



State of the University Address

By Dr. Lisa Freeman

Thank you very much, Shanthi, and thank you all for coming today for what I hope will be an informative and engaging dialogue.

But before beginning today's dialogue, I want to offer a few words about the unprecedented series of natural disasters that have inflicted untold pain and suffering across communities in Texas, Florida, Puerto Rico, Mexico and the Caribbean. Our thoughts and prayers are with all of those who've been impacted adversely, especially members of the NIU family.

I want to thank publically the staffs of Student Affairs, International Affairs and Athletics who have been providing direct support to the affected students and their families, as well as the faculty who have been working with these students in their classes.

I want to acknowledge the members of the College of Education who have been raising funds for our Houston school district partners, and I want to extend my profound gratitude to all of the caring Huskies who are contributing to the relief efforts. Thank you.

I want to begin the State of the University Address by acknowledging the overwhelming support that I've received from our faculty, staff, students, alumni, donor community and trustees. I want to acknowledge the trustees who are with us here today. Board of Trustees Chair Wheeler Coleman, Vice Chair Dennis Barsema, Trustee Bob Boey, Trustee John Butler and I didn't see him come in, but if he's here I also want to acknowledge our Student Trustee Giuseppe LaGioia.

I'm humbled and honored to lead this university that I love and respect; and after Monday's announcement by the Board of Trustees, I'm honored to do so for the next two academic years. I offer my sincere gratitude and look forward to what we will accomplish together.

When I accepted my new role, I pledged that NIU will be guided by the principals of shared governance, mutual respect and transparency in decision-making. In this spirit, today we will not only celebrate some of the university's accomplishments—we will also discuss some of the challenges that face us.

Our Board of Trustees has elected to delay the presidential search, but they do not want NIU to delay on advancing important initiatives. I want to be clear that the university will keep moving forward.

We will formulate the appropriate strategies, make the necessary decisions and build momentum in the process to strongly position NIU for the future.



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And I want to emphasize the “We.”

I have shared that I believe deeply that the strength of NIU is from the bottom up and not the top down. That means that our best ideas come from staff and faculty—and always have. It is thus important for those of us in leadership positions to listen very carefully and actively to you.

In my time here, Program Prioritization best demonstrates the power of bottom-up. From drafting program narratives, to the significant work done by the task forces, to our units, departments and divisions building and implementing action plans. Faculty and staff at every level were involved. The transparency of process, insights and results are impressive.

Throughout the Program Prioritization process, we recognized opportunities for synergy, and we restructured in ways that facilitate collaboration and increase operational efficiency and effectiveness. This was the case with Financial Aid and Scholarship Services, as well as with Marketing Communications and Enrollment Management. We’ve also re-thought the way we provide tutoring and advising, and we are implementing changes to make it easier for our students to succeed academically. These new structures allow for more effective and efficient means to recruit and retain our students.

The great work continues, and I want to share with you a few additional updates related to the implementation of Program Prioritization.

You may remember that the task forces recommended a merger between the Child Development Lab and Campus Child Care. I’m pleased to say that this is happening. The results will not only increase child care capacity, but will also provide additional space allowing for the expansion of the Child Development Lab to support our undergraduate students with an enhanced environment for their academic learning and success.

A second update comes from the strong recommendation to centralize the conferencing and event management functions at NIU. The basic framework for that effort has been established, and multiple departments are now at the table working to operationalize a new Conferencing and Event Management program, housed in the Division of Outreach, Engagement, and Regional Development. We believe that this move will create greater efficiencies, allow us to expand use of our facilities and create new revenue streams. Building the number of people coming to NIU for events will also enhance relations with area businesses who benefit from increased visitor traffic to DeKalb.

Program Prioritization was also instrumental in informing the faculty hiring plan this year and last, allowing us to approve and hire more faculty than we’ve been able to do in previous years.

The Program Prioritization process has changed our culture—encouraging us to think in new ways about how to support our mission and improve our operations.



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We are more thoughtful about whether it makes sense to keep doing things the way that they've always been done.

We're doing more than ever to capture and utilize data to inform our strategies and refine our practices. We have recognized the power of relationships as resources.

And in fact, we are taking that last idea and extending it beyond the campus into our region and our neighborhoods.

We're making great progress strengthening our connections to our community and I want to highlight a few examples:

Currently, there is a new, county-wide transportation plan online for public review and comment. This plan was two years in development. If approved, it will integrate the NIU Huskie Line bus system and the community's TransVAC transportation service into a shared service delivery system. Over the course of the next few years, routes will be expanded, the frequency of certain stops will be increased, money will be saved...and we will have jointly expanded opportunity and quality of life for students and local residents alike.

Another example of growing connections between NIU and our host community is an initiative called the City/University Student Leaders Group. Driven by a desire to better connect students with their host community, we worked with the City of DeKalb to recruit a diverse group of students who provide regular input on issues related to economic development and neighborhood revitalization. I attended one of their events earlier this year that focused on downtown DeKalb. The city took students on a bus tour then hosted them at a downtown restaurant for dinner and discussion. About 60 students spent several hours telling city leaders about the need for better marketing, additional entertainment venues and a better-lighted pathway from the campus to the downtown area. Many of these ideas are now under discussion at City Hall as municipal leaders look for ways to operationalize the suggested changes. I am so proud of our students and the thoughtful ways they are becoming involved in initiatives that can improve life for everyone in DeKalb.

In addition to building stronger relationships with our business and civic community, NIU is also doing more to engage our nearly 7,000 alumni who live and work in the DeKalb/Sycamore area. Our goals are to better mobilize their vociferous support of NIU, to enhance their participation in volunteer opportunities, and to increase their attendance at lectures, athletics and arts events.

To this end, we're launching an event series called the "Taste of NIU" which aims to drive alums to campus for special experiences. And I am happy to report that when our alums return to NIU they will see a campus that appears attractive and full of life—in no small part because of our amazing building and grounds workers—who achieve very high impact with very low budget.



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Soon visiting alumni will experience lecture and performance venues that have been recently updated and improved...

After a few starts and stops related to the budget impasse, we are closer than ever to having an inspiring and useful space for the Department of Anthropology and the School of Theatre and Dance. Next year, the Stevens Building will open with new classroom space and a “black box” theater waiting to be filled with our talented students.

We are also on schedule to start revitalization of the ground floor of the Holmes Student Center. Paid for by Build America Bonds, this Holmes Center project will result in a completely new space by 2019. The renovation plan has been informed by input and ideas from NIU students as well as from staff members in the Holmes Student Center, Student Affairs, Finance and Facilities. The planned \$20 million renovation will include new dining, retail, entertainment and lounging options that we’ll all be able to enjoy.

Many of the opportunities and accomplishments that I have cited for celebration are things that support student recruitment and retention, and the good news is that campus visits are up, as is freshman enrollment, law school enrollment and overall retention. This is because of our collective efforts. Let’s give ourselves a hand!

We have to build on those gains and grow enrollment in other areas; and we can do this using the lessons we have learned about the importance of collaboration and the power of relationships as resources.

Let me give you an example. I’m particularly proud that this summer, NIU along with our partners, Township High School District 211 Palatine/Schaumburg and Harper College, were selected as one of four teams out of 50 who applied to participate in an intensive challenge funded by the Michael & Susan Dell Foundation, the Seamless Transfers Pathways Design Challenge. The goal of the award is for two- and four-year institutions to partner on a solution to increase the number of community college students earning a four-year degree within six years. The design challenge will provide the schools with access to experts and reimbursement for national meetings and design sessions. Pilot programs that we develop over the next year or so will be launched in fall 2018 with results tracked for six years.

The Dell Foundation said that our application and interview demonstrated that our team is ready, willing and able to re-think the transfer experience in higher education and to transform the relationship between two-year and four-year institutions. We will spend the next 15 months working together to design and build truly seamless transfer pathways. This work will not only impact our own institutions, but will also provide opportunities for other schools to pilot the models that we develop and to benefit from our scalable innovation.



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Other institutions in our region view us as leaders, and we are. Our progress as a university is exciting, but as we move forward, we cannot forget who we are. We have to invest in what makes NIU special—our mission, our core values and our unwavering commitments to excellence and to diversity and inclusion.

At NIU we continue to address complex, real-world challenges head-on with interdisciplinary, forward-thinking research in a wide variety of fields, sciences, humanities, arts, business, engineering, education and health.

In FY17, NIU faculty members attracted nearly \$10 million in funding for fundamental and applied research. That funding level represents an 11 percent increase over the previous year.

NIU research helps to educate and prepare our students for 21st century careers, at the same time that it benefits our region and advances our society. There are so many examples...from creation of a virtual lab to engage local students in STEM . . . to investigations of the potential impact of climate change on thunderstorms across the Great Plains ...to uncovering the story of escaped Muslim slaves in the American heartland . . . to studying a vanishing art form in Myanmar . . . to bioinformatics work that could contribute to the production of lower-cost biofuels, help prevent crop loss and benefit human health research.

NIU faculty and students from physics and engineering are also participating in several “big science” efforts at the Fermi National Accelerator Laboratory, collaborating with scientists from across the world.

Our academic programs are being recognized in national rankings for their exceptional quality. Again, there so are many examples, but let me highlight just a few:

- In the newest U.S. News & World Report rankings, the CEET ranked in the top third of undergraduate engineering programs at institutions where the highest degree offered is a bachelor’s or master’s.
The College of Education’s online graduate programs tied for fourth out of 200 schools nationally.
- The NIU Accountancy Program ranks among the Top 25 large programs in the country in a survey of accounting faculty conducted by the Public Accounting Report. The department has been a fixture on that list for more than 20 years.
- The College of Law was recently recognized by National Jurist as a Best Value Law School. In addition, Law.com recently ranked us as fourth in the nation when it comes to placing graduates in government and public interest jobs.
- The American Association for Men in Nursing has identified the NIU School of Nursing as a leader



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in the nation for its commitment to preparing men for careers as nurses. Men represent 14 percent of the undergraduate nursing class, and the number of male nursing faculty has quadrupled over the course of the past three years.

- And here's one ranking that truly distinguishes NIU among Illinois public universities. Our excellence in academics and research were nationally recognized recently by a Brookings Institute Report where NIU was named as being among a select group of the nation's public universities that simultaneously produce important research and advance the social-mobility of students from low-income households.

Take that in for a moment. The work of NIU faculty and staff is not only informing our society, but also transforming the lives of our students and their families.

As you saw in the opening video, diversity and inclusion are at the core of our successful learning environment. Different perspectives and cultures enrich us all, open our minds and force us to challenge our beliefs and our potential.

Feeling welcome and achieving a sense of belonging is what we all want. And when we have that, we can be our best at teaching, learning, creating and ultimately shaping our world for the better. Places of higher education can and should be the catalysts for change.

Our world is struggling right now. None of us can avoid witnessing the turmoil and the injustices happening around the globe, throughout the nation and in our state.

Our students are often inspiring—because of their hopes and dreams—their motivations and their accomplishments, but they are also vulnerable, and in need of our respect and our support—especially students of color.

No matter what your background...whether you are Black, Latino, Asian-American, white or an international student...or have a different belief system...regardless of gender identity or status...when we admit you to NIU, we accept you and we welcome you.

To our undocumented students, we sent a firm message that we stand with you, you belong here. Your stories are important and I appreciate the work of DREAM Action NIU.

To our LGBTQIA students, we support all gender identities, including trans people, and we support the protection of all people regardless of gender identity. One of the many ways we demonstrate our support for all identities is through the creation of gender-inclusive restrooms and we've now grown that to include six different buildings, including the one you're in.

We also value our Asian-American students and recognize that they need a new space for their Resource Center. And I want to be honest here and tell you that we've not moved in this direction at the



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pace we should have. But we're working on it. And I'm committing to you that we will have a resolution during this academic year.

What oftentimes stands in the way of getting things done how and when we want to is our lack of financial resources. And in fact, our fiscal situation remains NIU's No. 1 challenge. Accordingly, we must continue to be forthright and transparent in our communications about the university's budget.

The impacts of more than 700 days without support from the state cannot be undone quickly. Fallout is widespread, and there's still a great deal of uncertainty with Springfield for next year. We have parts of our budget that deserve, but don't have, stable permanent funding. We have pressing needs related to renovation and repair of our physical plant and refresh of our technology—and these cannot be ignored indefinitely. To address these imperatives, we are going to have to continue to reduce spending in some areas as well as to increase revenues.

Divisions will be asked to make further reductions this fiscal year. While we don't have specific amounts at this time, we're working to determine how reductions will be allocated and implemented. We will inform you as soon as we can.

But despite our budget difficulties, we cannot afford to neglect our most important resource—our people—any longer. And I'm pleased to say that we're taking an important step to help address this. I've asked our Board of Trustees to convene a special board meeting on October 19 where we will request a 3 percent increase for all eligible employees.

Because I know how much this matters to you, and I know how many questions will be asked, I'm going to take a moment to go into some of the details.

We're targeting implementation so that all eligible employees should see an impact in their paycheck by mid-December.

Eligible employees are those who were hired before December 31, 2016 and who are not currently part of an open contract within a bargaining unit.

If you are currently a temporarily appointed SPS employee who has been continuously reappointed for three or more years, you are eligible.

All graduate students are considered eligible employees and will receive a 3 percent increase in their stipends.

Finally, I have elected not to take the 3 percent; and our vice presidents who also want to be supportive, and each is either electing not to take the raise or to make a gift to the foundation. Either way, they are demonstrating their support of you and our university.

I am sure that you will have additional questions about the increment program, and not all will have



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definitive answers at this point in time, as we are still finalizing details. As specifics are confirmed, we will post information on the Human Resources website. In fact, we hope to have the first set of FAQs up before the end of this week.

I want to emphasize that although this is a good thing—we wish we could do more—but it is a start. Ultimately, we need a longer-term strategy designed to address merit for faculty and other employment classifications, as well as issues such as compensation, inversion and market equity.

Investment in people is a priority for me. To be successful, we must invest in our faculty, our staff and our students. And, NIU is 18,000 students strong!

And who are our students exactly?

They originate from more than 100 countries with unique cultures and perspectives. They are first-generation students blazing new paths that will change their family's trajectory. They are transfers from community college partners. They are adults working to finish a degree or to achieve a new one. They are legacy students whose parents or siblings are Huskies. And I'm especially proud when I say that for many of you, they are your sons and your daughters.

I am also proud to say that our NIU students are leaders who succeed in the classroom, and in our community, and in competition—(particularly when that competition is held in Lincoln, Nebraska. And for anyone who hasn't heard, our Huskies beat the Nebraska Cornhuskers on their home field last Saturday).

Our NIU students are interesting—with diverse perspectives and informed opinions. They embrace the values of the Northern Pact. And they look out for each other. We see this in the priorities of the NIU Student Association—their commitment to supporting undocumented students, and their inspiring #noshame campaign, focused on de-stigmatizing mental health issues. We also hear this in the amazing stories that our students share about their struggles and their triumphs.

And, in this context, I want to share something personal with you. My husband, Doug Rose, and I have been so moved by our students and their stories that we have decided to make a \$25,000 gift to the NIU Foundation this year for student scholarships.

We believe in the potential of our current—and our future—students. Our hope in making this gift public is that others will join us—to increase the unrestricted funds available for scholarships—to make education a reality for those who want it most.

We are all part of the Huskie family here at NIU. And in crafting the State of the University Address, I had the hard task of culling down countless shining examples of hard work, determination, creativity, resilience and success. Those are the tenets of being a Huskie. And together as Huskies, we will move



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our students and university forward, and we'll do so in ways that we can all be proud of—maintaining open and transparent communications.

So let's start that now. I've shared a lot of information, and I want to hear from you. I'd be happy to take questions from the audience at this time.

Q&A PORTION

I want to end today on three words. This has become a battle cry for Athletics, but these words really speak to all of us. Smart. Tough. Relentless.

These adjectives not only encompass who we are, but how we deliver in the pursuit of our mission. How we deliver for our students.

You each make a difference at NIU and we're stronger for that and I'm grateful. Thank you!

Go Huskies!