

November 13, 2013
FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
Attention: News Editor

NIU WINS NATIONAL AWARD FOR INNOVATION AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

(Washington, D.C.) – Just weeks after receiving formal designation as an “Innovation and Economic Prosperity University,” NIU has received one of the nation’s top awards for regional economic development.

The Association for Public and Land-Grant Universities (APLU) on Tuesday announced NIU as the winner of APLU’s inaugural “Place” award for “excelling in community, social, and cultural development work.”

Speaking at the association’s annual meeting in Washington, D.C., APLU President Peter McPherson called NIU’s work in broadband development, school-university partnerships and manufacturing revival “a great example of a public university giving back to its community and state in ways that strengthen the economy and improve the quality of life for residents of that state.”

In addition to NIU, winners of the four economic prosperity awards included the University of Michigan, the State University of New York, and the University of Cincinnati.

“Engagement with our communities and regions has always been the defining characteristic of America’s top public universities,” said NIU President Doug Baker. “To be held up as one of the best in this endeavor, in the company of some of our country’s finest institutions, is a tremendous honor.”

“This defines a level of excellence in how we serve our community and our region,” Baker said. “It also affirms to students and their families that NIU is on the cutting edge of real-world education.”

University applications were scored by a panel of reviewers representing other universities and also national partners, including the National Governors Association, the Biotechnology Industry Organization (BIO), Association of University Research Parks, University Economic Development Association, Business – Higher Education Forum, and the National Association of System Heads. Scoring was based on a range of criteria emphasizing universities’ development of their economic engagement enterprise, their planning efforts around economic engagement, strategic communications around these efforts, and participation in encouraging economic engagement among peer institutions.

The extensive award application was a joint project of the Division of Outreach, Engagement and Information Technologies and the Division of Research and Graduate Studies. It describes how the institution serves a region that is simultaneously urban, suburban and rural, and how it forges both public and private partnerships that benefit all parties.

“To be placed in the company of America’s top public universities in this effort sends a message about the centrality of engagement to the overall mission of the modern public university,” said Anne Kaplan, vice president for Outreach, Engagement and Information Technologies.

Three case studies anchor the application. In the first, NIU describes a decade-long effort to bring high-speed broadband connectivity to the region. As of this fall, the university has overseen installation of more than 2,200 miles of fiber optic cable throughout the northern Illinois region and beyond. More than 750 “community anchor institutions” – schools, libraries, public safety agencies, museums, hospitals and city governments – have been connected to broadband through NIU-managed projects that have attracted close to \$120 million in federal and state funding.

A second case study focuses on the Center for P-20 Engagement. The P-20 center connects external partners such as schools, government agencies and community colleges with people and resources across five colleges and more than 20 offices, centers and institutes at NIU. Among more than 30 university-wide activities currently managed by the Center, the APLU application highlights STEM Outreach as an initiative providing a broad range of examples of innovation growing out of multi-disciplinary collaboration.

The final case study focuses on NIU’s engagement efforts in Rockford, where residents face the dual hardships of high unemployment and low educational attainment. One such initiative involves NIU’s successful partnership with Rockford to develop an aerospace cluster based less on manufacturing and more on design and testing. This project has attracted considerable attention from both federal agencies and private business: Last year Rockford landed a \$2.4 million grant to support aerospace job development, while a leading aerospace company cited the NIU-led initiative as a deciding factor in its choice of Rockford for a \$385 million expansion investment.

“In all three of these case studies, what we see is a commitment to innovation,” said Lisa Freeman, vice president of Research and Graduate Studies and Interim Provost. “At NIU, we are both doing new things, and doing old things in new ways, always with a focus on creating value.”

Unlike many award programs, the APLU competition required universities to describe both accomplishments and challenges. To that end, NIU’s application includes a “growth and improvement” section that outlines how the university intends to maintain momentum in its regional engagement efforts.

“Highlighting this kind of work is critical to developing a sustainable culture of innovation and entrepreneurship among our students and faculty,” Freeman said. “It really requires us to consistently focus on what works, why it works, and what it will take to do more of it.”

APLU is a research, policy and advocacy organization representing 219 public research universities, land-grant institutions, state university systems and related organizations. Founded in 1887, APLU is the nation’s oldest higher education association with member institutions in all 50 states, the District of Columbia and four U.S. territories. Annually, member campuses enroll more than 3.8 million undergraduates and 1.2 million graduate

students, award more than 1 million degrees, employ nearly 1 million faculty and staff, and conduct more than \$37 billion in university based research.

####

Contact: Anne Kaplan
(815) 753-9503
akaplan@niu.edu

OR

Lisa Freeman
(815) 753-1883
lfreeman1@niu.edu