



**Northern Illinois  
University**

Office of the President

November 1, 2020

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

The past year presented our university, state, nation and world with great uncertainty and significant challenges as the result of the global COVID-19 pandemic, and the national reckoning on racial injustice and systemic inequity. Appropriately, NIU focused on crisis response during the initial phases of the public health emergency, and on adjusting to constantly changing conditions thereafter. As a result, well-laid plans were upended; specific goals, milestones, and deadlines were pushed back or set-aside.

In the face of profound disruption, I am proud of the ways that NIU protected our mission and adhered to our values during these difficult and confusing times. We prioritized the needs of students and our community above individual concerns. And, to address those needs, we embraced key aspects of our vision-- innovation and creativity.

The transition to virtual teaching and learning was unexpected – abrupt by necessity, and amazing because of the ingenuity and resilience of NIU faculty and staff across the university. Our ability to effectively provide flexibility and support to employees and respond to the public health emergency was enabled by our Board of Trustees’ willingness to delegate emergency powers and authority governing campus operations to the president. I am grateful for the resourcefulness, courage and compassion exhibited by the entire Huskie community during this exceptional year.

In the following sections, I highlight the progress that NIU sustained across five areas of focus: enrollment; diversity, equity and inclusion; research, artistry, innovation and regional engagement; key leadership initiatives; and fiscal sustainability. I conclude by linking NIU’s FY20 performance to our FY21 goals.

During this year like no other, I am particularly proud of these achievements that are described in more detail in the following sections:

- Total enrollment for fall 2020 climbed to 16,769, up 160 students overall (1%) from 2019- with that growth driven by an 8 percent increase in the number of new freshmen (2,047) and a 6 percentage point-improvement in retention of first-year students.
- Our first-year retention rate of 78% was a 15-year high that reflected significant progress in closing first-year retention rate gaps for Black, Latinx, first-generation and Pell-eligible students.

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- NIU created a more supportive and convenient environment for students to build relationships and access resources, as a result of the [Holmes Student Center renovation](#) and the co-location of student-centered programs and services in the [Campus Life Building](#).
- NIU was recognized for innovation impact, and the university delivered a strong research performance, with our faculty and staff generating 325 sponsored awards totaling \$44M.
- NIU was redesignated as a Carnegie Community Engaged Institution, in recognition of our mission, culture, leadership, resources and practices that support dynamic community engagement, and the high level of community engagement, engaged teaching and engaged scholarship occurring throughout the university.

### **Enrollment:**

More than one year prior to the pandemic, NIU introduced its [Strategic Enrollment Management \(SEM\) goals](#), strategies and objectives, along with an [accountability framework](#). This plan maps out a multi-year approach to creating a sustainable enrollment at NIU while respecting the university's mission and values, and it formed the basis for our FY20 goals.

Prior to the onset of the pandemic, data indicated that our enhanced recruitment strategies were succeeding in attracting excellent students from diverse backgrounds to NIU, as evidenced by an overall increase in total new undergraduate applications by more than 4% (over 800 students), with an increase in new freshmen applications by more than 6% (1,000 students). It is notable that increased interest from students of color (over 850 students) contributed significantly to the increase in new freshman applications.

Throughout the spring and summer, we were highly concerned about whether the uncertainties produced by COVID-19, the associated pivot to remote learning, and the reduction in face-to-face services would prevent NIU from enrolling those applicants in academic year 2020-21. In April, the American Council on Education predicted an enrollment drop of 15% across institutions of higher education. Moreover, as of September 24, the [National Student Clearinghouse](#) reported that nationwide undergraduate enrollment is running 4% below last year's level, with the largest decline (-16%) in first-time beginning college students. In this context, we were pleased when the Fall 2020 10-day student census showed an enrollment of 16,769, an increase of 1% over Fall 2019, and reflected not only increased success at attracting excellent new students, but also significant progress in closing first-year retention rate gaps for Black, Latinx, first-generation and Pell-eligible students.

This year's incoming class boasts a strong academic profile. The average high school grade point average among new freshmen was 3.32, the second highest it has been in 11 years, and the percentages of applicants with a GPA of 3.0 and 3.5 grew 12 percent and 18 percent respectively. Some of that increase was likely created by the university's new [Huskie Pledge program](#).

Implemented this past year, the Huskie Pledge guarantees that all tuition and fees will be covered by grants and scholarships for any Illinois students with a high school GPA of 3.0 or better and whose families have an income of \$75,000 or less. Clearly, the program achieved its goal of providing access and opportunity to talented students who might otherwise have found NIU financially unattainable. Huskie Pledge recipients (719 students) made up 35% of the new freshman class. They were

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predominantly first in their family to enroll in college (74%) and students of color (80%), and they averaged a 3.57 high school GPA.

NIU also saw a significant increase in the percentage of students from the Fall 2019 freshman class who returned as second year students this fall. Specifically, the first-year retention rate increased from 72% to 78% --the highest rate in 15 years. NIU made significant progress in closing first-year retention rate gaps for Black, Latinx, first-generation and Pell-eligible students. Retention rates increased 10 percentage points over Fall 2019 for students of color, with retention of Black students at 71%, Latinx students at 77% and Asian students at 94%. The retention rate for both first-generation and Pell-eligible students was 74%, representing an 8 percentage point year-over-year increase for the former group, and a 9 percentage point increase for the latter.

Enrollment in the NIU College of Law grew for the third straight year to 307 students, an increase of 12% (33 students). Total graduate and professional program enrollment held steady (4,185) despite significant decreases in international students (-20%) and new graduate students (-19%). Enrollment in the eight, online programs supported by NIU's partnership with Wiley Education Services increased in both total students (+48.7%) and student-credit-hours (+53.5%).

It's gratifying to see these positive outcomes from our SEM plan. Although some of our tactics changed as the result of the pandemic, we held fast to our core values and continued to aggressively pursue our recruitment and student success goals. The fall enrollment numbers are cause for great optimism and Huskie pride, especially during this challenging time.

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

NIU's [core values](#) include equity and inclusion. They affirm that we seek and are strengthened by the diverse perspectives of our university community, and the FY20 goals were designed to foster an equity-minded learning environment and culturally competent community where students, faculty and staff from a wide range of backgrounds flourish. This past year, under unprecedented circumstances, NIU made an extraordinary effort to sustain our commitments to provide access and opportunity for students from currently and historically underserved populations, to improve systems that impact workforce diversity and inclusion, and to enhance vendor diversity.

### Student Success

As noted in the previous section, this past year, NIU improved undergraduate retention and narrowed equity gaps for students of color, first generation students, and students from low income backgrounds. The strategies we pursued to achieve these outcomes are detailed not only in the accountability framework that supports our [SEM plan](#), but also in our [ILEA Equity Plan](#). In FY20, NIU took significant actions consistent with these plans: adopting an equity statement; expanding the use of [NIU Navigate](#); and eliminating standardized test scores for general admission and merit scholarship decisions. We also acted with urgency in ways that were not scripted to respond to inequities that were introduced or exacerbated by COVID-19. We did this through enhancing academic advising and student assistance services, creating new mechanisms for rapid distribution of student emergency funds and relaxing financial barriers to reenrollment. I am immensely proud of the ways that the Huskie family came together to support struggling students and enable them to remain in school and on the path to

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graduation. What we have accomplished this past year will inspire and empower us to do more going forward.

### Student Experience

In January, NIU relocated a number of student-centered programs and services to the Campus Life Building. This action responded to specific student concerns and created a more supportive and convenient environment for them to access resources and build relationships. The [CHANCE](#) program moved into updated space with a dedicated lounge space. [Military and Veterans Services](#) created a welcoming space specifically for our military students and their families to study, relax and create community. The [Disability Resource Center](#) expanded to become more accessible, and to include more low-distraction testing rooms and technology-equipped workspaces, a lounge area and waiting room. The [Center for Student Assistance](#) was formed to provide students with a single point of consultation to seek resources to address student conflicts, food and housing insecurity, advocacy and victim services, landlord and tenant disputes and financial wellness concerns. These improvements were enabled by the renovation of the [Holmes Student Center](#) and creation of The OASIS, a space with offices and collaborative workspaces for student government and student organizations.

### NIU Workforce

NIU began to address compression, inversion and salary equity issues identified through the analyses committed to by the administration in the context of shared governance and collective bargaining. For example, the collective bargaining agreement for the faculty represented by the United Faculty Alliance defines a process for determining salary equity, compression and inversion adjustments, and the required salary study formed the basis for the adjustments that were applied to faculty salaries on June 15, 2020. Fifty-nine faculty received adjustments.

Additionally, based on the collective bargaining agreement between NIU and AFSCME, we agreed to allocate \$250,000 for two years to address salary equity for the employees in this union. This year's funds went to providing a market adjustment for 150 employees on July 1 which brings those employees to as close to market as possible (83.216%). Going forward, using proprietary models available to Affirmative Action, Equal Opportunity and Education (AAEOE), NIU will analyze compensation by department, by demographic, and across the organization to identify potential patterns of disparity in compensation.

In FY19, NIU saw positive outcomes from the changes initiated in the faculty recruitment process when collaborative efforts across departments and units led to the hire of 15 faculty of color out of approximately 30 hires. The FY20 goals sought to build on this success, by developing programs to support the retention and success of new faculty, and by continuing to improve our faculty and staff search processes to reduce bias, achieve diverse applicant pools and ensure fair evaluation of all candidates.

To facilitate these outcomes, a new position, senior faculty mentor, was created under the Vice Provost for Faculty Affairs in the Office of the Executive Vice President and Provost. An NIU faculty member was appointed to the role in August 2019, and charged with developing a university-level mentoring program for new and continuing faculty, with an emphasis on faculty of color. Despite the pandemic, the senior

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faculty mentor worked to strengthen and expand relationships across campus, collaborating with Academic Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (ADEI) and other offices to ensure the work is responsive to the needs of new and mid-career faculty. A formal proposal informed by this work has been developed, and the program is now expected to launch in FY21. Nonetheless, there was significant progress made this past year, expanding on the foundational work done previously by NIU's academic colleges as well as the successful NIU-hosted annual conference for fellows of the [Diversifying Higher Education Faculty in Illinois](#) (DFI) program.

The processes used to recruit talent to NIU were also strengthened in FY20 despite the pandemic's challenges and decrease in hiring activities. The requirement for implicit bias training was extended to include Supportive Professional Staff (SPS) as well as faculty search committees. A thoughtful analysis of NIU's annual job postings resulted in changes that included more inclusive position descriptions, more cost-effective spending on job advertising and more consistent posting in outlets that target diverse candidates. AAEOE also collaborated with hiring departments to diversify search committees, establish equitable interview processes, and develop and implement fair and effective practices for virtual recruiting. In FY20, faculty of color accounted for 6 of 12 ranked faculty hires, and 24 of 86 unranked faculty hires. In addition, 40 of 161 staff hires were classified as minorities.

### Vendor Diversity

Regrettably, the university fell short of its FY20 goal of improved, year-over-year progress toward achieving the aspirational goal of having 20 percent of our viable purchasing spend go to vendors classified as minority-owned, women-owned, veteran-owned and disadvantaged-owned businesses under the State of Illinois Business Enterprise Program (BEP). Based on currently available information, NIU fell short of the university's BEP goal of \$16.99M out of \$84.96M spend subject to the goal, attaining only 8.7 percent with this level of accomplishment based on expenditure of \$7.39M. This performance is inferior to FY19, when a 9.8 percent BEP achievement rate was reported based on \$6.87M achieved out of a \$14.01M goal based on \$70.03M spend subject to BEP. The increase in the dollar basis for our BEP goal from FY19 to FY20 was the result of changes instituted by the Illinois Department of Central Management Services.

The decreased BEP achievement in FY20 was directly related to the adverse impacts of COVID-19 due to the university's need to reduce overall spending and the postponement of key facility projects. For NIU, facility contracts are the primary contributors to BEP spend and the postponement of such initiatives limited potential BEP opportunities.

## **Research, Artistry, Innovation, and Regional Engagement**

### Research, Artistry and Innovation

NIU was recognized for innovation impact, and the university delivered a strong research performance in FY20. Specifically, NIU was ranked third in innovation impact productivity among U.S. universities with less than \$100 million in total research funding in an independent analysis performed by Southern Methodist University, the George W. Bush Institute and Opus Faveo Innovation Development. In addition, the university achieved its highest level of sponsored funding in five years, receiving 325 awards totaling \$44 million. This success was achieved despite substantial disruptions associated with the pandemic.

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To protect the health and well-being of NIU faculty, staff and students and adhere to public health guidance, most on-site research activities were paused in March and allowed to resume with appropriate guidelines and approvals in May. Many researchers were able to modify their program schedules to remain productive while working remotely, but others had work disrupted or even canceled. In addition, many faculty had less time to dedicate to scholarly activity, because of additional demands related to the rapid, unexpected transition to virtual learning by the university and public schools.

COVID-related travel restrictions also adversely impacted NIU artists, scholars and students by eliminating professional conferences and limiting access to field sites and specialized facilities. In this context, all current probationary tenure-track faculty members were granted an automatic tenure clock extension.

The university timeline for establishing new Emerging Research Initiatives was also impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Six proposals advanced from a competitive review process, but commitments of institutional recognition and funding decisions were delayed. As noted in the FY21 annual goals, these proposals have been shared with a strategic development team comprised of members from the divisions of Research and Innovation Partnerships, Outreach, Engagement and Regional Development and University Advancement, so that the team can identify relevant public and private funding opportunities and partnerships.

### Regional Engagement

In December 2019, NIU was informed that its endorsement as a Carnegie Community Engaged Institution was renewed through 2026. This endorsement recognizes our excellent alignment among campus mission, culture, leadership, resources and practices that support dynamic community engagement, as well as the high level of community engagement, engaged teaching and engaged scholarship occurring throughout the university. Notably, only 359 U.S. institutions of higher education currently hold the prestigious Carnegie Community Engagement Classification.

The experts who reviewed our application provided us with helpful feedback regarding areas for continuous improvement – two of which are directly relevant to established university goals. Specific suggestions were provided about ways to document and assess community partnerships and create coordinating infrastructure to support engagement and effective collaboration with community partners. This guidance will help us as we continue to evolve our partnership survey and pursue our Public Engagement Networks initiative.

In FY20, leaders of this initiative presented the concept and solicited feedback from faculty and staff across the university. Five networks were recognized: Arts and Culture; Workforce Development; Esports; Nonprofit/NGOs and P-20. Network co-chairs were recruited in the fall and the first network meetings were held in the spring. While the pandemic disrupted the momentum of the Public Engagement Network, the conversations and meetings put the network's framework in place, created new relationships and heightened levels of awareness that have been paying dividends while faculty and staff have been operating remotely.

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For example, NIU's success in public engagement and our ability to respond to community needs has been highlighted in the co-creation of DeKalb County UNITES. UNITES is an acronym for Universities and Neighbors Investing Together for Economic Success – a grassroots organization, created in the early days of the pandemic, co-led by NIU's chief engagement officer and a local business owner currently chairing the board of the DeKalb County Economic Development Corporation. Since its inception in March, UNITES has created a website with information and tools for small businesses, hosted more than 30 free webinars, conducted a local consumer behavior survey designed by a faculty member from our College of Business, and implemented public awareness campaigns about masks and public health guidelines. NIU's work with UNITES has also led to a new community engagement project called 40TUDE. Under this program, NIU students will work under the supervision of a College of Business faculty member and the owner of a local marketing company to create websites, e-commerce pages and social media visibility for small businesses and nonprofits whose operations have been significantly impacted by COVID-19.

### **Key Leadership Initiatives**

Key leadership initiatives for FY20 included a presidential commitment to lead change by reimagining Human Resource Services (HRS) and developing a university-level strategic plan to support and advance facilities master planning and development of philanthropic campaign priorities. As detailed below, the pandemic accelerated some aspects of these initiatives and delayed others.

#### Human Resource Services

An opportunity for NIU to reimagine HRS was created when senior leaders in that unit departed to pursue new opportunities. The objective was to identify changes that will allow HRS to be viewed widely as a collaborative and engaged partner; to provide recommendations for HRS becoming a unit celebrated for timely, effective communication and the willingness to work through challenges; and to find opportunities for success and ultimately better integration of NIU core values into HRS processes.

To support this effort, the university engaged an active NIU College of Business alumna with over 30 years of experience as a human resources executive to assess our current functions and recommend ways to foster talent growth, process modernization and strengthen relationships across the university. Consultation began in February, and the role expanded to that of interim HRS director during March to May when additional support was needed as COVID-19 stressed critical systems. These unusual circumstances greatly informed the recommendations offered in a [formal report to the university](#). As noted in the report summary, this is a pivotal time for NIU to transform its human resource function, and there is great confidence in the HRS team because of their extraordinary response to the myriad pressures of the pandemic.

Since March, HRS staff have been exceptional in their support of employees adjusting to working remotely and their efforts to re-engineer process to be both employee-supportive and compliant. Amidst great uncertainty and change, they have been effectively communicating and collaborating with employees about difficult topics. COVID-19 accelerated the reimagination of HRS and sustaining positive momentum will require continued focus on improving processes, workflows and communications as well as investing in technology. A senior leader with a history of supporting transformational change at

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NIU was appointed to the position of Interim Chief Human Resources Offices to drive continued progress.

### Strategic Planning and Facilities Master Planning

During FY19, the university revised our [vision, mission and values](#) statements, and identified six strategic themes interwoven throughout existing university and college plans. In February 2020, the university introduced a [strategic action planning framework](#) that expands upon those themes. The framework was informed by institutional reference documents and community feedback, and intended to support the university's multi-year planning efforts by guiding leader's choices among competing divisional and departmental priorities, informing facilities planning and helping to identify compelling initiatives for a comprehensive fundraising campaign.

Understandably, our original plans and timeline for implementing the strategic action planning framework and initiating a facilities master planning process were upended by COVID-19 and the associated disruptions in university operations. However, the actions taken by NIU during the pandemic to prioritize and address concerns related to the health and wellbeing of our Huskies are reflective of the framework's elements. For example, our [Protecting the Pack](#) plan, and the modifications we made to enhance our classroom technology, air-handling systems, occupancy rates and sanitation protocols, are consistent with our commitment to "encourage student well-being through programs, policies and partnerships that focus on the health, safety and resiliency of our students."

Our university's FY21 goals were created in alignment with the strategic action planning framework, and it will guide our efforts to position NIU for long-term sustainability and future success. These will include facilities planning actions that ensure that our space use and physical footprint reflect evolving academic priorities and economic conditions.

### Comprehensive Fundraising Campaign

NIU's comprehensive campaign planning was impeded by the pandemic. Coming off a strong year in FY19, there was momentum building in FY20 with philanthropic performance on pace towards the \$25M goal. However, after COVID-19 disruption, final year-end results were below projections with total activity (\$15M) at 60 percent of goal and down 31 percent year-over-year. This reflects the reality that the individuals and corporations who are committed to supporting NIU are concerned about economic stability and have less to give comfortably. Accordingly, completion of a case for support and launch of a campaign feasibility study were delayed until at least FY21.

There have also been encouraging accomplishments during the COVID crisis as donors came forward to help address the financial challenges faced by students and the university. Unrestricted giving increased by 6 percent, and these funds have allowed NIU to address unexpected and emerging needs. Total scholarship giving from all sources increased 18 percent. During the early days of the pandemic, fundraising focused on the Student Emergency Fund raised critical dollars to augment CARES Act and other institutional funds. Subsequently, the successful "Huskies United" campaign raised \$468,368 from 1500 donors over 48 hours to support student and faculty initiatives, scholarships and the Student Emergency Fund. In an overwhelming show of generosity and compassion, 672 employees deferred their parking refunds and donated \$27,413 to the Student Emergency Fund. The shift of donor priorities

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toward the immediate needs of students made a real difference for many who were struggling more than ever during this unexpected crisis. As we face continued uncertainty and unprecedented challenges, philanthropy will remain a touchstone for our university community's resilience and strength.

### **Fiscal Sustainability**

NIU implemented a multiyear strategy to produce a structurally balanced university budget no later than FY24. University leaders recognized that closing a structural deficit would require a multiyear commitment to reducing costs and increasing revenues. To that end, they began to create plans that included restructuring for efficiency, investing in mission-aligned areas with revenue-generating potential, incentivizing fiscally responsible behaviors and controlling spend-down of cash reserves. In February, the university was on-track to meet its FY20 budget goals through those efforts in conjunction with targeted budget reductions, bond refinancing and the successful execution of our strategic enrollment management plan.

In March, COVID-19 completely disrupted university operations, interfering with multi-year planning efforts and rendering original FY20 budget projections obsolete. At the outset of the pandemic, the university acted quickly and aggressively to protect the health and well-being of our NIU community, maintain teaching and learning, support our students, and provide flexibility to our employees. These actions allowed us to continue delivering on our mission, vision and values, but also resulted in significant revenue losses and unbudgeted expenses.

In May, NIU projected a final FY20 budget deficit of \$36.5M which was \$31.3M worse than the FY20 budget approved by the Board of Trustees. NIU was able to use \$7.4M of federal CARES Act funding to mitigate institutional expenses related to COVID-19. The university took additional actions to minimize the FY20 deficit and protect cash flow by postponing planned purchases and capital projects, limiting contractual obligations, and implementing a hiring chill. These steps, along with limited campus operations in the fourth quarter of FY20 helped us to navigate this difficult, pandemic-dominated fiscal environment and reduce the projected FY2020 deficit. NIU ended FY2020 with an all-funds deficit of \$15.3M based on total revenues of \$402.7M and total expenditures of \$418M.

### **Looking Forward:**

As NIU's President, I am committed to driving progress at NIU and ensuring that our university will continue to serve students and deliver on its mission, vision and values for many years to come. Accordingly, I appreciate the Board of Trustees approval of [FY21 goals](#) that reflect the intentions and ambitions of the university community and its leaders.

Our FY21 goals build upon the successes, shortcomings and lessons learned during FY20, a year like no other in our lifetime. They reflect NIU's mission, vision, values and incorporate feedback from students, faculty, staff and alumni. Importantly, our goals emphasize NIU's unwavering commitment to racial justice, equity and inclusion, and recognize the importance of actionable data to drive change. The goals also acknowledge the importance of using our strategic action planning framework to advance ideas and develop plans that will position NIU to recover from the financial shock of the pandemic and emerge stronger. I am confident that we will achieve these aspirations. We are Huskies – and Huskies never quit!

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In closing, I want to again express my sincere appreciation to NIU's Board of Trustees, as well as our faculty, staff, students, alumni, donors and partners. In the face of myriad challenges and opportunities, we remain relentless in our pursuit of excellence. Together, we will continue to move our beloved NIU forward.

Sincerely,

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

Lisa C. Freeman, D.V.M., Ph.D.  
President

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Northern Illinois  
University

*Board of Trustees*

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December 10, 2020

**MEMORANDUM**

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

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

**Subject: Annual Presidential Evaluation**

This memorandum contains commentary by the members of the NIU Board of Trustees concerning the goals outlined by you for Fiscal Year 2020 (FY20). This correspondence, along with a self-appraisal of presidential performance in the form of a letter from you to the Board, will be posted on the Board of Trustees' website (<https://www.niu.edu/board/>) and shall collectively serve as a written record of your performance evaluation for FY20.

The Board finds that your overall performance in FY20 met or exceeded the vast majority of your goals. The year 2020 brought many unexpected and unprecedented challenges to our campus, our country, and our world. As we entered the calendar year, NIU was continuing its recent success and was on a tremendously positive trajectory. Early in 2020, COVID-19 impacted every corner of our collective lives in an extremely negative and challenging way. Still, you managed to successfully lead the university through the immense challenges presented by COVID-19 and prepare us for the realities of living in a pandemic. Through it all, you and your leadership team kept student and employee health and safety at the forefront of every decision made. During this time, we also took important steps to alter the timeline and focus of our annual review and setting of presidential goals, so that we benefitted from a broader picture of the university's performance at the start of the fall semester, particularly in terms of enrollment and financial position, and so that goal setting could occur within the context of, and benefit from, a thriving and present campus community. Below, we have detailed our comments on your performance for each of your FY20 goals.

## **Enrollment**

Overall, you met or exceeded the goals in this area. With all the financial and emotional uncertainties in our state and the dire national predictions of declines in college attendance, we are extremely pleased with NIU's fall enrollment, which showed an overall student increase of 1%, including an increase in retention of first- to second-year students. The incoming class was 8% larger than Fall of 2019 and retention of first-year students rose 6%. Efforts to serve diverse students show encouraging results as well. The incoming class demographics reveal a 2% increase in Black student enrollment—resulting in the highest percentage in university history—and 3% gain in Latinx students. Further, the class was predominantly comprised of students who were first-in-family to enroll in college.

Equally important to increased enrollment were efforts to retain more returning students. We note that the first-year retention rate increased to 78%—the highest in 15 years—and specifically that retention also rose for Black (61 to 71%), Latinx (68 to 77%), Asian (84 to 94%), first-generation (66 to 74%), and PELL-eligible students (65 to 74%). The focus you have put on enhancing the student's experience, academic advising and student assistance services, plus marketing and addressing financial barriers were major contributors to these results.

As student enrollment nationally fell almost 4% on average (according to the National Student Clearing House on September 24<sup>th</sup>), we are very pleased that NIU's overall enrollment not only increased, with significant increases in the incoming class, but we also maintained a strong academic standard with the incoming freshman GPA being 3.32, the second highest in 11 years.

## **Diversity, Equity and Inclusion**

Overall, you met or exceeded the goals in this area. As noted above, student diversity continued to be a positive focus of the Fall class. Progress is also noted in addressing issues involving compensation for existing faculty and staff, and recruitment of faculty and staff of color. NIU took noticeable steps to address compression, inversion, and salary equity. Important changes were made to reduce bias in the recruitment process, and programs were created—including the new position of senior faculty mentor—to support the retention and success of new faculty.

Following changes in the recruitment process, we note people of color accounted for half of the new hires in ranked faculty and over a quarter of the unranked faculty hires. In addition, minorities comprised a quarter of staff hires. These are notable accomplishments as we continue working to expand diversity and fulfill our core values of equity and inclusion.

Such positive outcomes as these during the pandemic exceed our expectations and must be credited to the creative and tireless efforts of our leadership, faculty, and staff. The policies and strategies developed through collaboration and modified in response to the pandemic create cause for celebration and optimism for the future.

Unfortunately, the university was unable to demonstrate satisfactory progress toward achieving the Business Enterprise Program (BEP) goal in FY20. The aspirational goal created by the State of Illinois is to spend 20% of our viable and eligible dollars with BEP designated vendors. NIU in FY20 spent 8.7% with BEP vendors, representing \$7.39M out of a total viable university purchasing spend of \$84.96M. The university's FY20 spending with BEP vendors represents an increase of \$572K over FY19.

We are committed to working with you to fully understand how NIU can meet and exceed this critical State of Illinois goal by procuring goods and services that are counted by the State towards BEP goal compliance. We understand the pandemic caused the university to reduce its overall spending and postpone several key facility/construction projects which might have improved NIU's FY20 BEP percentage. Nevertheless, we have a keen interest in meeting the BEP percentage goal established by the State and wish to support you in your efforts to look for opportunities beyond these constraints.

### **Research, Artistry, Innovation and Regional Engagement**

Overall, and considering the significant challenges to university and faculty life at NIU during the COVID-19 pandemic, the goals you outlined for Research, Artistry, Innovation and Engagement have been met or exceeded.

We understand that faculty had less time to dedicate to scholarly activity as they undertook the additional demands of virtual learning. We applaud active researchers who were able to modify their program schedules and remain productive while working remotely, and understand that others had work disrupted and, in some cases, canceled. Granting automatic tenure clock extensions for tenure-track faculty was the right thing to do under the circumstances.

Despite substantial disruptions, the university was able to advance research and artistry in line with aspirations. We are very pleased to learn that 325 sponsored awards were received totaling \$44M. NIU's strong research performance in FY20 was further recognized through independent analysis outlined in your materials. Despite the pandemic interruptions, substantial progress was made to identify and support emerging research initiative(s) (ERI) consistent with NIU's research vision and strategic emphases. It would have been understandable to put this initiative on hold under the circumstances; instead, progress was made as six proposals advanced from a competitive review process, and efforts to identify relevant public and private funding opportunities and partnerships continue.

In terms of regional engagement, your goals related to institutionalizing engagement networks have been met or exceeded. NIU's endorsement as a Carnegie Community Engaged Institution was renewed through 2026. That process has sharpened your objective to document and assess community partnerships and create coordinating infrastructure to support engagement and effective collaboration with community partners. The Public Engagement Network initiative has led to the recognition of five networks (Arts and Culture; Workforce Development; Esports; Nonprofit/NGOs, and P-20). We recognize the value of conversations and meetings that have

put the network's framework in place, created new relationships, and heightened levels of awareness. The DeKalb County UNITES organization is an excellent example of what can be achieved through a well-organized and expertly managed engagement initiative—one that not only transcends the limitations of a public health crisis, but leans into that crisis with valuable interventions seeking to protect the health of the local community and economic viability of its businesses.

### **Key Leadership Initiatives**

Overall, you have met or exceeded all Key Leadership Initiative goals given that we had the serious interruption of a pandemic midway through the fiscal year. Your major goals were to reimagine Human Resources for the university, advance the strategic plan and facilities master plan, and plan the next capital campaign. We appreciate and admire that you identified the major goals for reimagining Human Resources to be a collaborative and engaged partner to the university, have timely and effective communication, have a willingness to seek collaborative outcomes, and be a role model for NIU's core values. To achieve this, you brought in an accomplished and experienced NIU alumna on a temporary basis when senior leaders in Human Resources departed. Working together with senior leadership across the university, a framework was established to achieve the goals you previously laid out. COVID-19 presented many challenges along the way, but also represented an opportunity to test and even accelerate some of the initiatives successfully. The response of Human Resources to the stress and operational challenges presented by the pandemic was exceptional and contributed to NIU being able to consistently put employee and student welfare and safety first. Also, we support and applaud the move you recently made to assign a key and respected senior leader of the university to the position of Interim Chief Human Resources Officer.

Even though the pandemic delayed the implementation of the original plans and timelines of the strategic plan framework established in FY19, you were able to quickly pivot and make some exceptional progress and create the necessary plans to allow NIU to respond to our new reality of living with COVID-19. NIU's "Protecting the Pack" plan was a great example of this. Also, very quickly, modifications were made to our classrooms, air-handling systems, occupancy ratios, and sanitation protocols that allowed us to successfully open the university in the Fall. Even with this major interruption to everyone's daily and professional lives, university leadership was able to make key decisions concerning competing divisional and departmental priorities and facilities planning to support the fiscal sustainability of the university in a year where revenue and expense budgets were completely upended by the pandemic. We recognize that the university's ability to respond in the manner that we did to these unprecedented times was due to the strategic planning framework developed by you and your leadership team. FY20 presented us with an opportunity to see the framework put into action in a way that kept NIU moving forward despite these uncertain times.

Although the university did not meet the \$25M fundraising goal, we applaud your ability to adjust priorities as needed while still raising \$15M and reimagining the timelines and

methodology for the next capital campaign as a consequence of the pandemic. The shift in fundraising goals to meet the needs of NIU's students shows your commitment to the welfare of the entire university. In addition to the Student Emergency Relief Fund, the creation of the "Huskie United" campaign and the willingness of 672 university employees deferring and donating their parking refunds to meet the financial needs of our students exemplifies your incredible leadership and vision during an increasingly difficult time. We commend the culture you have created which has led to donations for the "Huskie United" campaign and the increase in scholarship giving.

### **Fiscal Sustainability**

The Board of Trustees (BOT) acknowledges that, in FY20, you made progress in this area when you and your executive team implemented a multiyear budget strategy to produce a structurally balanced university budget no later than FY24. We further acknowledge that you and your team began to create plans that included restructuring the university for efficiency, investing in mission-aligned areas with revenue-generating potential, incentivizing fiscally responsible behaviors and controlling spend-down of the school's cash reserves. We understand you appeared to be on-track to meeting your FY20 budget goals through those efforts in conjunction with targeted budget reductions, bond refinancing and the successful execution of NIU's Strategic Enrollment Management Plan. However, it is apparent that the occurrence and onslaught of the COVID-19 virus stopped whatever progress was being made towards a balanced budget and rendered your FY20 budget projections obsolete.

The financial havoc caused by the pandemic on NIU's campus initially led us to anticipate a budget deficit of at least \$36.5M by the end of FY20; an amount far worse than that which was approved by the BOT for FY20. However, despite what has occurred to NIU budgetary goals as a result of the pandemic, you and your team are to be commended for your agility in reducing the anticipated budget deficit of \$36.5M to \$15.3M. You were able to reduce the budget deficit by taking the necessary steps to decrease NIU's expenses and by pursuing supplemental revenue sources. Although NIU finds itself in a worse predicament than anticipated, you did execute a multi-year budget strategy that unfortunately had to be abandoned due to no fault of your own. We will continue to stand with you as you and your team pivot and work to prepare NIU for the post-pandemic recovery of our country and the State of Illinois' higher education system.

In summary, President Freeman, the Board of Trustees would like to recognize that you have continued to be a fearless advocate for the interests of NIU students, faculty, administration and staff, alumni, and local communities. You have served as a role model for your leadership team, and in our opinion continue to be one of the most creative, imaginative and hardworking presidents in the State of Illinois, and higher education community overall. You consistently demonstrate great respect for the mission, vision, and values of NIU. We know that as we leave 2020, there are still difficult months ahead of us as we continue to navigate the impact of the pandemic. We realize that there are still many difficult decisions to make. But we know we

have a president that will continue to make these decisions in a collaborative manner with care and concern for the NIU community. We support and stand beside you and your leadership team. Forward, Together Forward!