model, we must go beyond cutting costs and increasing revenue from traditional sources. We need to look at new revenue streams with the recognition that we cannot depend on state appropriations as we have in the past.

Certainly, I will continue to demand that Illinois invest in its public universities, research networks and talented students. I will also work with my counterparts to advocate in Springfield and Washington, D.C. for public higher education as a public good.

But, at the same time, we'll need to demonstrate our ingenuity, creativity and ability to collaborate with the



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objective of generating new revenue. Through an appropriate focus on revenue generation, we can gain greater control over our own destiny and remain true to our core values.

Given this imperative, philanthropy will be more important than it ever has been. NIU's next president will need to invest significant time and energy engaging current donors, cultivating new donors, inspiring alumni participation and building a more robust pipeline for philanthropic support. I will relish the opportunities to help individuals and organizations find meaning by investing in NIU.

I have met many donors and alumni this year who are enthusiastic about the positive impacts NIU has had on their lives and eager to pay it forward to provide new opportunities to the next generation of Huskies. As NIU's next permanent president, I will strengthen those relationships, and tap the energy that exists across our alumni base. I am extremely enthusiastic about the potential to collaborate with the Innovation and Real Estate task forces recently created by the NIU Foundation.

Fostering and sustaining a strong town-gown relationship is very important to me – not only as NIU's leader but as a resident of this community. Like many of you, DeKalb is my home. We want it, and we need it, to thrive. To accomplish this, we will need to identify and develop non-traditional partnerships and new revenue streams for our community in a timely manner. We are already working on exciting possibilities.

For example, our DeKalb campus and contiguous portions of the City of DeKalb are qualified as an Opportunity Zone, able to attract new investments eligible for preferential tax treatment under the guidelines of the 2017 Tax Cuts and Jobs Act. This program has the potential to be transformative for the university and our community, driving innovation and economic development, as well as accelerating plans for revitalization of the Annie Glidden North Neighborhood.

NIU can and must collaborate effectively with the city, community-based organizations and private partners to achieve the shared goal of making our community more vibrant and welcoming by developing housing, retail, entertainment and employment options that are attractive to students and visitors as well as to current and future residents.

We will advance our fiscal sustainability by pursuing strategies that are entrepreneurial, transparent and consistent with our mission and core values.

I want to take just few more minutes, before I answer your questions, to emphasize the resonance between NIU's core values and my own. For the past eight years, I have helped to move NIU forward in a way that upholds my personal values – with honesty and transparency, hard work, not settling, encouraging others to push themselves and, when they can, to reach back and help pull up someone behind.

I feel especially strong about inclusivity and access. And I want to be clear that I am committed to leading NIU forward as an exemplar of equity, cross-cultural learning and engagement.

As faculty, staff, alumni and annuitants, you know the transformative power that higher education can provide to students and families – it's why you are here, why you work as hard as you do and why you are passionate about what happens at NIU.

Now more than ever, our society needs places like NIU to extend its arms and embrace diverse people, identities, perspectives and ideas to create knowledge; inspire expression and artistry; change lives; and even stir the soul. I want to lead a place that lives and breathes progress, in a multitude of forms, by fostering equity, inclusivity and innovation.

Diversity of identities, thought and activities creates vibrancy in a community. I have seen this at NIU. For ex-



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ample, our Division I athletics programs, our facilities and improving amenities, our student organizations and our town-gown relationships contribute to the vitality of our community. They add to my favorite images of NIU:

- Homecoming in the College of Education tent, where teachers and learners of all ages and backgrounds sing the Huskie Fight Song together.
- The annual involvement fair that unites 300 student organizations and many more individual students who care about leadership, community service, figure skating, Greek life, salsa dancing and the Mars Rover.

I value those aspects of life at NIU, but I also recognize that there are many other ways that we can energize and inspire our community. We have room to grow in this respect, and many opportunities to do so. I'm going to continue to push us to do more- and to be more.

Earlier, I mentioned peer review of the university by our accreditor the Higher Learning Commission. Four years ago, a site visit team expressed significant concerns about our budgeting, planning and resource allocation processes. They went as far as to recommend additional monitoring. We took an honest look at the feedback and ourselves; we created the right teams to address and make change.

The university has just received the positive news about the outcome of our most recent review by the Higher Learning Commission: We successfully addressed all concerns with no additional recommendations for monitoring, and we accomplished this despite unprecedented financial and leadership challenges. We know how to do hard things. We do them well when we do them together.

Difficult times remain in front of higher education, in front of our State of Illinois, and in front of our NIU, but I am confident that we will be able to capitalize on our opportunities and overcome our challenges. We have already done a lot of hard work to respond to changes in our operating environment.

We were stalled on our path to progress by 700 days without state funding. But we need to put that behind us. Rather than focusing on things that we can't control, we need to focus on the things that we can influence to make NIU a better, more sustainable institution.

We need to move forward rather than look backward.

We need to be bold and unafraid to think about where we want to be and will need to be not just next year, but in five, 10 and even 20 years.

We encourage our students to dream big, to trust in themselves and to strive for a greater future. We tell them that what they do today will make a difference— for them, for their families and for society. We need to exhibit this same sense of optimism across the Huskie family, and to expect these same things for ourselves as we move NIU forward together.

It would be my distinct personal and professional honor to serve as NIU's next permanent president in this critical, rewarding and meaningful endeavor.

Now what I'd like to do is hear from you. What are your questions?

Q&A

Thank you for attending the forum, for asking such thoughtful questions, for what you contribute to NIU and for the ways you support our students.

You are Huskies: smart, tough and relentless. You are the ones who can help turn a vision to reality.