



2021 State of the University

President Lisa C. Freeman

Good afternoon. Let me first begin by reading our land acknowledgement:

LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The four locations of Northern Illinois University in DeKalb, Naperville, Rockford and Oregon occupy the traditional homelands of Anishinaabe peoples—Niswi-mishkodewinan, also known as the Council of the Three Fires—comprised of the Potawatomi, Ojibwe and Odawa. Other Indigenous peoples who call this land home include the Sac and Fox, Kickapoo, Peoria, Miami and Sioux. NIU's occupation of this land is a result of ethnic cleansing and forced relocation of Native Americans in part through the Treaty of St. Louis (1804) and the Second Treaty of Prairie du Chien (1829).

We acknowledge the presence and continued vitality of these and other Native communities in our state and Midwest region, as well as throughout the U.S. and Canada. Today, the sovereign Indigenous nations who were forcibly removed from Illinois are located in Iowa, Kansas, Oklahoma, Michigan and Wisconsin, among other states. Moreover, one of the largest communities of Native Americans in the Midwest is in the Chicago area.

As an academic institution, Northern Illinois University has a responsibility to acknowledge and redress this colonial legacy. To that end, NIU will educate our students, staff, faculty and visitors, as well as the surrounding community, about this history. Furthermore, as part of NIU's commitment to diversity, equity and inclusion, we seek to build respectful and authentic relationships with Native students, faculty, staff and local and relocated Native communities by promoting student access and success, academic research and artistry and community outreach and engagement.

Whether you are joining us in person, remotely or watching as your schedule allows, I appreciate you taking the time now to hear about NIU's accomplishments over the past year and our goals and plans for the future.

At this very time last November, we were eight months into the COVID-19 pandemic and two weeks past an emotional election season. The vast majority of our classes, students and employees were remote. We were preparing to launch a new COVID-19 surveillance testing



program and hopeful that the FDA would soon authorize a vaccine for emergency usage. We missed being together in person.

Since then, we've been building a community of belonging as we reunite. We delivered on our promise to celebrate our 2020 and 2021 graduates with *in-person* ceremonies; 70% of our classes are now in person and our residence halls are full of new life; we saw a 12% increase in new first-year students; conducted more than 50,000 surveillance tests; our nation has a fully approved vaccine; and our on-campus vaccination rate is almost 90% and climbing.

Our Huskies are once again in the lab, on stage, in the field and more. This is *exceptional progress*. And we've been able to do it because of Huskies who have taken their responsibilities seriously to protect our pack; Huskies who never took their focus off student success; Huskies who adapted to new ways of teaching, learning and working; Huskies who embraced our [mission, vision and values](#); and Huskies who pitched in – in any way they could. I am profoundly grateful and proud of our caring and committed community.

But I'm also aware of and have felt the toll that the demands of the past 20 months have taken on Huskies. Attending or working at any university under the best of circumstances has its challenges. Now add in a lengthy global pandemic; percolating national issues around systemic racism, xenophobia and intolerance; and new pressures for our students to face. The sum of these is quite heavy.

Across the nation – particularly in the fields of health care, education, social work, law enforcement, food service and retail – morale has been hit, *hard*. Exhaustion feels more like a permanent state than a passing feeling, and I'm certain we're all wondering when and if an end will be in sight. I believe there will be – and together we will continue to help one another navigate the ebbs and flows until our new normal stabilizes. While there is no quick fix, I do want to share the ideas I've heard from Huskies that have proven helpful to many:

- First, no one should be afraid to use all available resources to help relieve pressure. There is no shame in asking for help. None. For our employees, that includes tapping into the [Employee Assistance Program](#), utilizing your benefits and talking with your supervisor or a resource in [HR](#) to help you be successful. For our students, the [Center for Student Assistance](#) is a one-stop shop to connect you to every type of help you need, including mental health counseling, academic support, access to food and the [Student Emergency Fund](#). Since April 2020, more than 6,000 students have received some form of Student Emergency Fund financial support, totaling \$5.7 million in direct aid to help address housing, meals, transportation and technology needs.



- Whenever possible and appropriate, employees have benefited immensely when their supervisors have provided grace and flexibility; the same is true for faculty with their students. I encourage all of us to find the ways, big and small, to allow a little extra grace to all Huskies we encounter. Kindness and mutual respect matter.
- Raising up ideas on how we can improve the daily lives of Huskies is also critical. Could something be done differently, better or more efficiently, such as a process, policy or program? I'm certain of it. What about an idea for a new service or set of supports? We truly want to know those ideas. Let us know by attending one of the [office hours](#) that I or [Executive Vice President and Provost Beth Ingram](#) host each semester, or submit an idea, either by name or anonymously, via our [virtual suggestion box on my website](#).
- There's also tremendous value in taking the time to acknowledge and celebrate the good work that is being done and even recognized. Just recently we shared that NIU has been honored nationally for our deep commitments to shared governance, the faculty experience and fostering a university community that embraces diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging. There are countless examples of really incredible things happening at NIU, and even more incredible are the people making them happen. [Applaud a Colleague](#) and [NIU Today](#) are terrific places to start when you need a little boost and inspiration. I am committed to creating more in-person opportunities to celebrate Huskies in the coming year.

As I reflect on this past year, I see where we've excelled, and I see where we need to revise our strategies. The pandemic has underscored our need to be more comfortable with uncertainty, more nimble and more open to change so that we can be in the best position to manage new challenges and new opportunities. We need to change the processes and practices used to support our [mission, vision and values](#) in order to stay true to the things that make us NIU.

Accordingly, our commitments to curiosity, creativity, equity and inclusion are closely interwoven with our aspirations and apparent throughout our annual and multiyear goals. I am very proud that NIU attracts diverse students and employees with different lived experiences and perspectives. We want to be a university community that respects all voices and identities; enables all to be fully who they are; a community that acknowledges historical inequities and strives to eliminate exclusionary practices and barriers that keep students, faculty and staff from learning and working to their full potential. Diversity is a dimension of our excellence, and equity is a driving force and necessary condition for achieving excellence in all aspects of our



mission. Each Huskie deserves to be seen, heard, valued and welcome, and while we are one community, what we each need to be successful is different.

Our goals reflect a commitment to equity and diversity that is deep, strategic and sustainable. Through shared commitment and accountability, achieving these goals will enhance the success of all of our students and faculty, foster employee satisfaction and sense of belonging and, importantly, position the university for long-term sustainability.

The [university's goals are accessible online](#) and are very detailed. Today I'm going to highlight a subset to give you a sense of our priorities and focus. As in past years, the goals are grounded in NIU's core values and aligned with the themes in the [Strategic Action Planning Framework](#) that guides the actions we take to deliver on our vision and mission. The specifics were informed by analyses of our university's strengths and weaknesses; the opportunities and threats we face externally; as well as feedback from our community. The university goals will go before the [NIU Board of Trustees](#) for their approval during the Nov. 18 meeting.

Under the core theme of empowerment and shared responsibility, NIU's [strategic action planning framework](#) emphasizes leadership development, transparent and effective communication and co-ownership of goals. Our university's success depends on the presence of visible leaders at every level, and a culture that appreciates and respects the expertise and perspectives of every community member.

A proven way to achieve these outcomes is implementing a shared leadership framework. Shared leadership is way to harness the knowledge and experience of multiple people at varying levels of the institution for problem solving, innovation and change. In this model, cross-functional teams are empowered to utilize their expertise to strategize and develop actionable solutions. Their efforts are supported by key decision makers and the university community so that the team has access to relevant information, key resources and meaningful professional-development opportunities. Shared leadership has already produced positive outcomes at NIU by facilitating changes that will help our university to innovate, learn, perform and respond to external threats. For these reasons, shared leadership is a common thread throughout the university's goals.

For example, shared leadership is powering our [administrative efficiency project](#). You might recall that 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.](#)

One recently completed project streamlined the financial aid process for students and has significantly decreased the manual document processing done by the [Financial Aid and Scholarships Office](#). Most of the other Tier 1 projects are well underway with half already in the execution phase. Other projects will take a bit longer, and the campus can [track progress online via a DoIT dashboard](#).

Shared leadership also propelled the work of the [Remote Working/Flexible Scheduling Task Force](#). Our employees have shown that flexibility can fuel productivity. Currently, a cross functional team is implementing a number of their recommendations, revising our human resources policies to expand work-from-home options to be more modern and inclusive. As we do with all new or revised policies, they will be communicated to Huskies with an opportunity to provide feedback through the [Policy Library](#).

Shared leadership is also instrumental as we collaborate on the next edition of our [Strategic Enrollment Management Plan](#). Under the initial plan, launched in early 2019, we developed and introduced new programs and strategies to make an NIU degree *even more* accessible, equitable and affordable. This fall, we saw the full effects of our innovative recruiting efforts – including being [one of the very first universities in the nation to remove the use of standardized test scores for admissions and merit scholarships](#). That action and the implementation of new programs like [Huskie Pledge](#) and [Rockford Promise](#) produced our newest class of diverse, high-achieving students. [Our first-year new student enrollment grew by 12%](#), the fifth consecutive year of gains in NIU's new first year class enrollment and the largest percentage increase in more than two decades. Let me share some additional highlights about our new first year students:

- Average high school GPA of 3.34.
- 70% received a merit scholarship.
- 57% are first-generation college students.
- They are the most diverse incoming class in university history.

Additionally, we saw:

- 38% growth in new master's-level students and 22% growth in new doctoral students; and
- The NIU College of Law grew for the third straight year.



We are proud of this new class and our continuing students. Our commitment to their futures requires that the entire university purposefully come together to help them persist to graduation. And our need to do so is greater than ever. COVID-19 has proved to be an unrelenting obstacle in our efforts. NIU student struggles reflected nationwide trends during the pandemic. Changes in learning modalities, as well as financial, time-management and personal stresses, made it especially challenging for first-year and first-generation students to stay focused on their studies and use available support networks. So, we took a thoughtful and personalized approach to our outreach and made significant investments of time and resources, personally reaching out to students, working with them on their specific challenges, connecting them directly to resources including federal funding and [NIU's Student Emergency Fund](#) grants. Our aim is to bring back as many 2020 first-year students as possible who did not enroll for this fall so that they may pursue their dreams.

Our experiences and lessons learned from the past 18 months will be reflected in a *new* multiyear strategic enrollment plan that will span the next five years. In alignment with [Thriving Illinois, the strategic plan of the Illinois Board of Higher Education](#), it will focus intensely on meeting the needs and supporting the success of historically underserved students, and on closing the equity gaps that have left too many behind.

And equity gaps are not limited to when students are in college – they also face post-graduation equity gaps when entering the job market. This is top of mind for our students, and they have let us know that they would benefit from greater opportunities to develop their career skills, internship experiences and better-defined paths to potential employers. That's why I'm particularly excited about a new relationship we're developing with Braven.

[Braven](#) is a non-profit organization that partners with universities looking to enhance the earning power of promising students from underserved communities. They do this by providing them with the same support and opportunities available to peers from more-affluent starting points. Braven and university partners work together to ensure that first-generation college students, students from low-income backgrounds and students of color gain the skills, confidence, experiences and networks necessary to transition from college to strong first jobs and thrive in 21st century workplaces. And, Braven will build on the incredible work we have already been doing with engaged alumni and employers to help businesses and communities thrive.

More information about Braven will be rolled out in the coming months, and we are committed to sharing the new Strategic Enrollment Plan with our community in February.



I'd like to talk now about three interrelated goals that promote transdisciplinary scholarship.

Many contemporary issues demand that scholars and students work at the intersections of disciplines and beyond their traditional boundaries. To maximize the talents of NIU scholars and students, and enable them to create sustainable solutions to complex societal problems, we need to broaden the way we typically think and teach. We must build on the foundational knowledge of our disciplines by integrating additional concepts, theories and methods into their traditional approaches. We must not allow inflexible hierarchies and metrics to be used either to devalue transdisciplinary research, applied and community-based works, or to dismiss scholarship on race, ethnicity or gender. When this occurs, our students, faculty and society suffer. Therefore, we must go beyond merely accepting the legitimacy of work that is transdisciplinary to actively championing the way it fosters innovation.

NIU has both established and emerging strengths where our society has urgent needs – specifically in the areas of social, racial and ethnic disparities; environmental justice; STEM education; artificial intelligence; and machine learning. To further distinguish ourselves, we will be investing significantly in these areas, empowering and incentivizing teams to develop transdisciplinary initiatives, including collaborative research projects, cross-disciplinary coursework and capstone experiences for graduate and undergraduate students. It's also an opportunity to expand our existing [Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Fellowship program](#) by seeking post-docs, post-graduate fellows and visiting faculty with perspectives and expertise that will enhance these areas. The numerous, strong alignments among these initiatives have led me to charge Provost Ingram, VP Blazey and VP Edghill-Walden to develop a plan for moving forward in these areas. You will be hearing more from them on the matter.

In addition, this past spring, two task forces were convened to consider existing barriers to transdisciplinary scholarship and curricular innovation. Their recommendations are forthcoming and will contribute to a strategy for inspiring change and achieving results.

As noted, advancing transdisciplinary scholarship is essential to how we will prepare our students and the communities we serve for a century of change. Our [Northern Illinois Center for Community Sustainability, commonly referred to as NICCS](#), is another terrific example.

As I have shared previously, NICCS is a hub in the [Illinois Innovation Network](#). The network connects Illinois public universities and supports collaboration to drive inclusive innovation, equitable workforce development and sustainable economic growth throughout our state. NICCS addresses the challenges of environmental change, shifting demographics and sociopolitical inequity impacting our region and the world, and connects research and



innovation to advance sustainability in food systems, water resources and environmental adaptation while also promoting science-based policies and practices for communities.

NIU is investing \$8 million in matching funds for the building that will house NICCS and serve as the centerpiece of the university's West Campus. And we continue to actively advocate for the release of the \$15 million committed by the state to move forward with developing the physical space for NICCS. But even without a dedicated building, NIU faculty are conducting cutting-edge, transdisciplinary research in relatively new fields such as urban-regional modeling, disaster attribution, controlled environment agriculture, prairie restoration and forever chemicals. Moreover, we are forging ties between university, community, government and businesses, with projects underway between NIU and the U.S. Geological Survey, Argonne National Laboratory, the DeKalb County Community Gardens, the University of Illinois and Southern Illinois University.

These projects and partnerships are built on a strong foundation, as NIU's sponsored funding portfolio continues to grow. 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 a win for our students who gain distinctive research and experiential learning opportunities.

And I am pleased that our students, faculty and staff will benefit from new space to support their teaching, learning, research and engagement. NIU's West Campus will also be home to a future Health Informatics Technology Center. Here again, shared leadership and transdisciplinary scholarship are charting a new course for our future. Earlier this year, a team representing expertise from five colleges, [Facilities](#), [Research and Innovation Partnerships](#), [Outreach, Engagement and Regional Development](#) and the [NIU Foundation](#) collaborated to develop a shared project vision through a thoughtful pre-design process. They recommended that design of the physical space be guided by the theme, "Information Technology: Building for a Healthier Tomorrow." They also shared invaluable insights regarding specialized spaces and philanthropic opportunities that should be considered during the next phase of planning and design.

And as we seek to be more intentional about broadening opportunities for leadership, fostering transdisciplinary scholarship and supporting work focused on understanding and addressing social and racial disparities, we must be intentional about centering equity and connecting policy to practice. NIU has made great strides, but there is still much more to be done. To sustain our momentum, we need to make clear that equity is everyone's work, and we



must hold each other accountable as we strive to diversify our faculty and staff, promote inclusive practices and foster the thoughtful exchange of views.

To that end, we are developing a formal NIU Equity Community of Practice that will use a shared leadership model to engage and enhance the work of departments, committees and commissions whose focus is to advance equity and inclusion goals. For example, the Equity Community of Practice will encourage dialogue across the NIU community on biases, systems and structures that impede the success and advancement of underserved and underrepresented students and faculty. This collaborative work will back the development of a change and accountability plan and, importantly, elevate recommendations from the [Faculty Senate Social Justice Committee](#) and the [Transdisciplinary Scholarship Task Force](#). To accelerate progress wherever possible, the Community of Practice will meet regularly with me and Executive Vice President and Provost Beth Ingram.

Our university goals are ambitious, and our ability to achieve them hinges on financial sustainability – which requires a combination of innovation, entrepreneurship and disciplined fiscal balance.

We've had to navigate too many periods of declining resources, fiscal deficits and operational challenges, including the COVID pandemic. We want to shape a growth trajectory that reflects additional student success, expanded research impact and enhanced community engagement, and do this in a way that honors the university community, as well as our region and state. Owning our destiny requires that we take new, more-transformative approaches, champion change, take risks, invest and evaluate our progress.

To be successful, we'll need to define our future vision for NIU. Our multiyear plans will need to acknowledge the necessity for trade-offs and redeployment of physical, financial and human resources. In addition, multiyear planning will need to be supported by an inclusive process that:

- Integrates conversations about planning and financial management;
- Increases access to information;
- Enhances transparency into budget decisions;
- Incentivizes innovation and entrepreneurship in support of strategic goals and priorities; and
- Promotes stewardship and accountability.



Shared leadership and cross-functional teams will play important roles in developing a transparent, inclusive university budget planning process that is effective at achieving these outcomes. In this context, the provost, chief financial officer and I have asked Vice President Blazey, Dean Brinkmann and Vice President Edghill-Walden to bring forward recommendations that can be implemented at the university level to ensure that our multiyear planning process aligns resources with strategic priorities that support the university goals and advance NIU's [mission, vision and values](#). Their work will provide the foundation for additional teams to make process recommendations at unit and divisional levels.

On a parallel path, our [Foundation](#) continues to tirelessly advocate for our students and university. Just recently, our annual giving event showcased the importance of supporting student social mobility and, once again, our amazing donors clearly demonstrated their desire to be a catalyst for student success.

The engagement and support of our donors and alumni is always invaluable, but even more so as the Foundation nears launching NIU's most aspirational multiyear comprehensive fundraising campaign. Through a united effort and a visionary plan for the future, our ability to meet the needs of our students and society's challenges will be enhanced and energized. Thank you, donors and alumni; we are incredibly grateful for your continued generosity.

I also want to express my profound gratitude and respect for our employees. You make it all happen – transformative learning experiences; advocacy; the big and small gestures that let our students know you care; the continued upkeep of our campus; the desire to make a difference each day in the Huskie community; and so much more.

And to our students: You inspire us. We think about you morning, noon and night – committed to raising you up, empowering you and celebrating your success. We are counting on you to foster the change we want to see in our world.

In closing, I want you to know that NIU will move forward driven by bold ambitions, exciting priorities and an unwavering commitment to excellence. We will harness and integrate the varied and valuable resources available to us – not only our financial resources, but also the expertise and ingenuity of our talented employees, support of our engaged alumni and donors and the wherewithal of committed partners and collaborators. We will create, rescale and grow by investing in shared priorities aligned with our [mission and values](#).



Northern Illinois University

Tuesday, Nov. 16, 2021

Please continue your commitment to collaboration, push your comfort zones related to change and respect for different perspectives and, most importantly, commit to upholding our Huskie values. Thank you for taking the time to listen today. Now, I invite you to take a moment to [watch this next video](#) for a little reminder of who we are and why we won't quit.