



# State of the University

By Dr. Lisa C. Freeman

Thank you for joining me for the 2020 State of the University Address. It's safe to say this is a year we'll never forget.

I smile when I say that, but I know there's some pain in that statement, too. All of us suffered and sacrificed during this year of the pandemic, this year of social and economic upheaval, this year of profound change.

Seemingly overnight, we transformed our institution — forced by global circumstances to hold classes virtually — to discover new ways to connect with, inspire and assist our Huskies.

Your incredible hard work, creativity and flexibility are helping us to succeed in the face of tremendous adversity and will serve us well in the months ahead.

A mentor once told me that when life throws you bricks, don't let them knock you down. Instead, use them to lay a foundation and then build your success — brick by brick.

Today, I will focus on how we will build on our accomplishments using our [Strategic Action Planning Framework](#). But first, I want to recognize the remarkable foundation laid this year by recapping our community's extraordinary pandemic response.

Early on, we took immediate actions to protect the health and well-being of our community:

- We de-densified campus, while maintaining critical services.
- We supported faculty and staff with flexibility and empathy, and they responded in kind with amazing support for our students and each other.
- Within a week, our faculty and students shifted to remote teaching and learning, and, while some universities sent their students packing, NIU staff kept our residence halls open for Huskies in need.
- We supported our mission under rapidly changing conditions:
  - Our [Center for Innovative Teaching and Learning](#) created and delivered an array of resources for faculty and students as they transitioned to virtual classrooms.
  - [Housing](#), [Dining](#) and [Building Services](#) adjusted their operations to meet changing student needs.



When we saw our students struggle, we responded:

- Our advisors and success counselors worked tirelessly to keep them on track.
- We found ways to help them meet their technology needs.
- Our [Center for Student Assistance](#) fielded nearly 3,000 questions.
- We refunded portions of student fees, and continued to pay students for their campus jobs last spring.
- With support from alumni, our own employees and stimulus funding, we launched an [emergency fund](#) to help meet student financial needs, from laptop purchases to food and rent.
- More than \$2 million was distributed to nearly 5,000 Huskies.
- That sum included more than \$27,000 from 672 NIU employees who donated their own parking reimbursements.

I say often that relationships are resources. During the pandemic, we saw this in many contexts:

- We navigated the initial phase, and then worked to develop and implement our Protecting the Pack plan with guidance from public health experts, higher education organizations and the Illinois Board of Higher Education;
- We leveraged our partnerships with Northwestern Medicine and the DeKalb County Health Department to support Huskie health and well-being, provide COVID-19 testing and conduct daily surveillance;
- We engaged with our community to mitigate the devastating impact of COVID-19 on small businesses. Notably, NIU's chief engagement officer and a local business leader created DeKalb County UNITES — University and Neighbors Investing Together for Economic Success. The group created a website with information and tools for small businesses, hosted more than 30 free webinars, conducted a consumer-behavior survey and implemented public-health awareness campaigns; and
- Those efforts led to a new project called 40TUDE, which is paying NIU students to create e-commerce sites and online visibility for small businesses and non-profits, all under the supervision of a College of Business faculty member and the owner of a local marketing company.

Meanwhile, the [NIU Foundation](#) pivoted from the traditional Red and Black Gala to create [Thousands Strong](#), a multiday, virtual event that both celebrates and challenges donors. Tomorrow night's segment features alumnus [Joe Minoso](#), of TV's "Chicago Fire" fame.



It's worth saying again: Relationships are resources.

Throughout this time, we've supported our faculty, staff and students — listening to concerns, responding to needs, being flexible.

- Our [Employee Assistance Program](#) has assisted our Huskie staff in many ways, from providing emotional support and direction for individuals and groups, to developing return-to-work toolkits to holding post-election debrief sessions.
- Our [counseling](#) staff has done a tremendous job, too, providing coping-skill workshops and individual counseling to help students deal with stress. Since March, they have logged an incredible number of tele-counseling appointments. Recognizing that they are stretched to capacity, we've taken steps to bolster their resources to meet our diverse student needs.
- To support virtual learning and take full advantage of existing spaces, [Information Technology](#) worked with [Academic Affairs](#) to upgrade instructional technology in more than 100 classrooms.
- In addition, portable medical-grade HEPA filter fans were purchased and positioned in 159 classrooms to further reduce the risk of airborne virus transmission. The entire process took less than two weeks, because of exemplary teamwork across departments within [Facilities Management and Campus Services](#) and [Procurement](#).

We're doing remarkable work, and we've gotten some assistance. To date, the university has received a total of \$18.2 million from federal and state COVID-relief programs.

- By the end of this semester, NIU students will have received about half of these funds — about \$9 million in direct aid.
- The other half has or is being applied to an array of NIU COVID-19-related expenses, including the enhancements to classroom technology and air purification, as well as personal protective equipment and various student supports.

And while we're extremely appreciative of the state and federal funding, it does not approach covering what's been spent or lost to date.

- And with so many pre-pandemic plans upended or delayed, we've all experienced loss.
- We miss seeing each other — and the camaraderie among co-workers and colleagues.
- We've seen our research, travel and professional development plans disrupted.
- We've canceled athletic competitions, performances and award ceremonies.
- We've postponed celebrations and gatherings to mark milestones — even commencement.



For some, I know, the losses were deeper and more personal: loneliness, illness, radical change to our home schedules, the stress of caring for family members and the loss of loved ones.

Despite all these hardships, we are learning, adapting and succeeding.

- We are gaining newfound skills and confidence when it comes to virtual teaching and learning.
- We are transforming how we operate, from classroom engagement to academic advising, human resources, student recruitment and orientation.
- We've begun to address salary-equity issues.
- We've found ways to continue our research, scholarship, engagement and artistry.
- Our NIU family has united to support struggling Huskies by enhancing student assistance services; creating new mechanisms for rapid distribution of emergency funds; and relaxing financial barriers to reenrollment.
- Amid dire predictions for college attendance nationally, our enrollment grew.

We are growing more accustomed to our new work environments and schedules, too.

- We catch glimpses of our multi-tasking colleagues in their living rooms, home offices, spare bedrooms, closets and cars.
- We meet spouses who wave in the background, are charmed by children on their parents' laps, spy teenagers who pop in and out of view, and are entertained by a parade of pets who crash our virtual meetings.
- We are reminded that there is no job more important than taking care of our children and loved ones.

Managing life's disruptions. Adhering to our values. Championing our students. Embracing change.

Across our university, we have many unsung heroes. To all these Huskies who never quit, I say, thank you.

Now, let's focus on building a successful future upon the strong foundation we have put in place.

Our efforts must always begin and end with a reflection on our [mission, vision and values](#). When we focus our efforts through that lens, we foster brighter ideas, stretch ourselves and deliver more effective results. We stay true to who we are and who we are here to serve.



We succeeded in recent months, because when we pivoted to change tactics and operations, we remained true to our vision of NIU as “an engine for innovation to advance social mobility.”

COVID-19 is reshaping higher education by accelerating the pace of change, straining budgets and prompting new operational models. We remain in a period of great uncertainty, and frankly, the challenges are formidable.

NIU’s [Strategic Action Planning Framework](#) articulates six themes to guide us in pursuing outcomes that align with our mission, vision and values. This year’s university goals, all reflecting community feedback, are organized around these six themes.

The goals, approved by our [Board of Trustees](#) on November 12, position NIU to recover from the financial shock of the pandemic and emerge stronger. They connect cost-containment and investment decisions to our enduring commitments to strategic enrollment management, equity in attainment, inclusive academic excellence and a robust research, engagement and innovation portfolio.

Additionally, our goals recognize that NIU’s dedicated faculty and staff are already balancing huge responsibilities in an extraordinary time. The intention is to direct focus to the university’s most essential priorities and encourage community members to set aside or suspend less-essential activities.

During the next few minutes, I’ll discuss the six strategic themes that will position NIU for long-term sustainability and success. For brevity, I’ll highlight one goal under each theme.

Theme 1 is Empowerment and Shared Responsibility.

We will not be returning to business as usual. The pandemic has significantly and permanently altered not only our operating environment, but also our perceptions of what is possible. It opened us to new ways of doing things, encouraged us to be more nimble and less risk-averse and showed us that reducing bureaucracy creates opportunity.

Post-pandemic, our success will depend on how we respond to change. To avoid stasis and decline, we must continue to seek more efficiency in business operations and work collaboratively to identify and revise practices, policies and procedures that need to be transformed, simplified or eliminated.

Happily, efforts are underway to achieve this outcome, with many NIU colleagues engaged in this work.



[Human Resources Services](#) did an amazing job improvising to streamline processes during the pandemic, and they are seeking ways to permanently modify processes to have less redundancy, fewer approvals and less paper.

[Provost Beth Ingram](#) and Faculty Senate President [Kendall Thu](#) are co-leading efforts to simplify academic policies and procedures, including academic program review; assessment of student learning; and topics historically covered by the [Academic Policy and Procedures Manual](#) — the infamous APPM. It's a great example of meaningful shared governance.

On the administrative side, [Chris McCord](#) is serving as point for a parallel initiative co-led by [Sarah Chinniah](#) and [Bryan Perry](#). Dr. McCord has been gaining feedback from stakeholders campus-wide. Early next year, university leadership will prioritize opportunities for digitization and automation efforts.

These efforts will help unburden employees who already are stretched thin—and allow them to direct their time and talents to more valuable tasks.

Theme 2 is Student Recruitment, Success and Experience.

NIU is committed to inclusive social mobility—to ensuring that all of our students can achieve their academic, professional and personal goals. Accordingly, we are working actively to eliminate disparities in achievement and degree-completion for first-generation, low-income, Black and Latinx students.

To advance this work, we developed a [Strategic Enrollment Management Plan](#) that acknowledges academic success is a responsibility shared by the university and our students.

We supplemented that resource with an [equity plan](#) that uses disaggregated student success data to drive change.

And, last year, with input from across our community, the [Committee for Academic Equity and Inclusive Excellence](#) put forward an [equity statement](#) that institutionalizes our efforts to remove barriers that disproportionately harm students who are in historically or currently underserved populations.

Planning is key to progress and success. And we have seen both this year.

- Our first-year retention rate jumped to 78% — the highest in 15 years.
- The primary driver for that is a 10-percentage-point jump in retention of students of color, with similar increases for first-generation and low-income students.



To sustain progress, we've removed significant barriers to equitable outcomes by:

- Eliminating undergraduate application fees;
- Becoming one of the nation's first universities to announce [test-blind admissions and scholarship policies](#); and
- By using a combination of high-tech and high-touch strategies to improve the ways we address our students' academic, social, emotional and financial needs.

We also have adopted innovative approaches to financial aid and scholarships:

- This year we implemented our [Huskie Pledge Program](#) to help talented students, who might otherwise struggle to afford college, realize their dream of attending NIU — with no tuition or fees. There are more than 700 Huskie pledge recipients in our freshman class, and their average high school GPA was 3.57. Eighty percent are students of color. Three out of every four are the first in their families to enroll in college.
- And, building on this success, we have just announced a [new program in Rockford](#) that represents a partnership with local leaders, schools and the [Rockford Promise Foundation](#). Over the next 17 years, the [City of Rockford](#) will invest \$1.5 million per year to support academic success and degree attainment by qualified [Rockford Public School](#) students who enroll at NIU. This program promises to be a real game-changer.

At this time when the [Illinois Board of Higher Education](#) is making equity the centerpiece of its strategic plan, their board chair described NIU's equity agenda as “a difference-maker” that is “driving how other institutions think about their mission.” We must continue to set the pace, especially during this time, when our students face extraordinary challenges.

Theme 3 is Diversity, Equity and Inclusion.

We've seen prominent examples of social and racial injustice that shocked and sickened us this past year, including the brutal murder of George Floyd and the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on Black, brown and poor communities. They have spurred more open, honest and candid conversations about race, class and structural advantage across our nation and at our university.

I've listened as NIU students, staff, faculty and alumni of color expressed pain, frustration and skepticism. Acknowledging their trauma, and the tension caused by bias and racism, is important — but it's not enough. We all need to commit to understanding our history and



doing better for our future. And this means questioning and changing systems and structures that promote inequitable outcomes.

NIU has already made some meaningful changes, such as implementing test-blind admissions and scholarship criteria and acknowledging gender identities in our enterprise IT systems.

We've also become intentional about diversifying our faculty, because we know that our entire university community will benefit when the makeup of our faculty mirrors the makeup of our student body, state and nation.

In 2018, after hiring only one tenure-track faculty of color out of a total of about 45 hires, we realized that we needed to do things differently if we wanted different outcomes.

To this end, NIU faculty, staff and administrators worked together to produce new print- and web-based materials and to strengthen our implicit-bias training protocols. Resources were made available to colleges and departments to enhance the diversity of the candidates interviewed on campus and to connect diverse candidates with supportive communities and networks.

By embracing change, we produced results. Since the fall of 2019, about half of our new faculty hires were people of color.

Of course, attracting diverse faculty members is insufficient without mechanisms to support their persistence and success. We must also increase the recruitment, hiring, retention and professional advancement of staff and administrators with diverse backgrounds and lived experiences. We will not succeed unless we recognize and remove systemic barriers that impede the success of NIU employees who are Black, Latinx, Asian, other people of color, women, LGBTQ+ and individuals with disabilities.

For this reason, Provost [Ingram](#) and Vice President [Vernese Edghill-Walden](#) are working with deans, division leaders and shared governance to examine the standards, assumptions, priorities and processes used in employee evaluations. And, our senior faculty mentor, [Janice Hamlet](#), is building relationships across campus while developing a university-wide mentoring program, with an emphasis on faculty of color.

Our university community will be stronger, more productive and more innovative when all of our faculty and staff feel that that they are valued for their ideas, recognized for their contributions, welcomed by their colleagues and supported by our institution. We must strive to achieve an anti-racist culture as vigorously as we pursue other aspects of academic and organizational excellence.



To truly achieve academic excellence, we need to think beyond the barriers in our human resources processes and systems and consider how our biases about research and scholarship not only contribute to inequitable outcomes, but also limit innovation.

Theme 4 is Academic Excellence and Curriculum Innovation.

Acute crises like this pandemic — and longer-term challenges such as food insecurity, climate change adaptation and community sustainability — require solutions that integrate knowledge from different disciplines.

A transdisciplinary approach is particularly important with societal problems that are complex, contested and high stakes.

NIU faculty, staff and students are fascinated by such problems, because Huskies value curiosity, creativity and the desire to confront challenges through collaboration.

Many NIU scientists, scholars and artists are eager to collaborate with colleagues outside their departments and colleges. And most of our students hunger for an educational experience that equips them to tackle persistent societal problems that don't easily fit into one program of study.

We don't make it easy, because our academic structures and curricula were not built to foster or support dynamic interactions among students and faculty from different disciplines.

To meet the changing needs of our students and society, NIU needs to remove barriers to transdisciplinary scholarship as well as to curricular innovation and experimentation.

We need to encourage transdisciplinary approaches that complement traditional practices, and act on the commitments made in NIU's strategic action planning framework:

- To push the boundaries of academic disciplines to meet the needs of today and tomorrow; and
- To provide opportunities and support for students, faculty and staff to be innovative, entrepreneurial and forward-focused.

To this end, one of this year's goals is to launch a collaborative process that will deliver formal recommendations, including a multiyear implementation timeline.



Theme 5 is Research, Artistry and Engagement.

First, I must commend our faculty scientists, scholars and artists on their continued success despite pandemic disruptions.

- NIU achieved our highest level of sponsored funding in five years, receiving 325 awards totaling \$44 million.
- Our faculty scholars were featured regularly in the news as experts on topics such as the pandemic, higher education, social justice, climate change, elections, and the Supreme Court.
- Faculty artists released new music to critical acclaim.
- Dozens of faculty members pivoted aspects of their research and artistry to issues surrounding COVID-19.

What's more, a recently issued report that assessed the innovation impact of U.S universities, [ranked NIU third nationally](#) for "innovation impact productivity," a recognition of our success in turning research expenditures into patents, licenses, widely cited papers and STEM graduates.

To amplify the incredible success of faculty and staff, NIU has launched a strategic development team to link and leverage internal and external resources in support of our university's research, artistry and engagement priorities. The team is focused on developing public and private funding opportunities and partnerships with the potential to spur key university enterprises, such as projects associated with COVID-19, the [Northern Illinois Center for Community Sustainability](#) and Emerging Research Initiatives.

Achieving this goal will inspire innovation, foster relationships as resources, and suggest strategies for revenue generation and fiscal sustainability.

Theme 6 is Resource Development and Fiscal Responsibility.

No industry was prepared for the financial impacts of COVID-19. The pandemic has exacted a financial toll on universities nationwide. Currently, NIU faces a potential budget deficit of roughly \$37 million. Our financial situation has been helped by our enrollment growth and by the university community's success at reducing expenses. But these positives are not sufficient to offset the losses associated with COVID-19 impacts on revenue from housing, dining, retail, conferences and events.



Against this backdrop, we remain uncertain about the timing and magnitude of additional federal COVID relief and concerned about the stability of the Illinois economy and our state appropriation.

We've already made very difficult decisions, and more lie ahead.

At this time, it is critical for NIU to continue to refine and implement a multiyear budget and financial planning process. In recognition of our complex, rapidly changing circumstances, university leadership will continue to engage our [Board of Trustees](#) quarterly to communicate progress toward targets. We also remain committed to making decisions in a thoughtful and transparent manner, respectful of shared governance and in alignment with our values. We must all be engaged in this effort, and we will meet our challenges with typical Huskie resilience and resourcefulness.

In conclusion, amid one of the most challenging periods in our [125-year history](#), I am proud of how we are upholding NIU's mission. We're prioritizing student and community needs above individual concerns. To address these needs, we embrace our values and key aspects of our vision — innovation and creativity. We are protecting the pack. We are caring for each other. We are Huskies.

In this turbulent time, NIU's commitment to equity and inclusion stands out as our greatest asset. Yet it's also one of our greatest challenges. Difference makers acknowledge and accept this paradox.

In 2020, we lost respected champions of inclusion and social justice, including:

- Civil rights heroes [John Lewis](#) and [C.T. Vivian](#).
- Supreme Court Justice [Ruth Bader Ginsburg](#).
- Our own community pillar, [Walt Owens](#).

They were leaders in word and action—unafraid to meet hard challenges, aware that enduring change takes time. We can learn from their examples.

Fully embracing our own commitment to equity and inclusion means accepting the tests and trials that come with it.

This year, our country is experiencing division, anger and tragedy on issues surrounding social justice. But this painful time brings opportunities to grow.



# Northern Illinois University

Tuesday, Nov. 17, 2020

Never has it been more important for Huskies:

- To listen to the perspectives of others, even when they don't agree; and
- To navigate what can be uncomfortable, but often necessary, conversations in our homes, schools, communities and workplaces.

Our university community must model inclusive excellence and civility as we prepare our students to become agents of positive change in our world. And I have every confidence that we are up to the task.

Now, more than ever, Together Forward.