



## Northern Illinois University

Office of the President

November 23, 2020

Andrew Lootens-White, Vice President of Accreditation Relations  
Higher Learning Commission  
230 South LaSalle Street  
Suite 7-500  
Chicago, IL 60604

Dear Vice President Lootens-White:

On behalf of Northern Illinois University (NIU), it is my pleasure to submit to you our HLC Open Pathway Quality Initiative proposal, *Success in Gateway Courses for ALL Students*. We believe this Quality Initiative, designed to address success rates and equity gaps in gateway courses, aligns well with our vision, mission, and core values. In particular, it reflects NIU's deep commitment to equity and inclusion.

The Quality Initiative will be embedded within our 2019-2023 Strategic Enrollment Management Plan that is already successfully underway and has broad support across the university community. Indeed, the Quality Initiative proposal has been vetted by the Strategic Enrollment Management Committee, a leadership group that will play a key role in the implementation of the initiative. The Quality Initiative has also been reviewed broadly by several shared governance and advisory bodies as outlined in the proposal and has received an enthusiastic response across NIU.

Under the leadership of our Executive Vice President and Provost, Beth Ingram, the steering group identified to oversee this initiative is well poised to implement, monitor, evaluate, and communicate with the larger NIU community on the progress of the Quality Initiative. NIU stands committed to providing these critical human resources as well as financial and other resources as outlined in the proposal to make this Quality Initiative a success.

We look forward to hearing back from the Higher Learning Commission on the status of this proposal.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Lisa Freeman".

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

Your Future. Our Focus.



## Open Pathway Quality Initiative Proposal

### Institutional Template

The enclosed Quality Initiative Proposal represents the work that the institution will undertake to fulfill the quality improvement requirements of the Open Pathway.

See Letter from President with Signature in Appendix B

November 30, 2020

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*Signature of Institution's President or Chancellor*

*Date*

*Dr. Lisa C. Freeman, President*

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*Printed/Typed Name and Title*

Northern Illinois University

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*Name of Institution*

DeKalb, IL 60115

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*City and State*

The institution completes the Quality Initiative Proposal by responding to the questions in each category of the template. Proposals should be no more than 4,500 words. The institution may choose to submit a brief implementation plan or supplemental charts or graphs as appendices to the template. The Quality Initiative Proposal will be accepted beginning September 1 of Year 5. It is due no later than June 1 of Year 7.

Submit the proposal as a PDF file to [hlcommission.org/upload](http://hlcommission.org/upload). Select “Pathways/Quality Initiative” from the list of submission options to ensure the institution’s materials are sent to the correct HLC staff member. Submission file names should utilize the following format: QIProposal[InstitutionName][State].pdf (e.g., QIProposalNoNameUniversityMN.pdf). The file name must include the institution’s name (or an identifiable portion thereof) and state.

### Overview of the Quality Initiative

1. Provide a title and brief description of the Quality Initiative. Explain whether the initiative will begin and be completed during the Quality Initiative period or if it is part of work already in progress or will achieve a key milestone in the work of a longer initiative.

## **Success in Gateway Courses for All Students**

The proposed Quality Initiative (QI) will support NIU's students to achieve their academic goals by improving student success and reducing equity gaps in gateway courses. At NIU, we define a gateway course as one that is necessary for students to advance within a major or is required to complete general studies requirements. The courses that will be targeted are those with low rates of completion, high equity gaps, or both. An equity gap exists when the success rates for students from under-served communities are statistically significantly less than the average success rate in the course. The success rate is the percentage of students who enroll in the course and who earn a grade of A, B, or C. We will focus on factors that influence success rates, including (1) pedagogical practices (e.g., active learning, inclusive teaching, contextualization of learning, etc.), (2) academic supports (e.g., proactive advising, course sequencing, tutoring services, supplement instruction, etc.), and (3) co-curricular supports (e.g., engagement, climate issues, etc.). Throughout the QI project, we will identify the most relevant factors for our students and work to scale the implementation of effective interventions. The project will entail an iterative process of identifying barriers to success, deploying interventions to overcome these barriers, assessing the interventions' outcomes, and adjusting (e.g., scaling up or eliminating) interventions as appropriate.

This initiative is part of an on-going project and is embedded within NIU's more comprehensive Strategic Enrollment Management (SEM) Plan and NIU's Equity Plan. The SEM plan was initiated in January 2019 with an overarching purpose of attracting and retaining students representing the diversity of NIU's region and serving a national and global student body (see SEM Plan in Appendix A). The QIP will build on the work of the SEM and Equity plans to implement strategies that improve course success rates and, ultimately, retention and graduation rates, with a particular focus on underrepresented students. Thus, the project will achieve a milestone in the context of the SEM and Equity plans: improvement in course success rates leads to student academic progress and to degree attainment.

## **Sufficiency of the Initiative's Scope and Significance**

### **2. Explain why the proposed initiative is relevant and significant for the institution.**

NIU's vision is to be an engine for innovation to advance social mobility, promote personal, professional and intellectual growth, and transform the world through research, artistry, teaching, and outreach. Our mission is to empower students through educational excellence and experiential learning as we pursue knowledge, share our research and artistry, and engage communities for the benefit of the region, state, nation, and world. In support of this vision and mission, NIU has a long and proud history of serving students from all backgrounds and providing them with broad educational and career opportunities. As a regional public university, NIU remains steadfast in its commitment to providing access and opportunity for students from underserved populations (e.g., Pell-eligible students, students of color, and first-generation students) who come to college seeking to achieve their personal and professional goals, and to make a difference in their families, communities, states, and nations. In fall 2019, 55 percent of our full-time undergraduate students were Pell-eligible, 47 percent were students of color, and 51 percent were first-generation students. The proposed QI aligns well with our vision, mission, and core values.

This work is significant because it represents the next step in addressing equity, diversity and inclusion at NIU. Efforts that began in 2015 have resulted in the adoption of an equity statement, the integration of equity and diversity goals into the SEM plan, and NIU's participation in the Illinois Equity in Attainment Initiative (ILEA). ILEA is the signature initiative of the Partnership for College Completion (PCC), a non-profit organization founded in 2016 to catalyze and champion policies, systems, and practices that ensure all students can graduate from college and achieve their career aspirations. With an initial focus on northeastern Illinois, PCC has set a goal to eliminate institutional achievement gaps in college degree

completion for low-income, Latino, and African American students in Illinois by 2025, establishing the region as a national leader in equity in attainment. By participating in ILEA, partners such as NIU commit to a core set of principles, including (1) colleges are responsible for graduating all their degree-seeking students as quickly and efficiently as possible; (2) all students can graduate with college degrees if they have the right information, tools, and supports; (3) achievement gaps between low-income, Black, and Latinx students and their higher-income and White peers are unacceptable and should be eliminated; and (4) these efforts will be undertaken without sacrificing institutional quality, excellence, or increasing admission standards.

In addition, NIU has been recognized nationally for its intersection of research and knowledge creation with educational opportunity and upward social mobility. A 2017 Brookings Institution report identified NIU as a leader in both research and social mobility, placing it first in this regard in Illinois and in the top 60 nationally among selective public research universities. Illinois' changing racial demographics during the past 10 years have resulted in an increasingly racially diverse student body at NIU. Population estimates for Illinois in 2018 indicated that over 17 percent of the Illinois population was Hispanic or Latinx, nearly 14 percent was Black or African-American, and 24 percent spoke a primary language other than English. With the upcoming 2020 U.S. Census currently underway, results are anticipated to show further increases in this diversity growth. NIU is committed to welcoming an increasingly diverse student population into our university community and to continuing to work to support success for all students as evidenced in our SEM Plan and continuing work to eliminate equity gaps. The proposed QI supports this ongoing work at NIU.

### 3. Explain the intended impact of the initiative on the institution and its academic quality.

The intended impact of this initiative is to improve student academic success by decreasing the number of gateway courses that have success rates of less than 80% and to reduce equity gaps in those courses. The QI is one piece of an effort to achieve the following:

- Increase six-year graduation rate by reducing equity gaps for Latinx students to 5% or less by Fall 2023
- Increase first-year retention rates by reducing equity gaps for Black new freshmen to 10% or less by Fall 2023
- Increase first-year retention by equity gaps for Black transfer students to 6% or less by Fall 2023
- Increase the six-year graduation rates by reducing equity gaps for both Black new freshmen and transfer students to 10% or less by Fall 2023
- Enhance the design of Gateway Courses and courses with high equity gaps by incorporating engaging pedagogical approaches by Fall 2023

The tailored, comprehensive plans that will be used to address success rates and equity gaps at NIU will be grounded in research-based approaches in (1) pedagogical practices (e.g., active learning, inclusive teaching, contextualization of learning, etc.), (2) academic supports (e.g., proactive advising, course sequencing, tutoring services, supplement instruction, etc.), and (3) co-curricular supports (e.g., engagement, climate improvements, etc.). Appropriate interventions in these areas, combined with careful monitoring of measurable outcomes associated with these interventions, and the ability to move quickly to scale up or eliminate interventions as appropriate will strengthen NIU's ability to best serve our students and to maximize our academic quality.

As noted above, the course success rate is defined as the percentage of students enrolled in a course who earn an A, B or C. In academic year 2019-2020, the average success rate in all lower-division classes was about 88%. However, there were approximately twenty courses enrolling approximately

5,000 students that had success rates of less than 80%. In multi-section courses, success rates often vary by section as well, so attention to intra-sectional success rates and equity gaps is crucial. An equity gap occurs when the success rate for underrepresented students is statistically significantly lower than the average success rate in the course. Lack of success in gateway and other courses creates significant barriers for students as they pursue their academic goals. Students may be prevented from being admitted into limited-enrollment majors, advancing in their desired majors, or completing general studies. Hence low success rates in gateway courses can increase time to degree and increase rates of non-completion.

## Clarity of the Initiative's Purpose

### 4. Describe the purposes and goals for the initiative.

The principal purpose of the proposed QI is to support all of our students to achieve their academic goals by assessing, improving and modifying approaches in gateway courses to support higher levels of student success. Of particular importance is ensuring success for students from underrepresented populations. The QI will have the following goals:

- (1) Identify and redesign gateway courses with low success rates or high equity gaps
- (2) Assess and deploy support for course transformation or other improvements in the identified courses to enhance student success
- (3) Monitor data from and engage in continuous quality improvement of identified courses to enhance student success in courses and beyond (e.g., retention and graduation)

### 5. Select up to three main topics that will be addressed by the initiative.

- |   |   |   |
|---|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Advising             | <input type="checkbox"/> Leadership                 | <input type="checkbox"/> Retention                    |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Assessment           | <input type="checkbox"/> Learning Environment       | <input type="checkbox"/> Strategic Planning           |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Civic Engagement     | <input type="checkbox"/> Online Learning            | <input type="checkbox"/> Student Learning             |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Curriculum           | <input type="checkbox"/> Persistence and Completion | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Student Success   |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Diversity | <input type="checkbox"/> Professional Development   | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Teaching/Pedagogy |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Engagement           | <input type="checkbox"/> Program Development        | <input type="checkbox"/> Underserved Populations      |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Faculty Development  | <input type="checkbox"/> Program Evaluation         | <input type="checkbox"/> Workforce                    |
| <input type="checkbox"/> First-Year Programs  | <input type="checkbox"/> Quality Improvement        | <input type="checkbox"/> Other:                       |
| <input type="checkbox"/> General Education    |   |   |

### 6. Describe how the institution will evaluate progress, make adjustments and determine what has been accomplished.

To address the three goals of the proposed QI, NIU will engage in the following steps: (1) identify relevant courses; (2) plan and implement strategic interventions for increasing student success in these courses based on research data and best practices; (3) re-assess student success in these courses and adjust strategies as needed, and (4) complete a summative assessment of the QI. (See question #10 for list of activities with timeline.)

### **(1) Identify Gateway Courses with Low Success Rates and High Equity Gaps**

The initial identification of relevant gateway courses has begun at NIU and will continue as we enter spring 2021. We have two platforms for identifying courses and sharing information with stakeholders, Tableau and Academic Performance Solutions (APS). To date, course-level student success data are depicted in Tableau for all undergraduate courses for the past four academic years. These data include course grade distributions and DFW rates. Data are disaggregated by gender, race/ethnicity, first generation status and Pell eligibility. APS, an EAB product, provides section-level course success rates. The Vice Provost for Undergraduate Affairs, along with the Chief Diversity Officer, and members of Institutional Effectiveness have been working with key stakeholders to familiarize them with these data. Among the key stakeholders are college deans, associate deans, chairs, and members of the Strategic Enrollment Management Committee. While the initial pass at this activity has been completed, these are data that will need to be monitored and communicated on a regular basis throughout the QI timeframe to engage in meaningful assessment of the course transformations and other initiatives that are undertaken as a result of the QI.

We will, in addition, create a baseline measurement of the number of other courses with low success rates (non-gateway courses), the number of students enrolled in those courses, the number of courses with high equity gaps, and the number of students enrolled in those courses.

### **(2) Plan and Implement Strategic Interventions for Increasing Student Success in These Courses Based on Data and Best Practices**

Strategic interventions will be developed to address low success rates and equity gaps in identified courses. NIU will collaborate at the central and local levels to share research identifying best practices for pedagogy and contextual learning to create a structure for developing and implementing potential interventions in these courses. Further, new professional development opportunities will be provided for faculty who teach these courses to utilize these interventions. The interventions may come in various forms and at multiple levels. For example, in relation to pedagogy, some interventions will require curricular and teaching method changes on the part of individual faculty members (e.g., implementing more active learning and/or contextualization of learning) while others may require a more exhaustive institutional approach. NIU's recently initiated and ongoing participation in the Association of College and University Educators (ACUE) Effective College Instruction Certification Program is one example of NIU's commitment to supporting the systematic implementation of innovative and inclusive teaching practices. NIU faculty who complete this 25-week program not only will receive a certificate in effective college instruction, awarded in collaboration with the American Council on Education but, as NIU ACUE Fellows, will be equipped to share these new pedagogical practices among their faculty peers over time. Similarly, if an intervention is needed to adjust academic supports for a course, this may involve embedding supplemental instruction or tutoring within an individual course or a more far-reaching approach of altering course sequencing or expanding support services throughout the university for specific subpopulations of students. Finally, interventions related to co-curricular supports may include developing student clubs/associations related to the course topics or addressing individual student concerns related to financial barriers or, more broadly, working on systemic campus climate issues that affect student success more generally. Further, all interventions will be reviewed to ensure that they are well aligned with NIU's vision, mission, and core values. Regardless of the interventions selected, the

process will be the same, to rely on data-informed decisions and use best practices to support continuous quality improvement in the courses.

### **(3) Re-assess Student Success in These Courses and Adjust Strategies as Needed**

Following the implementation of strategic interventions, data will once again be gathered, analyzed and posted in Tableau and conversations held with key stakeholders about the success of the interventions and how best to adjust these strategies. In some cases, the interventions will prove successful and will be scaled up for larger deployment as feasible. In others, the interventions will not be enhancing student success and will be eliminated. Still others may need more time to fully realize results and will be monitored longer. Throughout the QI timeframe, this iterative process will be repeated enabling formative assessments to guide the direction of the interventions for student success and engage in continuous improvement.

### **(4) Complete a Summative Assessment of the QI**

In addition to the ongoing formative assessments that will be undertaken throughout the QI to monitor student success in gateway courses and other courses with high equity gaps and to examine the efficacy of strategic interventions implemented to promote that success, a comprehensive summative assessment of the QI will be completed in the final year of the project. This assessment will include longitudinal data analyses of course level data over the QI period linked to interventions designed to reduce equity gaps and increase progression in majors. At the end of the project, we will create a dataset analogous to the baseline data set to measure progress in reducing the number of courses with low success rates or high equity gaps.

## **Evidence of Commitment to and Capacity for Accomplishing the Initiative**

### **7. Describe the level of support for the initiative by internal or external stakeholders.**

Internal stakeholders include students, faculty, and senior leadership. The QI proposal has been vetted by several shared governance groups including NIU's Baccalaureate Council, SEM Committee, Council of Deans, and University Assessment Panel. It has received broad support from these groups as well as the President's Senior Leadership Roundtable. (See letter from President Freeman in Appendix B.)

Relevant external stakeholders include the Higher Learning Commission, the Illinois Board of Higher Education (IBHE), and numerous external advisory boards connected with academic units across the university (including employees and alumni). The IBHE has made equity the beacon of its strategic plan development, and have highlighted NIU's SEM and Equity plans as exemplar during presentations, discussions, and meetings. As appropriate, these stakeholders will be kept updated as to the progress of the QI.

### **8. Identify the groups and individuals that will lead or be directly involved in implementing the initiative.**

While numerous faculty and staff will be engaged in the implementation of the QI, a small steering group of individuals will oversee the implementation and progress of the QI. These include the Executive Vice President and Provost, Beth Ingram; the Vice Provost for Institutional Effectiveness and HLC ALO, Carolinda Douglass; the Vice Provost for Undergraduate Studies, Omar Ghrayeb; the Vice President for Diversity, Equity and Inclusion and Chief Diversity Officer, Vernese Edgehill-Walden; the Executive Director of the Center for Innovative Teaching and Learning, Jason Rhode; and the Director of Accreditation, Assessment, and Evaluation, Ritu Subramony.

9. List the human, financial, technological and other resources that the institution has committed to this initiative.

NIU has made a strong commitment to its Strategic Enrollment Plan for 2019-2023 and the proposed QI, which will be embedded in this effort, will likewise receive strong commitment in terms of human, financial, technological and other resources.

As noted above, the initiative is supported at the highest level of the institution and a significant investment of personnel has already been made. In addition, the Vice Provost for Institutional Effectiveness oversees Institutional Research, which will provide data and analyses for the project and will post these in the Tableau platform. The Vice Provost for Undergraduate Studies co-chairs the Strategic Enrollment Management (SEM) Committee, which will play a crucial role in the implementation of this project. The SEM Committee includes all of the colleges' associate deans along with representatives from Student Affairs; Academic Diversity, Equity and Inclusion; Admissions; Financial Aid and Scholarship; Academic Advising; Student Engagement; Center for Innovative Teaching and Learning; Marketing and Communications; and Institutional Effectiveness. The Vice Provost for Undergraduate Studies also oversees most of the academic student support units needed to complete the QI including Tutoring and Support, First- and Second-Year Experience, the Writing Center, and Student Engagement and Experiential Learning. The Vice President for Diversity, Equity and Inclusion and Chief Diversity Officer also oversees critical units and initiatives relevant to the QI including the Center for Black Studies, Latino Resource Center, Asian-American Resource Center, Gender and Sexuality Resource Center, Social Justice Education, and Undocumented Student Support. The Director of Accreditation, Assessment, and Evaluation assists the ALO with monitoring all HLC activities, including the QI, and will communicate regularly on the status of the QI with the University Assessment Panel that serves as the shared governance body that serves in an advisory capacity at NIU to review and provide input on activities pertaining to regional accreditation. The Executive Director of the Center for Innovative Teaching and Learning will provide pedagogical support and resources for faculty teaching relevant courses. Finally, the Executive Vice President and Provost will provide leadership to the steering group and will communicate regularly about the QI with the Council of Deans and the President's Senior Leadership Roundtable.

To implement this project, NIU has already invested in and implemented necessary software solutions including both Tableau as described above and, more recently, NIU has begun working with the Education Advisory Board (EAB) bringing an additional data tool to campus, EAB's Academic Performance Solutions to promote data usage in this and other key initiatives. We have partnered with ACUE to expand faculty development in active pedagogical practice and inclusive teaching. Throughout the pandemic, NIU has replaced outdated classroom equipment, including computers, cameras and streaming devices. We expect to continue to devote resources to updating our classrooms to meet student needs. Finally, personnel in Institutional Research and other experts on campus will provide statistical expertise in completing the course analyses.

### **Appropriateness of the Timeline for the Initiative**

*(The institution may include a brief implementation or action plan.)*

10. Describe the primary activities of the initiative and timeline for implementing them.

1. Identify relevant courses with low success rates or high equity gaps. ***Complete by Summer 2021.***
2. Develop plans for each course based on best-practice research and analysis. ***Complete by Fall 2021.***
3. Implement course strategies, faculty development and support strategies. ***Complete initial implementation in Spring 2022.***
4. Assess initial implementation by reviewing strategies in (3). ***Complete in Summer 2022.***
5. Based on review, revise and implement course strategies, faculty development and support activities. ***Complete second implementation in Fall 2022 and Spring 2023.***
6. Assess second-round implementation by reviewing strategies in (5). ***Complete in Summer 2023.***
7. Complete a Summative Assessment of the QI using longitudinal data analyses of course and section level data. ***Complete by Fall 2023.***

## **Institutional Contact for Quality Initiative Proposal**

Include the name(s) of the primary contact(s) for the Quality Initiative.

Name and Title: Carolinda Douglass, Vice Provost for Institutional Effectiveness and ALO

Phone: 815-753-0492      Email: cdoug@niu.edu