

OUTREACH, ENGAGEMENT AND REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

IMPACT 2025

Celebrating Engagement
Excellence at NIU



Northern Illinois
University

A MESSAGE FROM LEADERSHIP



At NIU, community engagement and public impact are critical to our mission and central to our identity. We are recognized for our excellence in this area in our surrounding community, across the Northern Illinois region, nationally and beyond.

While always a mainstay, NIU's commitment to community engagement is more important today than ever before. Telling our stories about community engagement and public impact celebrates the excellence of our students, staff, faculty, and community. It also fortifies public confidence in higher education.

Our institutional culture of community engagement helps us attract, retain and graduate students who are both academically and socially focused. The community-engaged experiences they have at NIU help prepare them to achieve their ambitious goals to change the world.

NIU's success at outreach and engagement reflects years long, intentional and collaborative efforts by leaders across campus. Thank you to everyone who has helped make our university the community engagement powerhouse that it has become.

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

President

Northern Illinois University



Centering Engagement, Driving Impact isn't just a catchy title for our action plan. It describes how the university approaches this important element of NIU's mission.

As a community-engaged university, NIU is deeply committed to creating and exchanging knowledge, sharing resources, and creating mutually beneficial solutions with partners. Within the Division of Outreach, Engagement and Regional Development (OERD), we collaborate with partners across campus to establish the vision, nurture the culture, and ensure a robust infrastructure for outreach and engagement. Members of the Engagement Roundtable (who you will meet on page 5) are key partners in our ongoing process of discovery, creation and improvement.

In this Impact Report, we celebrate and reflect on a few key highlights of outreach and engagement over the last year. We recognize there is more to do and more stories to tell about NIU's impact around the globe. Thank you to everyone who has been part of the journey so far. We are wildly optimistic about the next chapter.

Rena Cotsones, Ph.D.

Vice President and Chief Engagement Officer

Division of Outreach, Engagement and

Regional Development

Northern Illinois University

For the third time, NIU is designated an Engaged Institution by the **Carnegie Foundation** for the Advancement of Teaching.

Table of Contents

Centering Engagement, Driving Impact	4
Inspirational Ideas.....	6
Aligned Strategies	8
Agile Approaches	10
Inclusive Partnerships	12
Impactful Scholarship	14
Measurable Results.....	16
Division of Outreach, Engagement and Regional Development	18

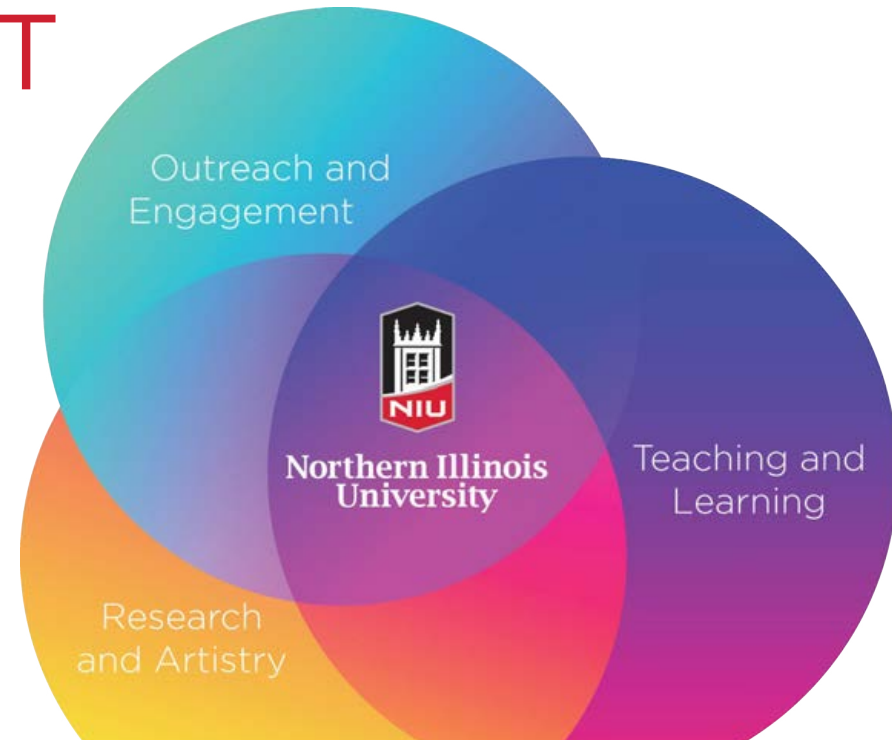
The 2026 Carnegie reclassification process required a rigorous self-study, which took a year to complete and resulted in a 100+ page report detailing how NIU supports community-engaged teaching, research and artistry across all colleges and divisions. The self-study was compiled by an Engagement Roundtable Action Team comprised of representatives from several divisions and colleges.

This classification, bestowed on only 277 universities in the U.S., recognizes universities that excel at collaborating with the larger community for the mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources in a context of partnership and reciprocity. The classification cycle runs through 2032, marking 22 consecutive years that NIU will be celebrating its engagement excellence.



CENTERING ENGAGEMENT, DRIVING IMPACT

Impactful **community engagement** is happening across NIU in classrooms, faculty research, and staff- and student-led projects. NIU employees and students connect with community members in our region during service days, internships and outreach. Centering engagement brings attention to this critical element of NIU's mission, amplifying the impact to our region and the people we serve.



NIU's Centering Engagement, Driving Impact Timeline

June 2022

Centering Engagement, Driving Impact concept is introduced to the Board of Trustees.

Spring 2023

Institutional definition of Community Engagement is created.

Fall 2023

Engagement Roundtable begins meeting monthly to advise on Action Plan.

Spring 2024

Faculty Senate approves Promotion and Tenure guidelines that promote value of community-engaged teaching, inquiry and service.

2022-2023

Engagement Task Force guides development of the Action Plan.

The **Engagement Roundtable** is a shared leadership model for centering engagement at NIU. It unites representatives from across campus to take action and provide advice on strategic engagement initiatives.

“I've been part of the Engagement Roundtable for a few years, and it's been inspiring to witness its evolution firsthand. When I joined, our focus was on continuing to build awareness. Today, we're hosting a multitude of workshops/seminars, welcoming Engagement Executives in Residence and Fellows from around the world, coordinating engagement and partnership events across campus, and supporting faculty involvement. All of this reflects the ERT's ongoing commitment to centering engagement and driving meaningful impact.”

Shondra Clay, Ph.D.
 Chair, School of Interdisciplinary Health Professions (SIHP)
 College of Health and Human Sciences



Roundtable Members, 2025-26

- **Rena Cotsones**, Vice President, Outreach, Engagement and Regional Development, Co-Chair
- **Laurie Elish-Piper**, Executive Vice President and Provost, Co-Chair
- **Rachel Boldman**, Student Affairs
- **Cindy Carbajal**, Newman Civic Fellow
- **Shondra Clay**, CHHS
- **Ben Creed**, CEDU
- **Jeannine East**, OERD
- **Jennifer Groce**, OERD
- **Michaela Holtz**, Academic Affairs
- **Becca Hussar**, COB
- **Adriane Hutchinson**, ADEI
- **Laura Johnson**, CEDU
- **Eric Junco**, CEDU
- **Jessica Labatte**, CVPA
- **Richard Mocarski**, RIPS
- **Andrea Radasanu**, Academic Affairs
- **Alexios Rosario-Moore**, CEDU
- **Alicia Schatteman**, Academic Affairs
- **Mark Schuller**, CLAS
- **Mansour Tahernezehadi**, CEET
- **Melina Wright**, OERD

go.niu.edu/ERT



Spring 2024

Baccalaureate and Graduate Council approve Designated Community-engaged Courses.

Summer 2025

Director of Community Engaged Partnerships and Director of Community Engagement Impact roles are created.

January 2026

NIU is reclassified as a Community Engaged Institution by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching.

Spring 2026

OERD and the Engagement Roundtable build the next 3-year strategic action plan.

2025-2026

Twenty-two undergraduate and nine graduate courses are designated Community-engaged.

INSPIRATIONAL IDEAS

As we aim to inspire others, we're inspired and moved to collaborative action by the expertise and voices of our partners.

We believe community engagement...

- Facilitates collaboration, in which all partners contribute, and all partners benefit.
- Unites the expertise and resources of the university and 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.



DEMOGRAPHIC-DRIVEN SOLUTIONS SERVE OUR REGION

WNIJ reporters published **800 stories**, strengthening community awareness and connections in Northern Illinois.

WNIJ's Hola initiative produces a robust collection of Spanish-language stories reflecting the lives and priorities of Latino communities in northern Illinois.



WNIJ's listening Area:



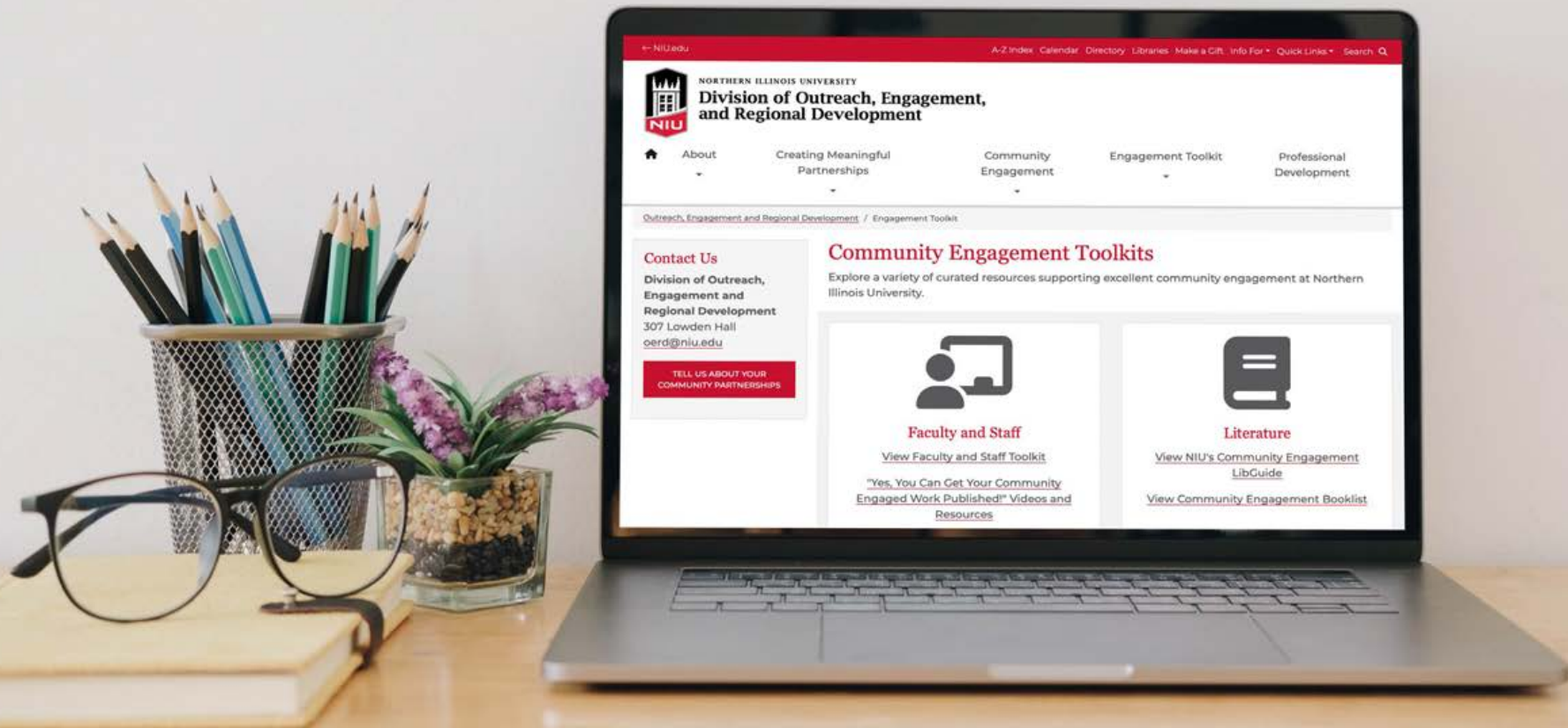
WNIJ's Story Topics:

- Politics
- Life
- Education
- Arts
- Social Issues
- Environment
- Government
- Health
- Economy



ALIGNED STRATEGIES

Effective collaboration starts with open communication, clearly articulating the goals of all partners. By aligning our strategies for success, we reach these goals together, for the mutual benefit of everyone involved.



Developing tracking and evaluation mechanisms for community engagement.

Strengthening Infrastructure for Engagement

OERD's Community Engagement Research Fellow Alexios Rosario-Moore, Ph.D. is studying the prevalence of and institutional support for community-engaged research, teaching and artistry at NIU.

Research survey results:

204
Respondents

38%
Participated in
CE Scholarship
or Artistry

90%
Agreed that
engagement
activities are part
of NIU's mission

76%
Agreed that NIU
Leadership supports
engagement efforts

go.niu.edu/measuring-engagement



In November 2025, Dr. Rosario-Moore (*center, left*) and NIU graduate student Emelia Essumanba-Josiah (*center, right*) presented their paper "Examining Faculty Participation in Community-Engaged Scholarship and Artistry at a Public R2 University" at the Mid-Western Educational Research Association (MWERA) Annual Meeting in November 2025.

Submitted partnerships
grew 68% in one year.

Partnership Map

In 2025, OERD built and maintains a Partnership Map showcasing 200+ partnerships between NIU faculty or staff and organizations across the world.



go.niu.edu/PartnershipMap

AGILE APPROACHES

Collaborating with partners can introduce elements of surprise such as shifting priorities, unexpected opportunities and leadership changes. Remaining agile allows us to recalculate our strategies, and pivot with our partners.



Workforce Development and Career Pathways

Middle school students in **OERD's Barb City STEAM Team** program participate in career-focused activities. Supported by NIU STEAM Staff, NIU faculty and community partners, they learn skills to succeed in school and careers.



Education Systems Center, Workforce Policy Lab and Illinois P-20 Network partner with community colleges, high schools, government organizations and industries to support K-12 student career pathways.



Collaborating with NIU is a wonderful investment in getting our students ready for their futures through varied experiences.

Sarah Montgomery —

Director of Teaching and Learning 6-12
DeKalb Community Unit School District 428
Barb City STEAM Team Program



Supporting Dual Credit and Workforce Development across Illinois



edsystemsniu.org/tag/dual-credit

INCLUSIVE PARTNERSHIPS

In an environment of true collaboration, all partners contribute and all partners benefit. Inclusive partnerships mean every member respects the expertise and lived experience of the others, creating open dialogue and more creative approaches to solutions. OERD promotes engaged partnerships at every level, from transactional to transformational.



Edible Campus
niu.edu/edcampus

Advice for Building an Inclusive Partnership

Excerpt from *“Creating Partnerships Overseas: Lessons Learned from Four Countries”*

James Cohen, Ph.D.
2025 Presidential Engagement and Partnerships Professor

- When beginning a partnership, start off with a level one MOU.
- Be sure that your department chair and dean are informed of your actions.
- Get feedback from more experienced others.
- Discuss roles and expectations very clearly so both partners are on the same page.
- Expect to have disagreements and last-minute changes in everything.
- Judging will get you nowhere. Just deal with the change.
- Flexibility is the key.
- Although it sounds inequitable, elevate your partner above yourself. Work on their schedule. Elevate their ideas over yours.
- If they ask your opinion, then give it. Otherwise, refrain from giving it.



Turtle Beach peripherals allow our arena visitors and varsity teams use of state-of-the-art equipment while exposing the Turtle Beach brand to a new generation of gamers.

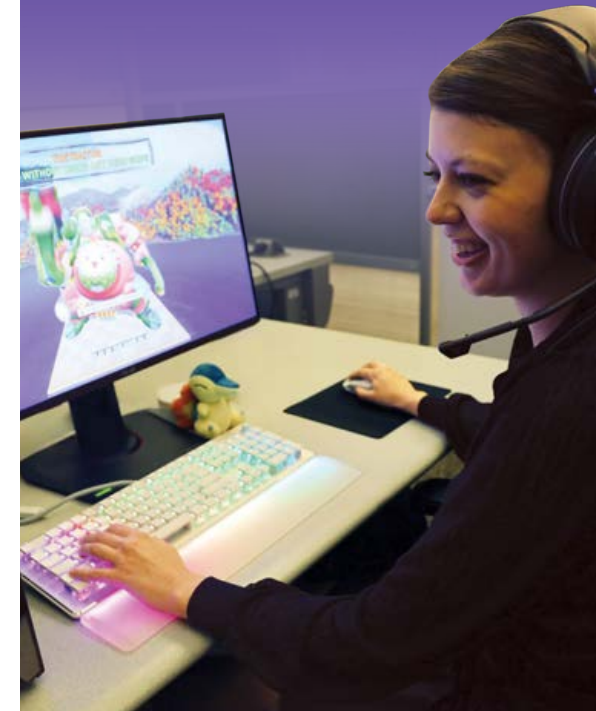


NIU Esports and Turtle Beach expand partnership in 2025 to include student internships.

Ethan Nguyen, the first NIU Turtle Beach intern, is an NIU senior majoring in computer science. Since early June, Ethan has been working with Turtle Beach on their outreach to online content creators. With his mentors at Turtle Beach, he seeks out and interviews internet personalities that might be a good fit for the Turtle Beach affiliate partnerships program.

“ At NIU I’m not only learning computer science at the enterprise level; I’m also learning about the esports industry and the business structure behind it, both in my coursework and the Turtle Beach internship. ”

go.niu.edu/TurtleBeachInternship



IMPACTFUL SCHOLARSHIP

Our **community-engaged faculty, staff and students** are scholars and practitioners. Their research, teaching, learning and publications generate positive impacts for the world and inspire the next generation of community engagement professionals.

2025 Presidential Engagement and Partnerships Professors

Melani Duffrin is a full professor in the School of Interdisciplinary Health Professions in the NIU College of Health and Human Sciences. Her research focuses on making nutrition, math and science education more accessible to K-12 students and adult learners through food-based lessons. Dr. Duffrin's award-winning FoodMASTER initiative has been in existence since 1999 and is still expanding, helping K-12 educators use food as a teaching tool to improve students' math and science skills, as well as their health.



James Cohen is a full professor of ESL/Bilingual Education in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction in the NIU College of Education. Dr. Cohen works with teachers and administrators throughout Illinois to increase their capacity to work with immigrant students. He partners with schools around the world, bringing international teachers to study at NIU and NIU students (pre-service teachers) to teach in K-12 schools in Indonesia, Uruguay and Kenya, among other places. His publications aim to reshape the field of literacy with a better focus on equitable partnerships.



Professional Development for Impactful Scholarship

Community engagement takes place in many forms in all colleges and many departments. OERD offers multiple opportunities for our faculty and staff to learn from experts in the fields of community, civic and public engagement. These include our Community Engagement Brown Bag Lecture Series and Engagement Executive in Residence Workshops.

Topics we explored:

- How to build a community engaged course.
- How to build a community engaged partnership.
- Creating partnerships overseas.
- Yes! You can get your community engaged work published.
- Sustaining impact through civic and community engagement.



Brown Bag Lunch Series
Holmes Student Center



152
Attendees in
2025

Introducing Students to
Engaged Learning

31

**Community-engaged
Designated Courses for
2025-2026**



OERD supports Academic Affairs

- Reviewing applications for course designation.
- Creating faculty/partner agreement templates.
- Participating in training for faculty.
- Formalizing and conducting a partnership assessment process.
- Providing parking passes for partners who visit campus.

MEASURABLE RESULTS

Our data-driven approach helps us evaluate and improve projects and partnerships.

STEM Fest is a regional beacon of discovery and a destination for the curious, bringing the next generation of innovators, researchers and dreamers to NIU.

2025 STEM Fest visitors by the numbers

5,000+ FROM **100** INCLUDING **1,000+**
Visitors **Communities** **K-12 Students on School Field Trips**
traveling as far as 200 miles!

Visitors explored a variety of exhibits from:

40 AND **60** FROM **6**
Professional Organizations **Student Organizations and Professors** **NIU Colleges and Academic Departments**

go.niu.edu/STEMFest

125
Exhibits



IHSEA Partnership Impacts High School Students

The Illinois High School Esports Association and NIU Esports collaborate to host the IHSEA State Finals in the NIU Esports Arena twice a year. In Fall 2025, we surveyed IHSEA stakeholders about the value of their partnership with NIU.

- “ Opportunity for students to travel to in-person competitions which provides validity to the sport and real-world experience, as well as exposure to colleges/college programs of all kinds. ”
- “ The kids and their parents can see first hand how E-sports is important and can lead to college aspirations. ”

The value of the partnership is worth the time, effort and resources/money spent:
(Survey completed by 30 IHSEA coaches/administrators.)



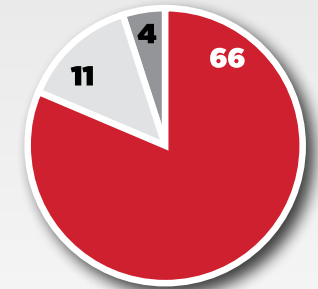
500+

High School Students Attend the Esports Championships at NIU



NIU Values Reciprocal Voice for Successful Partnerships

Mutual Voice in 81 NIU Partnerships



- NIU faculty/staff and the partner(s) had equal decision making input.
- The partner(s) made most of the decisions.
- NIU faculty/staff made most of the decisions.

(Survey completed by NIU faculty/staff in fall 2025.)

DIVISION OF OUTREACH, ENGAGEMENT AND REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

We **empower engagement** to create thriving communities.

Mission

To advance NIU's public mission by providing leadership, partnership and support that unites students, faculty, staff and community in an environment of mutual trust and collaboration to address challenges and maximize opportunities.

Values

INSPIRATIONAL ideas
ALIGNED strategies
AGILE approaches
INCLUSIVE partnerships
IMPACTFUL scholarship
MEASURABLE results

We create meaningful partnerships in the community and on campus; foster engagement by providing leadership, partnership and support to faculty and staff; and expand networks of thought leaders.



go.niu.edu/OERDprograms

OERD Departments and Programs

Center for Child Welfare and Education
Center for Early Learning Funding Equity
Center for Governmental Studies
Civic Leadership Academy
Community Engagement and Partnership Support
Conference and Event Services
Continuing and Professional Education
Education Systems Center
Illinois Career and Technical Education Project
Illinois Interactive Report Cards
Illinois Migrant Education Program
Illinois MTSS Network
Illinois National Safety Education Center
Illinois P-20 Network
NIU Esports
NIU STEAM
Northern Public Radio



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.



**Northern Illinois
University**

Outreach, Engagement
and Regional Development

go.niu.edu/oerd