

Executive Summary Key Accomplishments

SEM Plan 2019 – 2023



Northern Illinois
University

Guided by our Strategic Enrollment Management (SEM) Plan (2019-2023), NIU developed and introduced new programs and strategies designed to make an NIU degree even more accessible, equitable and affordable. The positive impact is reflected in growing numbers of new and high-achieving students and, prior to the pandemic, positively trending first-year retention rates, total enrollment and reduction of equity gaps.

This summary provides an overview of several key objectives accomplished under the SEM Plan that helped NIU achieve many of its enrollment goals over the past few years.

Goal One: Strengthen our distinctive identity as a public university that combines educational opportunity with student engagement.

Strategy: Refine and reinforce our brand identity to best differentiate NIU to our target markets.

1. **Sub-brand** — Distinct **sub-brands for each of the undergraduate colleges** were completed by 2021. Each college has gone through a brand expression exercise led by a creative branding agency which identified key design elements that allow for expression of each college's unique story while still aligning with the NIU brand. Each college has been equipped by that creative branding agency with a guide to content and brand expression, and a viewbook that leverages the sub-brand. These brands are used in communications with prospective students and families, among other audiences.
2. **Brand perception study** — NIU partnered with EAB on a perception study to better understand NIU's reputation and key branding and enrollment opportunities with key audiences. Between July 2019 and July 2020, a number of surveys, focus groups and/or interviews were completed for various audiences: admitted students, future student prospects, parents of prospects, currently enrolled students (undergraduate and graduate), faculty, staff, administrators, board of trustee members, alumni, high school counselors and DeKalb community members. The results from the study provided NIU with actionable recommendations for next steps that are being implemented into our strategic communication and marketing plans — several of which are new initiatives found in the SEM Plan 2.0.
3. **Advertising plan** — With an increased investment in advertising since 2019, we've been able to develop paid advertising strategies and tactics that are designed to answer and support the objectives of the SEM Plan. We've strengthened our brand by increasing the frequency of our presence in a crowded and expensive marketplace and coordinating both digital and out-of-home efforts. Moreover, we've used the results of the brand survey to develop new, creative concepts that will refine and reinforce our identity. The advertising team utilized new tactics and platforms to better engage target markets, including the introduction of lead-generation campaigns. With increased funds, we've expanded those geotargets to include more paid ads in surrounding states and, during the pandemic, we localized placements to better reach prospective students and their parents/families. Recognizing the diversity of our prospective audiences, we invested in the development of more personalized content and translation services, including consulting work for improved, more relevant communication with priority audiences. With the help of a new advertising agency, we now have access to a real-time dashboard for more frequency in analyzing the results of our investment and, in particular cases, the new CRM (Slate) enables us to track not only click-to-lead but lead-to-application. The team has expanded our undergraduate focus to include collaborative work with inside and outside partners for online and graduate recruitment.

Strategy: Leverage NIU's brand and values to attract, retain and engage employees to serve as brand advocates.

1. **NIU core values embedded in new employee onboarding activities** — We have developed key messages for job profiles that articulate mission, vision and values. A video was created to highlight the diverse perspectives and community that make up our Huskie community. The core values are also part of the NIU new employee online onboarding program.
2. **Search committee implicit bias training** — As of 2019, individuals on search committees for faculty and supportive professional staff (SPS) positions are required to complete implicit bias training. Search committee members must be trained annually (every 12 months) and this requirement will continue to remain in effect for ongoing searches. Members of civil service search committees are not required but are strongly recommended to complete the training.
3. **Social Justice Education Collaborative** — The Social Justice Education Collaborative is now called the FACCE (Faculty Academic Cultural Competency and Equity) Program, a faculty and social justice education co-led program. This program has been developed and is ready to launch fall 2022.

Goal Two: Achieve student enrollment that respects our mission and values while positioning NIU for fiscal sustainability.

Strategy: Clearly define recruitment targets and create tailored, comprehensive plans to drive action.

1. **Recruitment marketing partnership** — NIU began a new partnership with EAB in late 2018 to assist with strategies for cultivating interest from new students, senior application marketing and communications plan, and a strategy for reaching new students/families earlier in their high school career. For our admitted students, EAB administers a survey that informs us about the student's likelihood to enroll, helping us identify which students to focus the most intense recruitment efforts on and how to personalize those conversations. Later, NIU also began a financial aid optimization partnership to determine the most effective and strategic use of institutional aid to impact enrollment and maximize revenue, which impacts both enrollment of new students but also current student success and persistence.
2. **New Customer Relationship Management (CRM) implementation** — The implementation of Slate began in 2019 and was completed in about one year. The software is used to schedule and send communications to prospective students and their families, including email messaging about NIU's value proposition, events and visits, and next steps for applicants and admitted students. The software also tracks interactions with prospective students through events, phone calls, chats, text messages and print pieces mailed to students' homes. The system is also utilized for the undergraduate application and by campus partners to manage and host events for prospective and current students. Over 200 campus partners have been trained on leveraging the system for prospective student and family communications. The system currently includes over 350,000 contacts, including undergraduate and graduate student prospects. The system is also being successfully used for communications to currently enrolled students and employees, including an employee onboarding program that sends weekly messages to new employees over the course of their first year of employment.
3. **Chatbot/mobile messaging** — The chatbot and mobile messaging platform Mainstay, managed by Enrollment Management, Marketing and Communications, was implemented in June 2021 and allows for prospective undergraduate students and families to get answers to questions 24/7/365 through the chat interface on the Office of Admissions website. The mobile messaging component allows NIU to communicate with admitted students, nudging them on their next steps from admit to matriculation, and keeping them engaged with the university through a sophisticated texting campaign that drives yield.
4. **Harper University Center** — Since fall 2019, NIU has partnered with Harper College in developing **three degree-completion programs** — marketing, psychology and computer science — on their campus at the University Center. Since its inception, a total of 617 students have enrolled at NIU through the Harper College University Center and saw its first cohort of graduates from the program in spring 2021.
5. **Online program recruitment partnership** — NIU began a partnership with Wiley University Services in 2019 to provide needed marketing, recruitment/lead generation and concierge online student support services to grow online enrollment in eight high-demand online academic programs: Master of Accountancy (MAC), Master of Business Administration (MBA), Master of Science in Digital Marketing (MSDM), Master of Science in Data Analytics (MSDA), RN to B.S. in Nursing (RN-B.S.), Master of Science in Nursing (MSN), Master of Public Health (MPH), and Doctor of Nursing Practice (DNP). The partnership has leveraged the expertise of NIU faculty and staff in course content and delivery with Wiley's expertise in marketing, recruitment and online student support services. Over the past three years, NIU has increased enrollment in these programs by 378% or 667 new students.

Strategy: Provide enhanced, responsive, and effective scholarship and financial aid options that will attract students and ensure their success.

- 1. Test-free merit scholarships and admission criteria** — Recognizing research that standardized tests are more correlated with family income than likelihood for student success, NIU became one of the nation's first public universities to announce **test-free admission and merit scholarship processes**, beginning with the entering class of fall 2021. These processes support our vision of advancing the upward mobility of our students through more accessible and equitable practices. NIU increased the total amount of merit scholarships awarded to first-year students by 26%, while the total number of enrolled new first-year students with a merit scholarship increased by 48%. NIU also increased the total number of scholarships awarded to new first-year students across all ethnicities:
 - a. Asian (35% increase).
 - b. Black (113% increase).
 - c. Latinx (48% increase).
 - d. White (16% increase).
 - e. Two-plus races (92% increase).
- 2. Huskie Pledge** — **Huskie Pledge** has become a staple program for NIU. Funded by the state of Illinois' AIM HIGH Program, the Huskie Pledge was created to help talented students who might otherwise struggle to afford college realize their dream of attending NIU — with no tuition or fees. Over these two years, almost 1,600 new students received NIU's Huskie Pledge and paid no out-of-pocket expenses for tuition and general fees. Seventy-three percent are first-generation, 80% are students of color, and recipients had an average high school GPA above 3.5.
- 3. NIU Rockford Promise Program** — Through the cooperative efforts of NIU, the city of Rockford and Rockford Promise, a not-for-profit organization that works to increase educational attainment in that community, this new partnership is creating opportunities for thousands of students from Rockford to earn an NIU degree without having to pay tuition or fees. In its first year of existence (beginning with the fall 2021 semester), the **NIU Rockford Promise program** has had a dramatic impact. Ninety-six new students from Rockford Public Schools are attending NIU under the program, receiving support services such as mentoring, job-readiness training and access to a community of other area scholars. Of the 96 qualifying Rockford Promise students, their average high school GPA is 3.53/4.0 and 79% are first-generation college students. The city of Rockford has made a 17-year, \$25 million (\$1.5 million annual) commitment to this program, ensuring a long-term investment for future Huskies from Rockford Public Schools.

Goal Three: Support equitable access, opportunity and success for students from diverse backgrounds where diversity is defined broadly.

Strategy: Clearly define retention and completion goals and create tailored, comprehensive plans to best support the specific needs of our diverse student population.

- 1. NIU Navigate** — Through a collaborative effort, the use of **NIU Navigate** (all colleges, student service units and resource centers) was implemented for tracking student success. A coordinated approach for early alerts/progress reports and student note sharing, utilizing NIU Navigate was implemented across all colleges. In addition, Navigate has expanded the scope of student registration campaigns.
- 2. Increased advising capacity** — NIU has increased advising capacity to support reasonable advisor-to-student ratios of 1:300. Currently, every student has an advisor contact assigned in MyNIU and in Navigate. This has led to a positive impact on the graduation rate (over the most recent five years, the six-year graduation rate increased from 45% to 51%).
- 3. Redesigned Week of Welcome** — NIU redesigned Week of Welcome and bridge experiences, improving collaboration and alignment of first-year and transition programs; fostering a sense of community and common messaging about institutional core values, Huskie pride, academic and social expectations, and critical support services.
- 4. Inclusive teaching programs** — NIU has invested in faculty-inclusive, teaching professional development programs **ACUE (Association of College and University Educators) Inclusive Teaching Micro-Credential certificate program** and our own faculty-led Faculty Academy for Cultural Competency and Equity (FACCE) Program.
- 5. Social justice education programs** — NIU developed online social justice education programs (podcasts, town hall meetings and **Conversations on Diversity and Equity [CODE]** training modules) for faculty, staff and students which has doubled the number of participants in all social justice education programs.

6. **LGBTQ+ Learning Community** — The LGBTQ+ learning community was relocated to Neptune Hall, a more affordable on-campus housing option. As a result, participation in this learning community increased from 12 students to 46 students. NIU ranks among the most LGBTQ-friendly colleges and universities in the nation by Campus Pride Index. The learning community is one of the many valuable resources highlighted as part of the [Campus Pride Index](#).
7. **Disability Resource Center** — NIU improved service delivery for students working with the Disability Resource Center by relocating offices from the fourth floor of the Student Health Center building to the more accessible first floor of the Campus Life Building; increasing its budget to better serve the growing number of students served; improving ease of access to services through upgrades to the software that students use to request accommodations and notification to appropriate faculty; and upgrading equipment for Computer Assisted Real-Time Translation (CART) services.

Strategy: Clearly identify gaps in academic achievement and create tailored and comprehensive plans to reduce these gaps.

1. **ILEA Equity Plan** — In 2020, NIU launched a comprehensive [Illinois Equity and Attainment \(ILEA\) Equity Plan](#) through the Partnership for College Completion (PCC) to reduce equity gaps. In the plan we identified five strategies. The following highlights were tailored to enhance student success:
 - a. Focused academic support inside and outside the classroom.
 - b. Building capacity in mentoring programs for students of color.
 - c. Leverage financial aid to support affordability (i.e., Huskie Pledge).
 - d. Remove bias processes that hinder access to financial aid and influence admission decisions.
 - e. Invest in an inclusive teaching and learning model that promotes curricular redesign, culturally responsive teaching strategies and innovative professional development.
2. **HLC Quality Initiative** — NIU completed the [HLC Quality Initiative](#) that includes a plan to address courses with DFWU rates of 20% or greater and equity gaps of 10% or greater for underserved groups. Courses were identified and grade distributions were shared with the colleges. The colleges worked to create internal goals and initiatives to increase professional development for faculty/instructors, expand curriculum efforts, prioritize the use of campus resources to support students, and increase student outreach and communication tactics.
3. **Developmental education redesign** — In collaboration with the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences and the College of Education, developmental education at NIU was redesigned. As a result, all incoming students are placed in college-level courses in math, English and literacy. Working with the Math Department, the Math Placement Test was replaced with [ALEKS](#) where students can have up to five attempts to improve their math placement.
4. **Test-free admission to University Honors** — In addition to test-free general admission, the University Honors Program changed their admission criteria to a holistic admission, which made University Honors accessible to more students. These changes have resulted in an increase in the number of students of color from 19 (15% of incoming cohort) students in 2019 to 77 students in 2021 (41% of incoming cohort).