



Northern Illinois University

Office of the President

November 1, 2023

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

This past year saw measurable progress on the university's annual and multiyear goals, attributable to the creativity, commitment and resilience of NIU faculty, staff, students and supporters. I am proud of the myriad ways that members of our university community have embraced shared leadership to look beyond the pandemic and adjust to changing economic and social conditions. I am grateful for their continued confidence and encouragement, as well as for the strong support I have received from our Board of Trustees.

The dedication of NIU faculty and staff to our mission, vision and values is tangible at every level. We work together to foster an inclusive and engaging learning environment. We strive to advance student success and social mobility; create knowledge and works of art; and collaborate with community partners to enrich teaching, learning, research and scholarship. When challenged, our Huskie community exhibits grit, passion, optimism and respect for each other's diverse perspectives and experiences. NIU is moving forward on a positive trajectory, and my husband Doug Rose and I are proud to continue our annual practice of donating \$25,000 to support student scholarships.

Below, I highlight NIU's progress across our six strategic themes: empowerment and shared responsibility; student recruitment, student success and student experience; academic excellence and curriculum innovation; diversity, equity and inclusion; research, scholarship, artistry and engagement; and resource development and fiscal responsibility.

Empowerment and Shared Responsibility

This past year, NIU continued to promote shared leadership to strengthen institutional culture, create meaningful pathways for faculty and staff professional development, increase opportunities for collaborative problem solving and enhance accountability, building on our previous efforts to formalize shared leadership definitions and best practices. Notable examples of shared leadership in action include the bridging model being used to pursue objectives of [Strategic Enrollment Management Plan 2.0](#), the [DRAFT Sustainability and Action Plan](#) posted for comment by the Sustainability and Action Planning Task Force, the transition to multiyear budgeting in accordance with the [Budget Resource Planning Group recommendations](#) and the Digital Accessibility Task Force formed by interested employees from multiple divisions. Through shared leadership initiatives, we are developing employee potential and fostering pride.

NIU has grown more intentional in providing coaching and professional development experiences to faculty and staff who assume leadership responsibility at different levels, and we are proud to see Huskies represented in programs sponsored by organizations ranging from the [PKAL STEM Leadership Institute](#) to the [NACUBO Fellows Program](#). In addition, the university continued to expand its offerings for supervisor training and for emerging faculty and staff leaders. Between 2017 and 2023, the number of participants in our [signature faculty leadership programs](#)—the MAC Academic Leadership Development Program and

the Emerging Faculty Leadership Program—has increased from three to 14 each year. Moreover, in 2023, the President’s Office welcomed a second Presidential Staff Fellow and a second cohort of 16 participants in the Staff Professional Development Academy.

Participants in these programs have had significant positive impact on NIU. For example, more than 15 of the 43 alumni of our faculty leadership programs currently occupy academic leadership positions at NIU, serving as chairs, directors, associate deans and faculty athletics representative (FAR). Staff fellow projects have resulted in a more expansive and inclusive staff awards process along with changes to make campus parking more responsive to the needs of our residential students and hybrid workforce.

Our intentional efforts to develop leaders from the ranks of our faculty and staff will help us achieve our multiyear goals related to the theme Empowerment and Shared Responsibility by building capacity, providing a strong foundation for succession planning and enhancing employee engagement. In fact, we have already seen improvement in the relevant dimensions of the ModernThink Higher Education Insight Survey, including a 3% increase in the percentage of faculty and staff expressing satisfaction with professional development opportunities.

In addition to the efforts described above, NIU is continuing to use a shared equity leadership approach to scale work focused on enhancing diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging (DEIB). Outcomes are reported below under that theme.

Student Recruitment, Student Success and Student Experience

Driven by our mission, vision and values, NIU responded to the change and disruption caused by the pandemic with plans to become stronger, more sustainable and more purposeful about achieving our enrollment and equity goals. Our updated [Strategic Management Plan 2.0](#) recognizes that effective enrollment management requires intentional, effective strategies for recruiting new students and for retaining currently enrolled students and fostering an environment that encourages all our students to persist and complete their degrees. Accordingly, it provides for regular outcomes evaluation through integration with the university’s annual and multiyear goals.

Student Recruitment

Undergraduate Enrollment: The Huskies who joined NIU in the fall 2023 class are academically accomplished. According to the official 10-day count, total freshman enrollment is 2,202. These newly arrived scholars and leaders come to NIU having earned an average high school GPA of 3.42, the second consecutive year that the incoming freshman class has set this record. Under the university’s [test-free admission and merit scholarship processes](#), NIU awarded more than \$7.2 million in merit scholarships to new freshmen who arrive with cumulative high school GPAs of 3.0 or higher. Nearly 20% of incoming freshmen had 4.0 high school GPAs, while 36% of new freshmen had high school GPAs of 3.7 or higher. In 2023, the Honors Program added 282 new freshmen, and now has a total enrollment of 1,073 honors students, an increase of 14% over last fall.

While the number of new enrolling freshmen did not match the exponential growth over the past six years, the demographics of these students remains reflective of our public mission. They are an economically, socially and racially diverse group of learners, with 57% first-generation college students, 53% Pell grant recipients, and 70% students of color. NIU’s [AIM HIGH Huskie Pledge program](#), funded by the State of Illinois, continues to ensure that qualifying Illinois students from lower-income households can attend college with no tuition or general fees for their first year, and potentially beyond. This fall, 866 incoming students were eligible and will not have to pay out-of-pocket expenses for tuition and general fees. Further, NIU experienced an enrollment increase in new transfer students this fall of 6%

over a year ago—to 1,325 students.

For the first time in NIU's history, Latinx students represent 25% of NIU's total undergraduate population. The significance of this achievement is that it places the institution on a trajectory to receive full designation as a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI). Recruitment and retention of international students has been another area of success. NIU's total fall enrollment of students from outside the United States surpassed the 1,000 mark for the first time since 2016. In all, international students represent 73 different countries. NIU has continued to place great significance on the value and importance of a diverse university community, and this year's class demonstrates that this message resonates with students.

Graduate and Professional Enrollment: In Fall 2023, total enrollment in the College of Law was stable year over year with 314 students, an increase of two students compared to Fall 2022. However, this fall saw a 1.9% decrease in total graduate enrollment to a total of 3,832 students. This is consistent with national trends that show slowing growth of graduate enrollments. For example, available national data show that between Fall 2021 and 2022, first-time graduate enrollment at doctoral universities with high research activity (R2) decreased 4.7%. In this environment, it is important that NIU is acting intentionally to strengthen graduate programs and improve the graduate student experience as described below under Theme 3.

Student Success and Student Experience

While we recognize that enrollment of new students is essential to the academic mission, NIU has not taken for granted the critical nature of student retention. In Fall 2023, our total enrollment of 15,504 exceeded 15,360, the targeted enrollment minimum developed with consideration for the smaller pool of continuing students resulting from two years of negative pandemic impacts on student persistence. NIU's retention of first-time, full-time students increased over 5 percentage points, from 65% in 2022 up to over 70% in fall 2023. Significantly, the retention rate of first-generation students increased 6 percentage points year over year as we continue to focus on reducing and eliminating equity gaps. It is gratifying to see that we have made substantial progress alleviating barriers that hinder student success, retention and persistence through our intentional focus on providing effective transitions into the Huskie family, and increased attention to the academic, mental, physical, social and emotional needs of our talented, diverse student body.

One positive example—the Quality Initiative pursued as part of our reaccreditation by the Higher Learning Commission, *Success in Gateway Courses for All*—demonstrates that it is possible to reduce systemic barriers to student success when goals are aligned with mission; data is used to drive action; and the community shares responsibility for student outcomes. With the goal of increasing students' success in courses they need to take to advance within a major or complete general education requirements, teams of faculty and staff focused on interventions related to pedagogical practices, academic and co-curricular supports. Innovation was encouraged. Data collection and feedback were emphasized. Success rates improved in half of the courses addressed, and equity gaps reduced in almost one-quarter of all courses addressed. The Quality Initiative also propelled pilots for new interventions that have demonstrated great promise such as eight-week courses and course credit recovery modules. We plan to continue and expand these to even better support student success.

In addition to the progress made increasing persistence and graduation rates, we are increasing available opportunities for NIU students to build skills, confidence, experiences and networks to help them achieve strong first jobs, personal and professional success. For example, our partnership with [Braven](#) continued to evolve with more students served, more NIU alumni engaged as mentors and new opportunities for

improvement and growth. Overall, NIU Braven Fellows expressed a high degree of satisfaction with their Braven experience. For example, 60% agreed that the accelerator course was superior to other virtual courses they had taken, and 75% thought that Braven greatly improved their chances of getting the jobs they want after graduation. In addition, participation in the Braven Accelerator was associated with increased internship attainment. NIU Fellows also offered suggestions for improving the Braven experience by adding in-person events and providing more interactions with peers who share their specific career aspirations and with leadership coaches who work in their chosen fields. Accordingly, we are working with our Braven partners to expand career-specific coaching, mentoring and networking opportunities, as well as to provide NIU Fellows with at least two in-person engagements per semester. We are enthusiastic about opportunities to grow and strengthen the NIU Braven community.

The university's plan to sustain a thriving fraternity and sorority community also gained momentum over the course of the past year when DeKalb City Council backed our plan to construct the NIU Center for Greek Life at the intersection of West Hillcrest Drive and Blackhawk Road in the "Greek Row" area of DeKalb's Annie Glidden North Neighborhood. University leaders are enthusiastic about strengthening NIU's Greek community because research shows participation in fraternity and sorority life helps new students successfully transition to college and positively impacts myriad student engagement measures, including perception of a supportive campus environment, student-faculty interactions, collaborative learning and discussions with diverse others. Accordingly, we want to support members of our NIU fraternities and sororities and to promote the shared community values formulated by our Interfraternity Council, Multicultural Greek Council, National Pan-Hellenic Council and Panhellenic Council at NIU: service, cultural awareness, scholarship, leadership and siblinghood. The NIU Center for Greek Life will create a space that encourages students to study, to socialize and to collaborate with each other and with DeKalb partners for the betterment of our campus and community. The center will also serve to attract Greek alumni back to the DeKalb campus for events such as Homecoming, connecting students and alumni.

Academic Excellence and Curriculum Innovation

NIU is dedicated to sustaining academic excellence and preparing undergraduate and graduate students to be leaders in existing and emerging fields. To achieve these outcomes, the university is working to support and incentivize curricular experimentation, as well as to diminish the biases and barriers that discourage faculty from pursuing research and scholarship that is innovative, entrepreneurial, transdisciplinary, publicly engaged or social-justice oriented. To these ends, we have invested in an Office of Research Development and a Curricular Innovation Grant Fund. Further, university leaders are collaborating with faculty shared governance to modify policies related to faculty hiring, retention and advancement. NIU has taken significant steps forward, as evidenced by productive conversations occurring across the academic units and faculty senate committees, including the Faculty Senate Personnel Committee.

Of course, the most inspiring outcome from our focus on curricular experimentation is the work proposed and in progress by NIU faculty members. Twenty NIU faculty members proposed projects that were funded through the new [internal grants](#) program in topic areas that included immersive learning, inclusive teaching, open educational resources, virtual reality, community engagement and interdisciplinary approaches. Huskie faculty were also successful in procuring external funding to support curricular innovation. For example, NIU co-Principal Investigators from our Institute for the Study of Environment, Sustainability and Energy received funding from the National Science Foundation to work collaboratively with STEM and business faculty members from three universities to create and rigorously assess transdisciplinary curriculum modules focused on sustainability.

This past year, the university also saw continued progress in our multiyear effort to strengthen graduate programs and enhance the graduate student experience, as actionable recommendations put forward last year were implemented. Progress was made in all four focus areas: creating a graduate student community that supports its success; aligning tuition waivers to support graduate student success; setting expectations for graduate student stipends and mandatory fees; and ensuring adequate resources for strong and strategic programs. As the fall semester started, it was gratifying to see the inaugural cohort of 10 graduate student ambassadors welcome new Huskies from around the world to our DeKalb campus, helping with airport and luggage issues and directing them to important resources such as child care, grocery, transportation and banking options. It was also encouraging to see significant changes in NIU's graduate assistantship policies and procedures move forward to make our practices more equitable and student-centered. We appreciate the action taken by the Board of Trustees at its June 2023 meeting to lift the 20-hour-per-week limit on workload so that NIU can more effectively support graduate students on assistantship.

The work described above reflects NIU's commitment to supporting and enhancing the academic and career aspirations of Huskie undergraduates, graduate students and faculty, as well as our desire to discover and develop innovative solutions to complex problems. It is also important for us as a public university to ensure that our academic programs meet societal needs, particularly those of our region and state. To this end, we have been collaborating with other Illinois institutions of higher education to expand educational opportunities and improve service to non-traditional students who are place-bound and/or part of the incumbent workforce.

In 2023, NIU continued to offer selected degree completion programs targeted to meet student demand and address critical workforce shortages on the campuses of Rock Valley, William Rainey Harper and Elgin community colleges. Our offerings at Harper College even expanded to include a Master of Science in Education degree. We also remained part of the Early Childhood Access Consortium for Equity, a collaborative effort across state agencies, public and private higher education institutions and other partners designed to address the shortage of qualified early childhood educators by aligning systems and creating programs that facilitate the pursuit and completion of credentials by members of the incumbent workforce.

Participation in these initiatives has drawn positive attention to NIU as an institution committed to centering student success and capable of effective collaboration with industry and community college partners. Accordingly, we have been offered exciting new partnership opportunities. Recently, we signed an MOU to offer five programs of study at a new University Center associated with McHenry Community College. We also entered a collaboration with TCCI Manufacturing, Richland Community College and the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign to create a training academy with educational pathways and immersive experiences that prepare students for careers in the growing fields of electric vehicle manufacturing, climate technology and clean energy.

Diversity, Equity and Inclusion

NIU's overall commitment, progress and accomplishments related to DEIB were again recognized nationally in 2023. For a third consecutive year, the university received the [Higher Education Excellence in Diversity \(HEED\) Award](#) from *INSIGHT Into Diversity* magazine. And for a second consecutive year, we have been recognized by [Campus Pride](#) as one of the Best of the Best Colleges and Universities for LGBTQ+ students, a designation bestowed on only two universities in Illinois and 30 universities nationally. We appreciate being acknowledged for the progress NIU has made advancing DEIB through our programs, policies, practices and culture. We are also grateful to be governed by a Board of Trustees

and a state-level Board of Higher Education that are firmly committed to a higher education ecosystem that reinforces equity, sustainability and growth.

The diversity of the Huskie students is an important dimension of our excellence. We strive to make NIU a place where they and all members of the campus community feel heard, valued and respected, regardless of their gender, gender identity, culture, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, faith, age, ability, political views, background or lived experience. We make this commitment understanding that our diversity, coupled with an environment that supports the free expression and exchange of ideas, will prepare our students to be critical thinkers, compassionate leaders, successful professionals and members of a thriving democracy. These aspirations are aligned with NIU's Baccalaureate Learning Outcomes as well as with the University Goals.

Accordingly, in 2023, NIU hosted a series of structured opportunities designed to engage students in rigorous dialogue about difficult issues. These include on-campus workshops and conferences supported by the divisions of Student Affairs, Academic Affairs and Academic Diversity, Equity and Inclusion, as well as field trips and study-away experiences centered around challenging histories, untold stories and impacted communities. Recently, the Huskie community was energized by the participation and presentations at the inaugural conference put on by NIU's Truth, Racial Healing and Transformation (TRHT) Center, *The Real Talk Conference: Bridging Race, Identity and Community*. It was inspiring to have students, faculty and staff with different lived experiences come together to focus on our interconnectedness as human beings and the opportunity to transform our community and our collective future.

The success of that conference was enhanced by the vision of Carol Sumner, NIU's dynamic, new vice president for Diversity, Equity and Inclusion/Chief Diversity Officer who joined the university in July 2023. She was attracted to the Huskie family because of our strong commitment to DEIB and the many opportunities to advance shared equity leadership and utilize actionable data to shape the climate, systems and processes encountered by our students and employees. Going forward, her enthusiasm, experience and collaborative spirit will guide development of annual and multiyear goals and timelines informed by our climate survey data and aligned with our multiyear budget plans.

Research, Scholarship, Artistry and Engagement

NIU fulfills its public mission not only by enrolling and graduating students from groups historically underserved by higher education, but also by producing research, scholarship and engagement with societal impact. The faculty, staff and students who create and apply new knowledge are supported by both the university and external sponsors. In 2023, there was substantial investment, progress and success to celebrate.

In FY23, NIU faculty and staff secured \$57 million in sponsored external funding exclusive of COVID relief funding, an increase of 34% over last year and 60% since 2019. This funding included federal investments in university infrastructure to enable cutting-edge research and education, public programming to deliver social and educational services across the region and highly competitive research career awards that infuse innovative research and teaching. This year also marked the first time that a medical device incorporating NIU-licensed technology was cleared for use by the Food and Drug Administration. These endeavors advance NIU's standing among Carnegie High Research Activity (R2) universities, strengthen our designation as a Carnegie Community Engagement institution and enhance the recognition that NIU has received from the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities as an Innovation and Economic Prosperity University.

NIU is highly committed to using our expertise and resources to prepare our students and the communities we serve for a century of change. We also take great pride in providing our students with significant opportunities to work side by side with outstanding faculty in settings beyond the classroom. Together, they are addressing complex questions related to environmental and ecosystem change and adaptation, rapidly advancing technology, shifting demographics and systemic inequality, using transdisciplinary approaches to develop innovative socially responsible solutions.

To support this work and respond to recommendations received from Huskie faculty and staff, NIU has strengthened the infrastructure available to support transdisciplinary teaching, scholarship and engagement. For example, the new [Office of Research Development](#) was launched to facilitate transdisciplinary, cross-university, multi-institutional proposals and awards. Furthermore, a new research cluster, the Transdisciplinary Research Incubator for STEM Education ([T-RISE](#)), was established to support university and national priorities related to broadening participation and increasing student success in STEM areas. This initiative will bring together scientists, engineers, mathematicians, social scientists and humanities researchers to design and conduct STEM education research related to three broad themes: science of learning; equity; and pedagogical innovation. Student experiences in STEM programs at NIU and elsewhere will be enriched by this faculty-driven work.

Across our campus and community, there is sustained interest and enthusiasm for initiatives associated with the Northern Illinois Center for Community Sustainability (NICCS). To date, programs associated with NICCS have attracted more than \$2.7 million in sponsored funding to support teaching, research, community engagement and policy development. As a result, NIU students have been engaged with expert faculty in prairie restoration, climate modeling, grant review panels, local foods initiatives and more. Partnerships with corporate, government and non-profit partners are expanding. And we are most excited that plans for the NICCS building are moving forward as the design-build consultant meets with focus groups comprised of faculty and staff interested in food systems and water resources, climate change and environmental adaptation, community sustainability and community engagement to inform plans for the building, instrumentation and equipment. The composition of the focus groups reflects the transdisciplinary nature of NICCS with members drawn from a majority of NIU's divisions and colleges.

Broad campus support for transdisciplinary research, entrepreneurship and evolving forms of scholarship is also evidenced by our Faculty Senate's efforts to improve processes related to faculty hiring, tenure-and-promotion and the [recommendations](#) put forward by the Centering Engagement, Driving Impact Task Force. NIU faculty and staff want to connect their work to societal and environmental challenges and be credited by rewards systems that recognize the full range of their talent and contributions. As noted above, the Faculty Senate Social Justice Committee Subcommittee on Academic Affairs, the Faculty Senate Personnel Committee and NIU academic leaders are engaged in productive conversations about revising [Faculty Senate Bylaws Article 8](#), the section of our governing documents that addresses the academic personnel process .

NIU's emphasis on elevating public impact scholarship and promoting a more equitable research enterprise is aligned with [federal multi-agency research and development priorities](#). As the result of effective advocacy by higher education leaders including NIU research scientists and federal relations staff, funding agencies are being encouraged to *"support regional innovation and workforce development with an emphasis on emerging research institutions and historically underserved communities"* and to *"assist emerging research institutions to compete effectively for federal funding."* NIU has already benefited from a competitive [Department of Energy initiative](#) designed to diversify participation in STEM and leadership in the physical sciences, including by providing internships, training programs and mentor opportunities at universities that serve historically underrepresented groups. The

NIU program selected for funding by the Office of Higher Energy Physics is led by co-Principal Investigators from the College of Business and the College of Engineering and Engineering Technology and is intentionally transdisciplinary.

As faculty, staff and student interest in transdisciplinary approaches grows, and research continues to affirm the long-term positive impact of such scholarship, NIU is committed to dismantling barriers and directing support to transdisciplinary collaboration. This past year, we have made progress building administrative support structures, developing physical spaces and investing resources in pursuit of these goals. Going forward, we must continue that work, and also accelerate our efforts to strengthen recognition and rewards systems.

Resource Development and Fiscal Responsibility

NIU's public mission requires us to be good stewards of university funds, as well as to be student-centric, equity-minded and true to our mission, vision and values. Our senior leaders advocate consistently and forcefully for reliable, equitable and sufficient investment in NIU and public higher education by the State of Illinois. At the same time, we recognize that securing our future will require us to be proactive and realistic in aligning recurring revenues and expenses. To this end, members of the 2022 Budget Planning Workgroup recommended that the university achieve a structurally balanced budget by FY 2025 through a combination of revenue generation, expense reduction and resources reallocation. They also provided several specific suggestions that were incorporated into annual and multiyear university goals.

NIU's vice president for Administration and Finance/Chief Financial Officer joined the university in January, and our interim executive vice president/provost assumed her role in July. In a short period of time, these leaders have established a strong working relationship focused on addressing the university's financial realities and sustaining a budget that is academically responsive and fiscally responsible. Moreover, they have embraced the key recommendations and call to action put forward by the Budget Planning Workgroup. By committing to transparency and modeling honest communication and effective collaboration, they are motivating faculty and staff leaders and teams across the university to take significant and sometimes painful steps to align operational expenses with revenue projections and preserve the important mission of our university in a sustainable way.

A commitment to transparency also underlies the university's practice of regularly updating the Board of Trustees about our financial performance, and progress related to facilities and technology priorities. A key element of that transparency is the public nature of these presentations; another is sharing information in a format that is easily understandable to non-experts. Over the course of the past year, the university has modified the templates used to present budget and financial summaries to provide greater clarity regarding the assumptions and parameters associated with major revenue and expense categories. The university appreciates the Board of Trustees' support for these changes. We hope that the new format will enable richer public dialogue about how NIU revenue and expenditures align with the university's mission, core values and strategic priorities, and how we will achieve long-term fiscal sustainability.

With respect to facilities and technology, the university completed the implementation of Microsoft Teams Voice this past year. We also saw continued progress on two major state capital projects—the Health Technology Center and NICCS—along with critical capital renewal projects focused on boiler replacement, roofing and building envelope repairs, and elevator upgrades. In addition, new congressionally directed funding was awarded to the College of Engineering and Engineering Technology to modernize the Microelectronic Research and Development Laboratory. These building design, construction, renovation and repair projects inspire optimism and Huskie Pride across the university community.

Talented NIU students, staff and faculty deserve to work and learn in structurally sound, well-maintained classrooms, laboratories and buildings with modern technology and equipment. To achieve this in the context of our resource constraints, aging infrastructure and maintenance demands, the university needs to

be thoughtful when considering the evolution of our physical plant. Accordingly, we are adopting a master planning methodology that delivers both strategic direction and flexibility.

Specifically, a master planning framework was determined to be the preferred planning method, because it provides agility for future campus planning and preserves alignment with long-term objectives for NIU's built environment. In April 2023, we engaged a consultant who proceeded to gather information from diverse groups including students, faculty and staff. These engagements included discussions with each division and a senior leadership planning exercise to refine the key overarching principles for our physical environment that enhance our vision, mission and values. The resulting Master Planning Framework, anticipated to be completed by spring 2024, will codify these long-term guiding principles and ingrain them into a process that will be used to inform future capital planning and project decisions.

NIU's multiyear comprehensive fundraising campaign, now in the leadership phase, provides an important mechanism for partnering with donors and alumni who are passionate about NIU priorities, such as enhancing educational access, providing transformative learning experiences, delivering innovative solutions and equipping citizens to build a more equitable society and stronger democracy. This year, the campaign case for support was refined and shared with the university community for feedback; the campaign cabinet charter was developed; and the cabinet chair and membership were identified to facilitate a formal announcement before the end of the calendar year. The NIU Foundation annual fundraising achievement of \$23.4 million exceeded last year's total while falling short of the ambitious \$28.5 million goal. The university looks forward to continued progress in this quiet phase with sustained donor engagement, followed by a successful public launch and achievement of our campaign goal.

Looking Forward

In 2023, NIU continued to fulfill its expectations as a community-engaged, high-research activity public university, and honor its commitment to providing access and opportunity to academically accomplished students from underserved and under-resourced communities. Major points of Huskie Pride include increased re-enrollment rates for continuing undergraduates, sustained success of faculty and staff in securing external funding, continued national recognition for our outstanding commitment to DEIB, and progression of three capital projects in different stages of planning- the Health Technology Center, NICCS, and the Center for Greek Life. These accomplishments, along with ongoing efforts related to strategic enrollment management and multiyear, all-funds budgeting, form a strong foundation for the work that lies ahead. I look forward to sharing the 2024 university goals Thursday, Dec. 7, during the next regular meeting of the Board of Trustees.

I am honored and proud to serve as NIU president. I am endlessly inspired by our amazing Huskie students. I am also sincerely grateful for the continued confidence of NIU's Board of Trustees, the unrivaled dedication of the university leadership team, and the constructive, collaborative approach of our faculty, staff, alumni, donors, and partners. Together, we will help NIU overcome challenges and realize opportunities. We are Huskies who never quit!

Sincerely,



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



November 1, 2023

MEMORANDUM

TO: Lisa Freeman, President
Northern Illinois University

FROM: Eric Wasowicz, Board Chair
Montel Gayles, Vice Chair
Dennis Barsema, Secretary
Rita Athas
John Butler
Veronica Herrero
Timothy Moore
Leland Strom

Subject: Annual Presidential Evaluation

This memorandum contains commentary by the members of the NIU Board of Trustees concerning the goals outlined by you for Academic Year 2022-23/Fiscal Year 2023 (FY23). This correspondence, along with a self-appraisal of presidential performance in the form of a letter from you to the board, will be posted on the board's website (<https://www.niu.edu/board/>) and shall collectively serve as a written record of your performance evaluation for FY23.

As in prior performance evaluations, the evaluation process commences following the start of the fall term that follows the end of the fiscal year. This timeline permits us to assess the progress made across six strategic themes outlined in the goals set for the year; to include in our assessment fall enrollment (recruitment, retention and student success) and the financial condition of the institution and budgetary position after the close of the fiscal year; and to perform the evaluation in close proximity to the setting of goals for the next fiscal year.

We find that your overall performance in FY23 met or exceeded your goals. We observe a university community, led by you, that is focused on core challenges across several operational areas and priorities. We join you in expressing appreciation for the resiliency and creativity of the NIU community, and wish to express our profound gratitude to all who have contributed to NIU's success across the following specific strategic themes:

Empowerment and Shared Responsibility

Your goals in this area have been to foster a more collaborative and transparent, and less risk-averse, culture to inspire innovation and professional development that focus on the demands of a changing higher education environment in Illinois and the country. The collaboration and progress made possible through empowerment and shared leadership are evident in the achievements you have shared with us, and demonstrate that the goals you established for this area were met or exceeded in FY23.

Many priorities have been advantaged by intentional efforts to empower campus leaders and cross-functional teams to work together to achieve goals. Naturally, this evaluation refers to several initiatives in more detail below where they concern specific strategic themes. Especially notable for us are continued collaboration to transition to a budgeting planning process that is equitable, iterative, multiyear, and consistent with the university's mission, vision and values; the Sustainability and Climate Action Planning Task Force that has issued an impressive draft plan for NIU to model sustainable behaviors for our community and region; the Digital Accessibility Task Force that builds on lessons learned during the pandemic concerning the importance of digital accessibility to all NIU stakeholders; and continued stewardship of our Strategic Enrollment Management Plan 2.0 (SEM) that requires we empower NIU's people to focus on recruitment and retention, and the equity-oriented initiatives inherent to that effort.

In addition to these specific areas, we observe intentional collaboration throughout the NIU planning landscape. We observe NIU executing on programs instilled with our values concerning matters such as planning for the for NIU's Health Technology Center, the impacts of remote work on campus, parking operations, preparing to lead during a crisis, external advocacy for NIU priorities and more.

In terms of professional development, you have been working to build a strong bench of future leaders for the university that should pay dividends in the coming years. Examples of this include faculty assuming important leadership roles concerning the transformation of undergraduate STEM education (vital to NIU's desire to contribute to global competitiveness in science and technology, and to prepare students to for STEM careers), and campus business and finance professionals engaged nationally in professional development that will prove essential to NIU's long-term success. A shared vision and sense of responsibility across campus is necessary to lead the university through changes in the work environment and to create efficiencies that help us better align systems and practices with the needs of our students, faculty and staff. Enhancing skills and competencies to foster shared leadership and accountability is an important component of this work.

Moreover, these commitments and related practices appear to be contributing to a growing appreciation for work life among faculty and staff, as the year-over-year ratings on several categories (job satisfaction and support; professional development; well-being; collaboration; and mission and pride) measured by NIU's Great Colleges Survey have improved.

Student Recruitment, Student Success and Student Experience

Growing and stabilizing enrollment is achieved by attracting new students, improving retention rates for continuing students and enhancing student success.

We understand total enrollment as a consolidation of our efforts to position NIU as an attractive higher education option for prospective freshman and transfer students; to retain existing students who have not yet graduated; and to improve graduation rates among students with different lived experiences. We also appreciate how enhanced satisfaction among students concerning their NIU experience and the institution's ability to launch students into fulfilling careers contribute to growing and stabilizing the institution overall. Importantly, cutting across all these endeavors is a value system that seeks to achieve retention and completion goals by centering students in our work and accepting shared responsibility for their success.

The 2023 University Goals set a target range for total enrollment that would meet expectations / show progress (between 15,360 – 15,570) and that target was achieved (15,504). Analysis of elements making up this number suggests that retention success was a significant factor in reaching the target range. Notably, among all first-time, full-time students who enrolled in Fall 2022, 70% re-enrolled (up 5% from the Fall 2022 retention rate of 65%). Within that cohort, 66% of first-generation students re-enrolled (up 6% from 60%). Among the specific goals set for 2023, a target retention range was set for first-time, full-time Pell

recipients (65-68%, or higher) that was met at 65% (up an impressive 7% from 58% in 2022). Retention of transfer students, at 85%, was also an improvement from 82% last year. Recognizing, particularly, the inevitable impacts on our total enrollment of the departure of students who left NIU during the pandemic, and many other challenging factors common across the higher education landscape, this retention success is a strong indicator of a widely shared community commitment to the success of students who choose to attend NIU.

We also understand that continued growth and stabilization of NIU's enrollment is achieved by attracting new students. We are impressed with the academic accomplishments of the 2023 freshman class and take pride in its composition. This cohort is economically, socially and racially diverse, with 57% of the freshman class comprised of first-generation college students, of which 70% are students of color and 53% are Pell-eligible. We commend the increase in new transfer students (this population grew by 6%) and the increase in students from outside the United States, as its enrolled international student population surpassed the 1,000-student mark for the first time since 2016. Moreover, the percentages of incoming freshman and transfer students who identify as Latinx increased in 2023, contributing to an overall percentage of Latinx students of 25% of NIU's total undergraduate population – placing the university on a trajectory to receiving full designation as a Hispanic Serving Institution. NIU also welcomed over 1,000 new graduate, professional and law students in the fall (4,146 of NIU's total enrollment). A number of factors within and beyond the university's control affect the number of new students who enroll each academic year. We appreciate the focus you will continue to place on those factors within the university's control and welcome the insights and strategies that you and NIU's enrollment leadership bring to this challenge.

We observe many successes and continued dedication to innovative student success programming. We are especially excited to observe the success of strategies to increasing students' success in courses they need to take to advance within a major or complete general education requirements. Efforts to improve first-year advising are well underway in terms of hiring and training new advisors. Students participating in Braven are realizing the advantages of their participation, as efforts continue to build enthusiasm for the program and increase the number of students who can uniquely benefit from its offerings.

Making the NIU student experience more equitable and engaging is the objective of a constellation of activities and institutional focus areas that seeks to ensure that students transition successfully into the Huskie experience. These efforts include routine surveying of student needs and a paired effort to connect students to campus support resources, increasing the utilization of student mental health resources (mainly Counseling and Consultation Services) in partnership with JED Campus, and the initiative to revitalize Greek life.

Under your leadership, the initiative to sustain a thriving fraternity and sorority community at NIU has led to high-quality collaboration among undergraduate and alumni stakeholders affiliated with NIU's four Greek councils (the Greek Life Revitalization Task Force). This coalition of organizations shares an earnest desire to sustain their organizations and the contributions made by them to the NIU community. A keystone objective of the revitalization initiative has been to construct the NIU Center for Greek Life. That plan received the support of the DeKalb City Council in July of 2023, and efforts to raise funds for the new center, to be located in DeKalb's Annie Glidden North Neighborhood, are underway.

Academic Excellence and Curriculum Innovation

The goals you outlined for academic excellence and curriculum innovation have been met or exceeded. Those unfamiliar with the dynamics of higher education institutions might read the goals within this strategic theme and find them highly technical, specialized or even mysterious. We understand them to be central to the university's ability to attract and retain excellent faculty and the quality and attractiveness of

NIU's undergraduate and graduate programs. These goals seek to set in motion an environment wherein faculty can thrive as teachers, researchers and artists who are also engaged with their community, so that students can find curriculum and degree options that are innovative and ideally suited to their aspirations and the evolving needs of our society. Other positive impacts of a well-aligned, responsive university reverberate from there.

It is evident to us that there is a growing consensus and enthusiasm for transdisciplinary scholarship and curricular experimentation and how it might be expanded to include new, exciting and impactful types of faculty activity. Formal support for faculty research through the proposed Office of Research Development, including facilitating transdisciplinary research proposals and awards, is well underway. A new research cluster, titled the Transdisciplinary Research Incubator for STEM Education, or T-RISE, seeks to cultivate transdisciplinary teams in STEM fields, working toward the longer-term goal of a Center for Transdisciplinary Research in STEM Education. This specific effort and others of its kind are aided by continued thoughtfulness concerning the structure of joint appointments and the agreements necessary to ensure their proper administration. The Curricular Innovation Grant Fund has launched 20 projects, and the visions behind these projects are publicly accessible to serve as examples and models for more innovation.

Notable efforts are also underway to diminish biases and structural barriers that inhibit transdisciplinary scholarship and discourage curricular innovation and experimentation. Considerable collaboration has occurred among the appropriate campus constituencies to modify policies related to faculty hiring, retention and advancement. The record of this engagement is robust and impressive, representative of a methodical consideration of the matter across department-, college- and university-level leadership. We commend these efforts and wish to express our gratitude to the many stakeholders who have devoted, and will devote, their time to these important reforms.

Since the articulation of the 2023 goals concerning the university's graduate programs, significant work has occurred to address a set of actionable recommendations to enhance the graduate student experience and make the university's practices more equitable and student-centered. Included in the record are serious initiatives to create a thriving graduate student community; align graduate assistantship opportunities and tuition waivers to support student success; set expectations for graduate student stipends and mandatory fees; reform workload limitations for graduate students on assistantships; and ensure adequate resources are available to support graduate programs. By engaging graduate students directly and convening responsible parties to focus on reforms, an improvement agenda is underway that makes us optimistic about the future of graduate education at NIU.

We are very pleased to review what has been done to improve support for transfer students and working adults. As noted above, NIU is recruiting more transfer students – and our ability to retain them is improving. There is no doubt that this objective will be furthered by the growing number and range of partnerships with community colleges resulting in new degree completion opportunities developed to meet societal needs and regional workforce demands. It is notable that one such collaboration is aligned with statewide objectives to make Illinois an attractive location for the clean energy and electronic vehicle industries. We are also pleased to observe the functionalities NIU has developed to permit students to review the transferability of credits earned at other institutions and to locate and engage adult learners with existing NIU credit who might be encouraged to re-enroll.

Diversity, Equity and Inclusion

Our unwavering commitment to diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging (DEIB) continues to be one of the strongest hallmarks of the NIU culture. The goals within this strategic theme have not only been met but, in many areas, exceeded.

Achievements in this area are exemplified by the fact that NIU stands as an example of DEIB excellence, not only within the Illinois higher education community, but also on the national stage. We are thrilled to learn that, for the third consecutive year, NIU received the Higher Education Excellence in Diversity (HEED) Award from *INSIGHT Into Diversity* magazine for its achievements related to diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging (DEIB). We are equally proud of the recognition the university received, for the second consecutive year, from Campus Pride as one of the Best of the Best Colleges and Universities for LGBTQ+ students.

On specific goals and objectives, you, your team and a wide range of university representatives finalized the shared equity leadership model. Notably, no ground on this objective was lost while leadership over the institution's DEIB initiatives was in transition. This is another example of NIU's deep-rooted belief in DEIB and your team's adherence to the mission.

While not an anticipated objective, the successful DEIB leadership transition must be acknowledged. Replacing a highly successful and widely respected leader was an extremely challenging situation that required a shared and inclusive process of selection. Carol Sumner, our new vice president for Diversity, Equity and Inclusion and chief diversity officer, comes with strong experience, a collaborative spirit and unbounded enthusiasm. This appointment and the time spent hiring the right person again demonstrates your understanding of the importance of this core value to the success of the university.

The timeline for hosting a series of social healing circles was appropriately revised. The circles are being held after *The Real Talk Conference: Bridging Race, Identity and Community*, hosted Oct. 27 by NIU's Truth, Racial Healing and Transformation Center. This adjustment provides a shared context for the discussions that will follow.

As NIU aspires to be academically excellent as well as respected for impactful and inclusive research, scholarship, artistry and engagement, we recognize that progress recounted in Strategic Area Three concerning Academic Excellence and Curriculum Innovation contributes significantly to the initiatives we specifically track within the DEIB category.

During FY23, NIU's Business Enterprise Program (BEP) strategy, a key element of an institution's commitment to diversity, equity and inclusion, showed strong progress. NIU's director of Procurement Services and Contract Management was awarded the Illinois Public Education Cooperative Award for commitment to supplier diversity. NIU's commitment to this important imperative helped drive the university's success in having the largest percentage growth in BEP compared to all other Illinois public universities. Internally, NIU had a strong annual growth rate compared to FY22. While fair and equitable procurement gains will continue to be a challenge for all public institutions, NIU's strong efforts in this area should be recognized and appreciated.

Your multi-faceted commitment to DEIB is evidenced at all levels, where it can be observed as impactful to students, faculty, administrative leadership, suppliers, contractors, the community and more. Every one of your annual reviews to date, including this one, backed by data and examples, highlights your strength and dedication to this focus area. We are very proud that DEIB continues to be a crucial part of the NIU fabric.

Research, Scholarship, Artistry and Engagement

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

Research, scholarship, artistry and engagement are important priorities at NIU. Because of the dedication of many, NIU's is positioned for success as a Carnegie High Research Activity (R2) university, a Carnegie Community Engagement institution and as a university recognized by the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities as an Innovation and Economic Prosperity University. We continue to be impressed with the progress being made concerning the university's infrastructure for research, artistry and engagement. The work we observe in this realm of university operations is inclusive, forward-looking and collaborative.

In FY23, a strong record of securing external funding was achieved, with \$57 million in sponsored external funding – exclusive of COVID relief funding. This constituted a 34% increase over last year and a 60% increase since 2019. Importantly, NIU students, both at the undergraduate and graduate levels, work alongside the faculty and staff working on these funded projects and across the larger NIU research and artistry ecosystem, learning how knowledge and creative endeavors emerge from the methodologies of disciplines and across disciplines. Importantly, as noted above under the third strategic theme, the research, scholarship, artistry and engagement of NIU's faculty inform curricular innovation, making it possible for NIU to offer curricular and co-curricular opportunities for students to address complex societal challenges.

The Research and Innovation Partnerships (RIPS) team has continued to advance the university's sustainability initiatives and make progress toward the establishment of the Northern Illinois Center for Community Sustainability, or NICCS, as enabled by the Illinois Capital Development Board. We are enthusiastic about the preparation of the conceptual plans and design objectives, and the work that is already underway by faculty to support the goals and objectives of NICCS, such as the launching of the Sustainability and Climate Action Planning Taskforce. We look forward to the hiring of a NICCS director under Yvonne Harris, the new vice president of Research and Innovation Partnerships.

We are also pleased with the launch of the new Research Development Office (RDO) that will promote transdisciplinary research, teaching and scholarship by facilitating grant proposal cross-collaboration and supporting grant management. We believe that this will lead to increased funding and resources for transdisciplinary and multi-institutional programming. Similarly, we recognize the commitment to transdisciplinary research demonstrated in the formation of a new research cluster, the Transdisciplinary Research Incubator for STEM Education; efforts to develop a model for cluster hiring that will be piloted to build capacity for transdisciplinary scholarship, collaboration and promotion of faculty diversity; and the significant progress being made to modify policies related to faculty hiring, retention and advancement.

Finally, we look forward to the continued execution of the multiyear action agenda developed in response to recommendations delivered by the Centering Engagement, Driving Impact Taskforce that will strengthen our Carnegie redesignation application process and submission as well as our community engagement efforts.

Resource Development and Fiscal Responsibility

Overall, the goals within this strategic theme were met. In terms of implementing a multiyear, comprehensive planning and budget process, despite a year of continued uncertainty because of post-pandemic issues including economic volatility and national and global political extremes, the university senior leadership made it a priority in FY23 to stress the importance of aligning expenses with revenue in a manner that will allow NIU to achieve a balanced budget by FY25.

We were pleased to see continued efforts to make our campus community aware that it will take everyone's effort and sacrifice to capture new sources of revenue and enact the structural changes and resource reallocation needed to achieve financial sustainability. Moreover, and following the shared leadership model that is core to NIU's current operations, the Budget Planning Workgroup continued to solicit stakeholder input, ideas and recommendations toward achieving the goal of a balanced budget by FY25 and related long-term financial health.

Key to the multiyear budget planning is the sharing of information with the board and public. You continue to lead an extremely transparent reporting process, updating the board quarterly on budget progress, while presenting the information in an understandable format by modifying the templates to show clearly our sources of revenue and expense and where we have opportunities for improvement.

The board also observed extensive and adept advocacy in Springfield as you and your leadership team sought reliable, equitable and sufficient investments in higher education within the State of Illinois. This advocacy proved to be tremendously successful when Gov. Pritzker announced, in June of 2023, a historic 12.4% increase in spending on higher education, including a 7% increase in funding for public universities, including NIU.

Another key and extremely important objective in FY23 was to hire the permanent vice president for Finance and CEO. George Middlemist, who was installed in January of 2023, brings great experience in finance and administration and has been a pleasure to work with. We look forward to his continued guidance and work in moving NIU toward a balanced budget.

With respect to advancing facilities and technology planning priorities, we observe several achievements. The university completed the implementation of Microsoft Teams Voice. Continued progress was made on two major state capital projects: the Health Technology Center and the Northern Illinois Center for Community Sustainability. Across the campus, we are seeing thoughtful capital improvements being made within our budgeting constraints. Notably, work continues on boiler replacements and roof repairs on a number of buildings. Appropriately, work began in FY23 on a Master Planning Framework that is expected to be completed in late FY24. This planning effort has involved students, faculty, staff and administration with the goal of creating an inclusive framework and principles for our campus and physical environment. We look forward to receiving this plan when it is complete.

Finally, with respect to fundraising and campaign execution, the NIU Foundation, while slightly increasing fundraising year over year, fell short of its fundraising goal of \$28.5 million. The actual amount raised was \$23.4 million; still, the board recognizes and thanks our great alumni and donors who continue to give back to NIU. There was significant work that continued to move forward relative to the campaign, including the formation of a capital campaign cabinet and chair. While the university remains in the quiet phase of the campaign, continuing to line up leadership donors, we look forward to the campaign plan continuing to evolve into a successful public launch.

As we know you are aware, adapting to the changing operating environment has required, and will continue to require, courageous leadership, organizational alignment and difficult choices. With the planning and decision-making frameworks in place, or soon to be in place, NIU must continue to quickly evolve our fiscal model to match student enrollment, public support and revenue available from tuition, fees and other sources. Identifying and taking timely action on revenue generation opportunities and rightsizing our cost structures will be required for NIU to balance its budget in FY25.

Conclusion

In summary, during FY23, the goals you established for yourself and the NIU community have, overall, been met or exceeded. As we consider the six themes under which you have pursued a number of initiatives during FY23, we recognize the advantages of a shared leadership system through which collaboration and innovation is occurring and decisions are being made; of strategic initiatives to support student success, recruitment and retention; of curricular innovation and scholarly activities and artistry that cross disciplinary boundaries, and the academic excellence made possible by such reform; of an operational culture that weaves diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging into all university pursuits; of a thriving research and innovation enterprise that challenges and excites faculty, students and more; and of fiscal and facility planning designed to ensure a sound and responsible future. Across all this activity, the university operated in accordance with its mission, vision and values.

We are immensely grateful for the devotion of so many to the core functions of NIU, and we wish to reinforce your, and our, deep appreciation for the sacrifices endured by members of the university community. We continue to be optimistic that NIU is well-positioned under your leadership, and the foundation has been laid for longer-term fiscal sustainability and responsible resource management. You continue to function as a vigilant advocate for the interests of NIU students, faculty, administration, staff, alumni and local communities; and you continue to serve as a role model for your leadership team. Consequently, we consider you to be one of the most creative, imaginative and hardworking university presidents in the State of Illinois and in the higher education community overall.

Forward, Together Forward!