



STATE OF THE UNIVERSITY ADDRESS

By Dr. Lisa C. Freeman

Good afternoon, Huskies. It's wonderful to have the opportunity to share with you today highlights of our progress, impact and priorities for moving our university forward.

Just over a year ago, I had the distinct honor to be named the [13th president of NIU](#). The support from you, our alumni and community has been amazing, and it's a testament to the profound impact NIU has in our personal and professional lives, in our town and across the globe.

Whether at alumni engagement events across the United States, or in [Southeast Asia where an NIU delegation nurtured new and longstanding relationships](#) that support academic success, leadership development and research excellence. Wherever Huskies gather, the message to me is always clear – the people and educational opportunities from NIU are transformative, not only for individuals, but also for their families and communities. The energy and optimism for our university is greater than I've ever experienced. Together we truly are making a difference and I applaud you all for that.

Our ability to make that difference starts with our [mission, vision and values](#). In fact, all that we do – whether related to recruitment, student success, academic excellence, curriculum innovation, employee professional development, fundraising or budgets – all should begin and end with a reflection of our mission, vision and values. When we do that, we stay true to who we are and who we are here to serve. When we focus our efforts through that lens, we deliver better results, foster better ideas and we stretch ourselves in ways that make us more effective as colleagues, mentors, managers and leaders.

And we've shown that it is possible to respect our mission, vision and values even as we implement new strategies and pursue new solutions. This is the way we approached developing our [strategic enrollment management plan](#), and as we've seen with our most recent enrollment figures, [our recruitment efforts are working and delivering as we had anticipated](#). Overall, we saw a 10 percent increase in applications for Fall 2019 admissions – and we're up across the board in new students. Specifically, we're:

- Up 2 percent each in new freshman, transfer and graduate students
- Up 5 percent in new law students, 25 percent in out-of-state students and 37 percent in new online students

Part of this success stems from identifying strategic partners to assist us in areas where they add value and speed in achieving results. Had we gone it alone doing things the same way, we would not have seen positive change. Relationships and partnerships are resources that we must continue to develop and mine.

And the individual relationships that we cultivate also make a difference. All of us play a role in ensuring students and their families have a great on-campus experience. It's particularly gratifying when I receive



positive emails directly from families who visit campus, such as the one I received recently from the Carroll family, who spoke highly of our admissions staff and [Northern Ambassadors](#).

To quote:

- “Of all the schools we’ve toured this summer, Brigid and Kaelyn were, by far, the most impressive and helpful people we encountered and the NIU tour was, by far, the most informative and helpful tour we participated in. Before the tour if you had asked us ‘is NIU in your consideration set for your kids to attend?’ my wife and I would have said ‘probably not’ – after the tour...our answer would be “definitely, yes.”

This is but one example of the positive unsolicited feedback we’ve received.

Now let me tell you a little about the new students we welcomed to NIU in August.

- They are awesome. They are excited to be here. I love seeing them in their spirit wear, exploring our campus and city, taking and posting pictures at our [new Huskie Pride sculpture](#).
- They are also actively involved, creating connections to each other through common interests and experiences, defining and building their own NIU communities.
- These new students will inspire us to be our best.
 - More than half of all new freshman and transfer students come from traditionally underrepresented groups, and their perspectives, experiences and cultures will enrich our community and their educational experience.
 - Our new freshmen are accomplished academically – more were in the top 10 percent of their graduating class than ever before, and their average GPA represents a 15-year high.
 - And they have high expectations of our university. They want NIU to deepen their learning; to challenge their assumptions; to give them the tools they need to affect social change; and to prepare them for careers not yet invented.

Learning *about* our students is exciting – but it is even more important that we are ready to learn *from them* and listen to their voices. It’s on us to understand how they experience NIU and the world – so that we can reduce the obstacles they encounter – and provide the support they need to complete their degrees.

Where we’ve changed the way we do things and seen positive results for recruitment, we need to do the same to improve our retention and graduation outcomes. It is unacceptable that more than half of students who leave NIU prior to graduation do so in good academic standing. Our enrollment plan takes a holistic approach and looks beyond just academics to factor in student experiences, facilities, mental and social well-being, financial literacy and financial aid, and, importantly, equity.



To this end, we are participating in two formal learning communities comprised of higher education institutions that share our commitment to diminishing achievement gaps and promoting student success. The first is the [Partnership for College Completion initiative, Illinois Equity in Attainment](#), and the second is the [Association for Public and Land-grant Universities initiative, Powered by Publics](#). These collaborations will help us to identify, adapt and scale evidence-based practices that advance equity in college completion.

At the same time, we are evaluating many of our long-standing practices to determine whether “the way that we’ve always done it” still makes sense. For example, we are examining the criteria that we use to award scholarships and financial aid.

Our own data show us that student success at NIU is strongly correlated with high school GPA but not performance on the SAT and ACT. Moreover, a body of research has demonstrated that these standardized tests are biased against students from economically disadvantaged or marginalized communities. Knowing this, it is hard to justify placing significant weight on the ACT and SAT in financial aid determinations when we are committed to making our transformative educational experiences accessible to talented students from diverse backgrounds.

I want to note that eliminating the use of standardized test scores in the award of institutional aid is an administrative decision that does not directly impact the use of ACT and SAT scores in admission decisions. Changing our admission standards rightfully rests with shared governance – specifically, with our faculty. Faculty Senate President Kendall Thu and members of our [Faculty Senate](#) are exploring the topic of test-blind admissions, and I commend them for this effort and look forward to seeing this advance.

Hand in glove with equity are *access and affordability*. And we are able to do more financially to support students than ever before, because of the [AIM HIGH](#) scholarships funded by the State of Illinois, and because of the generosity of our alumni and donors. This past year, total scholarship giving from all sources increased by more than 200%, with an additional \$10.3 million committed.

To a college-bound high school student, having the talent, drive and determination but not the financial means is debilitating and discouraging. Where Pell and MAP fall short is a gap that I want us to bridge. Tomorrow, we will formally do so with the launch of an important new program: the [Huskie Pledge](#).

For Illinois residents who enroll for Fall 2020 as full-time freshmen with a 3.0 high school GPA and an annual household income under \$75,000, we will completely cover their first year’s full tuition and general fees with a grant. If income, enrollment and university GPA criteria continue to be met, the initial amount of the Huskie Pledge grant will be renewable for up to four additional years.

Whether a student comes from a single-parent home, a dual-income family or if they are undocumented, the Huskie Pledge reflects our continued commitment to reducing barriers, creating opportunities and investing where *we can make the difference*.



Our admissions counselors and marketing team will be helping us share this exciting news, and we hope you will do the same.

One of the other messages we've been driving home to prospective students and their families is just how outstanding our faculty are. Faculty, your accomplishments underpin the national and international reputation of NIU as an engaged, student-centered, research university. We boast that NIU professors stand with the best, not only for the personal attention and hands-on learning experiences that you provide to students, but also for your contributions to society through leading-edge research and artistry.

In the fall, just as we welcome new students, we have the privilege of welcoming new NIU faculty. The new faculty dinner, where these new Huskies have an opportunity to introduce themselves to members of the university community is always an incredibly positive event – but, this year, it was phenomenal!

Our newest faculty members shared details about themselves, their scholarly aspirations, and what attracted them to NIU. Some had ties to this region; a few were even Huskie alumni. Many were attracted to our university because they were drawn to our mission, vision and values – and to the students that we serve. And almost all said that they ultimately came here because the administrators, faculty and staff that they met during the interview process were welcoming and supportive, and because our campus felt like a place where they belonged.

And they do belong at NIU. We are committed to playing a key leadership and resource role to prepare society for a century of change. Our newest faculty hires are accomplished scholars who are asking bold, original questions about how humans interact with each other, with their environment and with technology. They understand that cultural competence is critical to excellence in education, research and even health care delivery. They value interdisciplinary collaboration. And, they are looking forward to working with each other and with their successful senior colleagues.

Every year, I look forward to the myriad occasions where we celebrate the scholarly accomplishments of our faculty and their success at engaging students in the creation of new knowledge and works of art. Most of these happen in the spring, but I want to highlight some of the amazing work I've been seeing now because the success of our established faculty is always cause for celebration.

From 2016 to 2019, funding from outside sources for NIU research, instruction and public service increased by 27% to \$35 million. The awards provide training to doctoral, graduate and undergraduate students; facilitate cutting-edge research and development activities; and help the university continue to attract and retain stellar faculty and students.

Many of our established research and artistry programs focus in four areas: global climate change, shifting demographics, advancing technology and interpreting the world around us. And, using relationships as resources, we are developing innovative academic programs and experiential learning opportunities that speak to these critical areas. Here are a few examples:

- This past year, the Illinois Board of Higher Education considered and approved [three new Ph.D. programs at NIU](#)-- in Electrical; Industrial and Systems; and Mechanical Engineering. These programs share a distinctive feature: an Industry Fellows Program that will promote experiential



learning within industrial environments and facilitate inter-institutional collaborations in science and engineering.

- Faculty members from more than 15 different departments are developing the vision, programs, partnerships and facilities associated with the [Northern Illinois Center for Community Sustainability \(NICCS\)](#). A hub of the Illinois Innovation Network, NICCS will emphasize food systems innovation, water resources management and ecosystems sustainability.
- Our [Center for Black Studies](#) is partnering with Clemson University to create a new Study Abroad program wherein our students will visit Ghana, Barbados and South Carolina. The experience will deepen their understanding of the origins of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade System – the forced enslavement of Africans – and the lasting impact of this system on our society.

I could spend days sharing our impressive and impactful body of work with you, but for the sake of time, I will provide a short overview of the work in each of our [four research emphasis areas](#).

Global climate is projected to continue to change over this century and beyond, with temperatures rising, precipitation patterns changing and severe weather events increasing in frequency and intensity. Things that we value and depend upon, like water, energy, food systems, plants and animals, are experiencing negative effects. NIU researchers are working to reduce our vulnerability by:

- helping us understand ice sheet dynamics and sea level rise;
- identifying new weather forecasting methods, severe storm trends and risk areas; and
- rethinking ecosystem resilience theory to guide our response to climate disturbance and human-induced environmental change.

Our survival is linked to the solutions they'll help to devise.

With respect to changing demographics, changes in migration patterns, increasing ethnic diversity and the aging of baby boomers and millennials will have broad impacts on our society, impacting everything from our labor force to community planning. NIU scientists and scholars are anticipating and preparing for the future by:

- analyzing labor markets and proposing innovative workforce models;
- exploring social and cultural determinants of health inequities and working to ameliorate disparities;
- researching the ways laws and policies impact family unity for immigrant families;
- preparing equity-minded K-12 teachers;
- and promoting physical activity and exercise for older adults.

With respect to advancing technology, in our increasingly cyber-driven world, every single sector of society will experience changes with new applications of artificial intelligence, robotics, and advanced materials. NIU scientists, engineers and artists are shaping our future by:



- exploring new purposes for nanomaterials;
- designing new sensors and medical devices;
- building new lasers and accelerators;
- and finding novel ways to use advanced computing and artificial intelligence.

With respect to interpreting our changing world, it's hard to keep up, and to understand ever-changing technology, information overload, fake news and other new dilemmas. NIU faculty members are:

- probing the psychological, ethical and sociological impacts of new technology;
- and exploring the state of our humanity through art, history, literature, language, museum studies, philosophy, poetry and politics.

This entire body of work is transformational. We are changing the landscape of teaching and learning, shedding light on our origins, and laying the foundation for new technologies and perspectives.

The role faculty and staff play together to help our students succeed can't be overestimated. You are sharing your knowledge, helping them to create new knowledge, and you are tireless champions for them. I have been impressed by how many faculty and staff come to the [president's office hours](#) to offer suggestions about ways NIU can better serve undergraduate and graduate students. You are their advocates in a time when so many voices in our world are being marginalized.

Last year alone, we estimate that more than 40% of our faculty and staff completed cultural competency training. Thank you. We need that work to continue, so please sign up to be an ally for our [LGBTQ+](#) and our [undocumented students](#), participate in [implicit bias training](#), become a [CODE facilitator for Conversations on Diversity & Equity](#). Doing so is valuable. I know, because I, along with the members of my senior roundtable, have benefited from these experiences.

Building on this, it's important to me, to our Board of Trustees and to our university's future that NIU be an exemplary employer even when resources are constrained. We want to retain our wonderful employees and welcome more into the fold. And we're making progress. In the past few months, we've included [differential tuition in our benefits](#) for employees and dependents, implemented a 3 percent increment for eligible employees, bargained with our faculty in good faith, increased graduate student stipends and most recently, [modernized and expanded parent and family leave policies](#).

In addition to these enhancements, I'm pleased to share that we're working now on a brand new program that will roll out in January. It's called Huskies Give Back, and it seeks to support something that we know is important to you: volunteerism. Our aim is to provide each full-time employee with one paid day to share your time and talents with charitable organizations, such as a food pantry, animal shelter or perhaps your child or grandchild's school. Huskies are a community who care, and I want to continue to foster that as a university.



Let me go back for a minute and point out that the parental and family leave policy changes were based on feedback received from the [Presidential Commission on the Status of Women](#). In addition, extending our employee tuition benefit to differential tuition was a response to requests from members of our Operating Staff and Supportive Professional Staff. Seeking and welcoming feedback on what we are doing is a priority for me, as is looking for ways to embrace doing things differently.

I continue to hear positive feedback associated with seeking care from our new [Northwestern Medicine student health clinic](#). Their devoted and caring personnel are serving the diverse needs of our student population in ways that are inclusive, free of judgment and comprehensive.

Since I arrived at NIU, I've seen and heard about the need to update our spaces. And, we are investing in our facilities to create welcoming spaces for our students. This year, we will dedicate \$100,000 to revitalizing student gathering spaces in the DuSable complex to ensure students have comfortable places to wait, to visit with faculty, to prepare for class and to access charging stations.

And, the state has promised to invest more than \$50 million in our facilities over the next several years to address structural integrity and to improve our academic spaces in ways that modernize the teaching and learning environment. I look forward to working with the Illinois Board of Higher Education, the Capital Development Board and members of the university community to achieve those outcomes.

I also look forward to seeing our entire university community take advantage of the [new amenities coming to the Student Center](#) in a few short days. It will serve as the heart of campus, and bring us together for meetings, a meal, a cup of coffee and even a quiet place to reflect by the fire. Student feedback played a critical role in determining what the space will offer and how it will be used. New entertainment and dining spaces will be rolled out gradually over the coming months. But, we're making what we can available now so you can start to enjoy.

And this Friday, I am honored to participate with our alumni and students to open the new Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Commons and rededicate his bust. For those who might not know, we have the MLK Commons because of feedback from students, faculty and staff in the early '90s, and their shared desire to have a place devoted to peace, unity and justice. It's a beautiful space, meant to draw us in and reflect upon Dr. King's vision, which endures today and is needed more than ever. Over time, as the landscape takes stronger root, the space will only continue to flourish.

All of this is great progress, but I also know from feedback that we need to work on better serving our students who identify as disabled or who need to utilize the services of the [Disability Resource Center](#). Disabilities can be visually apparent or hidden, permanent or temporary, chronic or acute. All of them matter and deserve our attention and support.

This year, we have already hired five new employees to help address our students' growing needs. In the coming months, we *will* relocate the Disability Resource Center to our Campus Life Building – a more accessible home – with more space for staff and testing, as well as accessible parking.



As part of our facilities master planning, we will assess all of our facilities and grounds, identify the ways we need to make our campus more accessible and develop an action plan.

These changes will not happen nearly as quickly as any of us want or need, and some will require substantial financial resources. But I am committed to identifying opportunities and implementing solutions that are student-centered, sustainable and, again, *inclusive*.

We have also heard from our students that our policies and practices related to sexual misconduct and assault need revision. It's an epidemic on college campuses, and we're doing something to change that here at NIU.

Earlier this year, we received a [multi-year grant to reduce sexual assault, domestic violence, dating violence and stalking on campus](#). The focus of this grant is to work collaboratively with campus and community partners to develop a violence prevention plan for the campus and surrounding area, and to build meaningful resources that are advocacy-based, culturally competent and trauma-informed to support the needs of all survivors. The grant has many aspects to it, but two points in particular will be game-changers. The first is enhancing our partnership with Safe Passage to provide more advocates for survivors, more training for staff and students, and greater access to resources that will position us to be even more effective advocates.

The other aspect I spoke of is developing more culturally relevant and inclusive programs to serve all vulnerable populations. Successful prevention and advocacy cannot be a one-size-fits-all approach. We have to be more mindful of survivors who come from different cultures; racially diverse communities; who identify as LGBTQ+; have a disability; or for whom English is not their first language; and offer them information, resources and services that meet *their needs*.

As always, there's a lot of work to be done here. We have our challenges. We have enrollment to stabilize, facilities that need updating and overhauls, a never-guaranteed budget situation that we're working tirelessly to take more control of, and a variety of processes and procedures that need simplification.

More importantly, though, we have incredibly dedicated faculty and staff who care deeply for our students and their future. And our students are worth it. I said at the onset of my remarks that our students are awesome. They are innovating, hypothesizing, challenging norms and building new bridges.

- Like Princess Jeremie, an honors student majoring in biomedical engineering who came to NIU from Brooklyn, New York. As the daughter of a United States Army service member, she grew up on a variety of military bases and wanted to find a diverse university community where she felt like she belonged. Not only does Princess belong here, she has made it a priority to help others make NIU their home. Through her work in Admissions and in the Office of Military and Post-Traditional Student Services, Princess plays a critical role in helping students connect to resources so that they are supported and part of a community. She is someone who embodies every aspect of who we are and what we value.



- Like our newly named Lincoln Laureate Ian Pearson. Ian is a first-generation student from Rockford who has achieved a 4.0 GPA as a political science major. In addition to being speaker of the Student Senate and serving in leadership roles for a number of student organizations, he served as an intern for our Office for Federal Relations. In that role, Ian analyzed federal policy briefs and brought to our attention a planned merger between textbook companies that would have led to reduced competition and, ultimately, to higher prices being passed on to students. Because of his due diligence, NIU was able to mobilize with other universities to prevent that merger.
- Like Dale Brown, from Greenwood, Mo. A former Huskie football player, and one of our many high-performing student athletes, successful on and off the field.

In an address to the DeKalb Chamber of Commerce last week, I said that we must work together to support NIU graduates who want to start businesses in our community.

Dale is a great example. He is a May 2019 College of Business graduate and now a grad student with a dream of owning his own culinary business – cinnamon rolls, specifically. We hired Dale and placed an order to enjoy and to remind us how sweet it tastes when someone believes in you.

As Huskies, we support and push one another forward. We want to see each other succeed and do what we can to help a Huskie's dream become a reality.

We believe in you Dale. And I believe in all of you.

Thank you for your time today. I welcome the opportunity to take your questions before you enjoy one of Dale's Homemade Cinnamon Rolls.