



Engagement and NIU

Meaningful engagement with the surrounding region is a defining characteristic of Northern Illinois University. The university's strong commitment to its public service mission is evident as faculty, staff, students, and community members engage with one another to address societal challenges and maximize opportunities for equitable community and economic development.

NIU is one of only 357 higher education institutions in the country that has achieved the Carnegie Elective Classification for Community Engagement, winning designation in 2010 and redesignation in 2020. The university honors those committed to community engagement with its Presidential Engagement and Partnerships Professorship, a recognition bestowed on faculty members annually since 2011. NIU's institutional goals for FY22 and FY23 reflect an increasing focus on partnerships, collaboration, and engagement as essential elements of NIU's mission.

The Need for Action

NIU President Lisa Freeman has called for an action plan to guide the development of the institutional culture and infrastructure necessary to move NIU from its current status as an engaged institution to a national model of excellence in community engagement. The **Centering Engagement, Driving Impact** Task Force was established to ensure the presence of diverse perspectives and voices in crafting the plan. President Freeman appointed Dr. Rena Cotsones, Vice President of Outreach, Engagement and Regional Development, as chair of the task force.

In preparation for the task force launch, leaders of the Division of Outreach, Engagement and Regional Development (OERD) interviewed deans and faculty members to solicit input on current campus interest, knowledge, attitudes, and activity around community engagement. Academic leaders expressed strong interest in community engagement and shared their appreciation for engagement as an enriching element of teaching, learning, research, and artistry. They also expressed widely varying methods for defining community engagement, a desire for institutional support for faculty and student engagement and engaged research, and a belief that engagement and engaged scholarship are undervalued in promotion and tenure policies and procedures. During this discovery phase, the team learned that the NIU College of Liberal Arts and Sciences (CLAS) was also exploring community engagement and had recently finished a college committee report. CLAS leaders were pleased to share their report and become part of the university-wide task force.

Centering Engagement, Driving Impact Task Force

- Gregory Beyer**
College of Visual and Performing Arts
- Bob Brinkmann**
College of Liberal Arts and Sciences
- Amy Jo Clemens**
Division of Outreach, Engagement and Regional Development
- Rena Cotsones, Chair**
Division of Outreach, Engagement and Regional Development
- Melani Duffrin**
College of Health and Human Sciences
- Jeannine East**
Division of Outreach, Engagement and Regional Development
- Cassandra Hill**
College of Law
- Michaela Holtz**
Student Affairs
- Laura Johnson**
College of Education
- Andrea Radasanu**
Academic Affairs
- Clint-Michael Reneau**
Student Affairs
- Alicia Schatteman**
College of Liberal Arts and Sciences
- Bart Sharp**
College of Business
- Mansour Tahernezehadi**
College of Engineering and Engineering Technology

The **Centering Engagement, Driving Impact** Task Force charge was 1) to provide a definition of engagement to be shared by faculty, staff, and students across the research and artistry, teaching and learning, and public service missions of the university, along with a set of guiding principles for engagement and recommendations for units across the university to operationalize the definition and principles and make engagement central to their work; and 2) to define an action plan for university leadership to address six key areas of engagement strategy and operations: engagement infrastructure; assessing outcomes of engagement; partnership guidance; scholarly engagement; faculty recognition and rewards; and engagement and equity. These six key areas mirror the criteria for the Carnegie Engagement Classification.

Task Force Process

Task force members engaged in a series of discussions around key topics. For each topic, task force members were given background materials which included relevant issues to consider, NIU strengths, key opportunities for centering engagement and driving impact, what NIU faculty members said about the topic during the discovery phase, relevant article(s) with key points highlighted, and examples and best practices from other universities. Occasionally, subject matter experts and other guests were invited to join the task force meetings. Task force members volunteered to be part of small work groups that met between task force meetings to explore topics further and accelerate the development of task force materials and recommendations. Preliminary drafts of goals and recommendations were refined and finalized during task force meetings.

NIU Presidential Engagement and Partnership Professors

- 2023:** Mylan Engel, *Philosophy*;
Barrie Bodie, *Biological Sciences*
- 2022:** Mitchell Irwin, *Anthropology*;
Kryssi Staikidis, *Art and Design*
- 2021:** Paula Frasz, *Theatre and Dance*;
Melissa Lenczewski, *Geology and Environment Geosciences*
- 2020:** Keri Burchfield, *Sociology*
- 2019:** Leila Porter, *Anthropology*
- 2018:** Paul Wright, *Kinesiology and Physical Education*;
Mansour Tahernezehadi, *Electrical Engineering*
- 2017:** Catherine Raymond, *Center for Burma Studies*;
Alex Gelman, *Theater and Dance*
- 2016:** Teresa Wasonga, *Leadership, Educational Psychology and Foundations*;
Andrew Otieno, *Technology*
- 2015:** Judy Ledgerwood, *Anthropology*;
Kurt Thurmaier, *Public Administration*
- 2014:** Christine Malecki, *Psychology*;
Jon Miller, *Biological Sciences*
- 2013:** Laurie Elish-Piper, *Literacy Education*;
Andrea Molnar, *Anthropology*
- 2012:** James Ciesla, *Nursing and Health Studies*
- 2011:** Cliff Mirman, *Technology*;
Susan Russell, *Anthropology*;
Kendall Thu, *Anthropology*

NIU Definition of Community Engagement

The first action of the task force was to develop an NIU definition of community engagement, based largely on the definition used by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. After extensive discussion of the task force, a small working group of task force members finalized a definition that was approved by the task force.

“Northern Illinois University believes that community engagement is an intentional collaboration between partners who unite their expertise and resources to pursue a shared vision for public good, in a spirit of mutual benefit and reciprocity. Community engagement enriches scholarship, research, and artistry; enhances curriculum, teaching and learning; address critical societal issues; and strengthens democratic values.”

In order to further highlight and share the definition, the task force also crafted the definition into a set of belief statements, which have been designed and printed as small posters for distribution across campus. The definition and belief statements will also be included in university informational materials and on the university’s website.



At Northern Illinois University, we believe community engagement...

- facilitates collaboration, in which all partners contribute, and all partners benefit.
- unites the expertise and resources of the university and the community.
- allows partners to pursue a shared vision for public good.
- enriches scholarship, research, and artistry.
- enhances teaching and learning.
- addresses critical societal issues.
- strengthens democratic values.

Institutional Goals for Centering Engagement, Driving Impact 2023-2026

The following goals are guiding the development of the Centering Engagement, Driving Impact Action Plan for 2023-2026. The Division of Outreach, Engagement and Regional Development, in close collaboration with Academic Affairs and other key NIU units, will provide institutional leadership to advance these goals.

1. Nurture an institutional culture in which community engagement is
 - Highly valued as an enrichment of teaching, learning, and students’ academic experience
 - A form of scholarship, research, and artistry
 - An essential element of advancing the university’s public service mission
2. Establish expectations around diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging in community engagement, and prioritize partnerships and strategies that help advance social justice.
3. Build and sustain a collaborative and agile infrastructure to support faculty, staff, students, and community members in all elements of engaged teaching and learning, engaged research and artistry, and community engagement
4. Ensure mutual support, effectiveness and efficiency through alignment of the many and varied engagement efforts underway throughout the university and the community.
5. Develop an evidence-based approach to demonstrate NIU and its partners’ collective impact through community engagement and to inform future planning.

Goal One: Establish an Institutional Culture around Community Engagement

A shared set of beliefs about community engagement, along with clear strategies and tangible supports, are integral to the establishment of an institutional culture in which community engagement is highly valued as an enrichment of teaching, learning, and students' academic experience; as a form of scholarship and artistry; and as an essential element of advancing the university's public service mission. Strategic actions for building and maintaining this culture include:

- Adopt the NIU definition of community engagement created by the Task Force
- Elevate the profile of exemplary community engagement through awards, celebrations, sharing effective practices of faculty exemplars, and more
- Facilitate Scholarly Engagement Communities of Practice
- Create Community Engagement Professional Development opportunities
- Support institutional efforts to be more inclusive of community engagement in promotion and tenure processes

Goal Two: Advance Social Justice through Community Engagement

NIU is dedicated to advancing social justice, equity, and inclusion, both on campus and in the wider community. It is vital for community engagement efforts to recognize and promote diverse community partners, to engage in difficult conversations with respect and reciprocity, and to remove barriers to community engagement for all students. By ensuring that diverse perspectives and voices are part of the conversation, we can more effectively address challenges and maximize opportunities in the region and beyond. Strategic actions for advancing social justice through community engagement include:

- Develop a strategic engagement agenda for addressing equity issues in the region
- Remove barriers for first-generation, underserved students interested in community engagement
- Provide resources and allyship for diverse faculty, staff, and students interested in community engagement

Goal Three: Build an Institutional Infrastructure to Support Community Engagement

In order to build lasting, mutually beneficial relationships with community partners, an institutional infrastructure for community engagement is required. This infrastructure will support faculty and staff in applying best practices, help to expand community engagement efforts while avoiding burnout, and improve the experiences of both community members and NIU students. Strategic actions to build an institutional infrastructure include:

- Establish an institutional shared leadership model to facilitate and guide strategies, priorities, and institutional decision-making around community engagement
- Expand capacity across campus for leadership, partnership, and support of community-engaged scholarship, engaged research, and community engagement activities
 - Develop Office of Community Engagement in OERD
- Expand funding opportunities for community-based teaching, research, and artistry
- Support institutional designation of community-engaged courses

Goal Four: Align Institutional Engagement Efforts for Maximum Impact

Community engagement is already taking place across NIU. However, in order to move from our status as an engaged institution to a national model of excellence in community engagement, it is imperative that NIU more effectively communicate about and promote alignment of new and existing engagement efforts. Establishing clear principles, practices, and institutional points of contact will help to avoid duplication of efforts and ensure maximum impact. Strategic actions to align institutional engagement efforts include:

- Improve awareness and alignment of existing engagement efforts across campus
- Create and maintain an ongoing institutional inventory of community-engaged teaching, learning, and public service activities and related funding opportunities
- Develop NIU Principles of Partnership to provide support and ensure high-quality community engagement for the university and the community
- Clarify and improve access to institutional points of contact for potential partners

Goal Five: Support Evidence-Based, Effective Approaches to Community Engagement

A wealth of research and resources exist to identify, implement, and measure the impact of community engagement. Shared systems to report, track, and analyze community engagement efforts will help NIU better understand and increase its positive impact in the region. Strategic actions to support evidence-based, effective community engagement include:

- Identify appropriate platform for reporting, tracking, and analyzing community engagement projects, outcomes, and impacts
- Create a Community Engagement Toolkit for faculty, staff, students, and community members
- Maintain membership in the Engagement Scholarship Consortium
- Provide access to scholarly engagement journals, databases, and other resources

Engagement Roundtable: A Shared Leadership Model for Centering Engagement, Driving Impact

While OERD will take the lead on advancing the Engagement Action Plan, it is important that this work move forward in a collaborative and strategic manner, ensuring that multiple campus perspectives are included and aligned. In the spirit of shared leadership, the Engagement Roundtable will bring together representatives from across campus to take action and provide advice on strategic engagement initiatives and issues.

The Engagement Roundtable will support NIU policy, strategy, and implementation of engaged teaching, learning, engaged research and artistry, and engaged public service and outreach that align with NIU's mission and definition of engagement.

Charge

- Promote and help to operationalize NIU's definition of engagement
- Advise OERD on development and implementation of the division's strategic objectives and ensure alignment with strategic plans of other divisions and the institution as a whole
- Convene internal and external stakeholders to gather input and insights on engagement-focused collaboration and partnership within the university and between the university and partners
- Monitor and assess progress on goals and use these data to make changes in strategy and tactics where necessary
- Provide incentives for collaboration and help stakeholders identify and make use of resources to improve outcomes

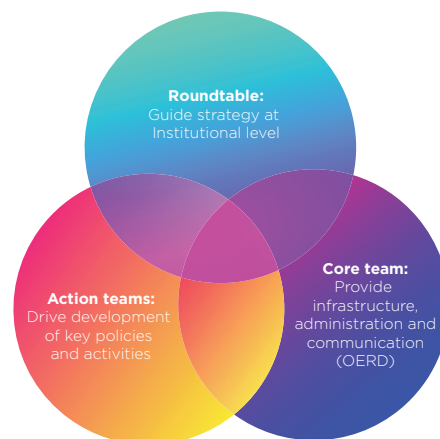
Goals

- Support impactful collaboration within NIU and between NIU and its partners
- Facilitate alignment of existing and emerging community engagement activities and initiatives
- Guide the development of an effective engagement infrastructure that serves multiple institutional goals
- Lead the effort to ensure NIU's continued designation as a Carnegie Engaged Institution
- Provide inspiration and guidance to fellow faculty, staff, and students for a shared vision for public good

Composition and Structure

The Engagement Roundtable will be chaired by the OERD Vice President/Chief Engagement Officer and the Executive Vice President and Provost/Chief Academic Officer. Members of the Engagement Roundtable will be engaged faculty and staff members with broad internal and external networks and decision-making capacity to recommend strategies and policies applicable to the entire university. Action teams will be comprised of Roundtable members as well as other interested faculty and staff who will work together to deliver on institutional engagement priorities. OERD leaders will serve as the core team that stitches these elements together and provides the infrastructure, administration, alignment, and communication needed to move plans forward. After one year of operation, members of the Roundtable will determine the advisability and/or process for including students in the group. A similar consideration should be made about whether/how to include community members.

Engagement Roundtable Structure



Centering Engagement, Driving Impact Action Plan 2023-2026

Year One: 2023-2024

- Launch Engagement Roundtable
 - Establish Action Team for Carnegie redesignation
 - Establish Action Team for community-engaged course designation
- Fall 2023 speaker event
- Inventory of community engaged activities at NIU
- Collaborate with campus partners for unified data platform
- Spring 2024 speaker event

Year Two: 2024-2025

- Launch Office of Community Engagement within OERD
- Establish Engaged Scholarship Community of Practice
- Collaborative and inclusive Carnegie application process (application due April 1, 2025)
- New community project funding opportunities

Year Three: 2025-2026

Year Three: 2025-2026

- Celebrate successful Carnegie redesignation (January 2026)
- Collaborative staffing for Office of Community Engagement
- Launch Summer Faculty Engagement Academy

For more information about the Engagement Action Plan, contact:

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