



2022 State of the University

President Lisa C. Freeman

Good afternoon, Huskies. Thank you for gathering here in person today and viewing remotely.

Each year I look forward to the State of the University address. It provides opportunities to celebrate our accomplishments, share what we have to look forward to and, importantly, express my gratitude to students, faculty and staff.

The return to a more traditional, fully in-person fall semester has been a welcomed experience. We are together again in classrooms and labs; filling the student center with fun and activities; marveling at our performers and artists; and cheering on our athletes. Together we are empowering shared governance, brainstorming ideas and solutions; and participating in events that celebrate what it means to be a Huskie. **We are at our very best and strongest when we are together.**

“Strongest together” also reflects who and what we value. It shows in how we champion our students, and in the ways that we come together to innovate and tackle challenges. Huskies know they are not alone.

This past year, we were more intentional bringing people together and tapping into the diverse talents, expertise and viewpoints of our community to create solutions and reach our goals. Through this shared leadership approach, we are more effective and impactful in key areas such as student recruitment and retention, revenue generation and process improvement. Our efforts are yielding results, and I’ll highlight just a few examples of what we have achieved together.

- We again saw year-over-year growth in our incoming freshman class, with 2,400 new first-year students who are diverse and accomplished.
- More than half of all NIU undergraduates now are first-generation. And, our university currently ranks second among Illinois’ public universities for social mobility, according to U.S. News & World Report.
- We saw remarkable student engagement at the start of the fall semester. With a more robust and cohesive move-in and welcome experience, students demonstrated extraordinary eagerness to meet others, form connections, get involved, learn about resources and become successful.



- And we are working hard to make sure our students can be successful by providing a more immediate and holistic response to Huskies in need. Since the beginning of the year, Academic Affairs and Student Affairs together have proactively reached out to offer assistance to more than 900 students they found to be struggling – in their coursework, or with mental health issues, finances or food or housing insecurity.
- Our alumni and donor communities are also highly committed to supporting our students. This past year, philanthropy exceeded expectations with over \$23 million raised by the NIU Foundation. Most important, as a result of the continued emphasis on student need, \$13.4 million was raised specifically for scholarships – the highest annual total for scholarships ever achieved.
- I’m also incredibly proud of the emphasis we’ve placed on helping all Huskies feel they belong here at NIU. This commitment resonates beyond the university community, with national organizations continuing to recognize our efforts. This year, NIU received a second Higher Education Excellence in Diversity Award; recognition as one of the nation’s Best of the Best Colleges and Universities for LGBTQ+ students; and again made the list of Great Colleges to Work For, based on our employees’ feedback about strength in shared governance and diversity, inclusion and belonging.
- In that context, cross-sectional teams have developed meaningful and actionable recommendations for how we can improve or enhance NIU, addressing important areas such as student recruitment, retention and success; transdisciplinary scholarship and curricular innovation; Greek life revitalization; multiyear planning and budgets and more.
- I am particularly impressed with the recommendations from the members of the Budget and Planning Work Group, and their recognition that development of sustainable, multiyear budgets will require us to consciously establish and fund priorities; continue to invest in equitable student success; and increase incentives for innovation. They envision our university community rallying together to embrace shared responsibility and accountability and to make strategic choices necessary to guarantee NIU’s future. I support their vision, which was developed after significant consultation with campus stakeholders. Accordingly, many of the work group’s suggestions have been incorporated into the University Goals.

These few examples can’t fully capture the scope of what we have accomplished together. There’s a lot to be proud of, and we are still moving forward. Our university goals for the coming year build on this work and will yield even greater results.



Today, I want to focus specifically on what we're doing to foster shared leadership, student success and innovation. Our efforts are tied to specific university goals, and they also are intrinsically linked together and essential for our future.

We know from experience that taking a shared-leadership approach to problem-solving, innovation and change delivers results – tangible and significant results.

Shared leadership empowers cross-functional teams to use their expertise to strategize, develop actionable solutions and garner buy-in from key decision makers and the university community. Achieving these outcomes requires abundant organizational readiness and capacity. So, we are investing time and resources into more on-the-job learning experiences, networking opportunities and purposeful professional development for our faculty and staff. Let me give you three examples.

First, our [Emerging Faculty Leaders Program](#), led by Alicia Schatteman, director of the Center for Nonprofit and NGO Studies, and Vice Provost for Faculty Affairs [Chad McEvoy](#), launched last year. It is an intensive professional development experience for faculty seeking to expand their capacity for leadership in higher education. Eleven faculty participated in regular cohort meetings, assigned readings and panel discussions, with feedback and mentorship provided throughout. A new cohort began this year with 10 members representing all seven colleges.

This fall, we launched the [Staff Leadership Development Academy](#) led by Chief of Staff Matt Streb and our first President's Office Fellow, Michaela Holtz. Open to all full-time, non-academic civil service and SPS employees, this program focuses on professional growth and leadership-skill enhancement. It exposes participants to multiple facets of the university to enhance their knowledge and understanding of institutional goal-setting, campus operations, shared governance and the current higher education landscape. Sixteen participants from a variety of campus departments – including the Disability Resource Center, Holmes Student Center, Honors, Lorado Taft and Public Safety – now meet regularly with an appointed mentor from NIU's leadership team.

Through these programs, faculty and staff participants are empowered to apply their new knowledge and perspectives to their daily work, and to share their insights and experiences with colleagues. I encourage all interested employees to apply for next year's programs.

Recently, I asked a cross-functional group of staff to recommend additional strategies that senior leadership could implement to enhance NIU's organizational capacity for shared leadership.

They began by offering a framework that centered on three essentials of shared leadership: innovation and risk-taking; commitment of time and resources; and transparency and



accountability. Additionally, they highlighted the importance of institutional leaders, unit leaders and individual Huskies for promoting and supporting these cultural attributes.

Collaboration was envisioned as a crucial moving arm driving collective progress.

Culture was central to their model, emphasizing that continuously nurturing our beliefs, values and attitudes is key to ensuring that shared leadership endures in NIU's mission, vision, and values.

To achieve these outcomes, the team recommended committing additional financial and human resources to support staff professional development. They advocated specifically for individualized employee development and engagement plans as well as enhanced training for supervisors.

Their input will be used to develop and implement a series of professional development opportunities for staff, designed to heighten individual and team performance, foster collaboration, and improve accountability. Phase one will be implemented by July 1, 2023.

Now consider this: If shared leadership is how we do things, *student success is why*.

Let me share a few points of pride about our students:

- Our student body is becoming more and more diverse, reflecting our region and our commitment to access and affordability.
- The average high school grade-point average of the Fall 2022 freshman class is 3.42, the highest for new freshmen on record.
- Nearly 4,000 students live on our campus – 10% more than last year and the most since 2015.
- Just under 1,000 international students left homes and families in 76 different countries to come learn here with us.
- Our students are excited to be here and get involved. In fact, we saw significant participation in programming at the start of the semester, including more than 1,300 students attending the student involvement fairs.

Our Huskies are forging brand-new paths for themselves, their families and their communities. That takes incredible courage and determination.



It also requires intentional, caring employees who surround our students with resources, reassurance and opportunities to help them persevere. We had this in mind when George Middlemist was hired as our new vice president for Administration and Finance, to start in January. George brings 25 years of experience to campus from MSU Denver – a university that leads Colorado in the number of first-generation students, Pell-eligible students and students of color. You can imagine that it would not be easy to leave a place where you’ve been so invested, but George was absolutely drawn to NIU because of our students and our deep commitment to access and affordability.

As a new employee, he’ll be in good company, given that we recently welcomed Dr. Clint-Michael Reneau to NIU as our new vice president for Student Affairs. His passion for students is palpable. You’ve likely seen him at multiple events and activities, in person and on social media. Clint-Michael and his team are collaborating with students to find more meaningful ways to support their success. Together, they are reimagining what engagement looks like and creating a community of care. One new initiative is a twice-monthly dinner series called “Conversations that Matter,” where students are invited to share a meal and their voices in conversation with senior leaders. Opportunities like this build connectivity, let students know we’re here for them and give us another way to learn more about our students and how we can support them.

That is our greatest responsibility: to do everything we can to help our students achieve the goals and aspirations that brought them to NIU. Today, more forces than ever are pulling our students’ focus away from excelling academically and completing their degrees – significant stressors like financial struggles, family obligations and mental health challenges. Student success needs to be at the forefront of our minds when making decisions. Each of us can positively influence the lives of our Huskie students if we intentionally prioritize their interests, needs and challenges.

Earlier this month, I was on a panel during the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities annual meeting. We discussed adding value to a public university education by advising and supporting our students to successful outcomes, not only while they are on our campuses, but also as they launch and develop their careers. I was proud to share that NIU is already doing this through the efforts of Career Services and our partner, Braven. Braven is a Chicago-based, non-profit organization that empowers students with the skills, networks, experience and confidence to land strong internships and jobs. This fall, we launched a 3-credit elective course called UNIV 301: Braven Leadership and Career Accelerator. It is taught by leadership coaches working in a variety of industries. Students are grouped in small cohorts with the same leadership coach throughout the semester to focus on career exploration and preparation, developing a professional portfolio and getting hands-on opportunities to help clients develop solutions. Upon course completion, students are provided with additional, long-term supports, such as mentors within the Braven network to help them stand out after graduation.



The challenges faced by our undergraduate students are magnified for our graduate and professional students, especially those from other countries. They face unique dynamics as they work toward advanced degrees, oftentimes feeling isolated while balancing significant demands related to immigration requirements, employer expectations and family obligations. Academic Affairs, the colleges and the graduate school are all committed to collaborating and to really engaging with our graduate students to make certain that the programs, resources and experiences we offer meet their current and long-term needs.

Accordingly, Provost Ingram and Graduate School Dean Wilks have recently completed an assessment of our graduate student programs and experiences. They identified actionable recommendations that reflect four major themes: creating a graduate student community that supports its success; setting expectations for graduate student stipends and mandatory fees; aligning tuition waivers to support graduate student success; and ensuring adequate resources for strong and strategic programs – programs that enhance the reputation of our university and propel our graduate students to productive, fulfilling lives and careers.

From college prospect to college graduate, we are responsible at all stages for helping undergraduate and graduate students achieve their dreams. Our Strategic Enrollment Plan 2.0 maps out strategies for improving access, affordability and persistence to graduation, as well as for re-enrolling students who stop-out and for assisting working adults interested in upskilling for advancement. We must all be involved in exploring more-tailored approaches to recruiting and retaining students, closing equity gaps, embracing accountability and driving progress.

Our endeavors have never been more important to our state or nation. There is growing need for an educated and skilled workforce to serve our region, while the pipeline of college-age students continues to shrink. Across our country, the gap between affluent and underserved continues to grow, increasing divisions among us. Our university can make a difference – as a creator of opportunity, producer of talent, convener of thought-leaders and generator of ideas.

This brings us to our third area of focus today – innovation.

Increasingly, contemporary issues demand that artists, scientists and humanists innovate together to bring new ideas and solutions to light. In this context, NIU needs to prepare students and scholars to build on their disciplinary foundations by broadening their thinking, being open to integrating additional concepts, theories and methods; and accepting as legitimate work that crosses disciplinary boundaries, is collaborative or solutions focused.

To help do this, we will establish an enterprise-level unit reporting to the vice president for Research and Innovation Partnerships. This office will consolidate and strengthen NIU resources available to facilitate transdisciplinary work and support cross-university and multi-institutional proposals and awards. Additionally, our provost, deans and college curricular committees will



be encouraged to dismantle administrative barriers to curricular experimentation and development of transdisciplinary courses and programs. My expectation is that they will move forward recommendations from faculty task forces and shared governance groups to create needed change.

We are in a period when the value of higher education is being questioned. It's critical that we sustain excellence. This means changing our systems to align with diverse and evolving forms of scholarship, and crediting appropriately the accomplishments of those whose work has relevance and impact outside of traditional academic boundaries.

We must value and reward the work of scholars who seek to blur disciplinary boundaries in their teaching and learning; scholars who are publicly engaged; scholars who support mission-driven work around DEI; and scholars who are innovators and entrepreneurs creating new technologies. We need to recruit such scholars to join colleagues at NIU already doing this work – and recognize their accomplishments.

I want to acknowledge the tremendous work of the NIU faculty and staff responsible for our university's continued growth in external funding. Annual non-COVID-19-related sponsored funding has grown by almost 40% in the last five years, and 11% since last year, to more than \$42 million. External funding is supporting countless impressive faculty efforts across campus, and many of these use transdisciplinary approaches to tackle complex problems such as how to train effective, engaging science and art educators; how lifestyle, environmental and socio-demographic factors influence cancer mortality risk; and how to make sure infants and children flourish despite facing adversity. These scholarly activities and many others create learning opportunities for our students, while our region and world reap the benefits.

There is no shortage of challenges, however. And one of the greatest is how to respond to our changing climate and environment. Polar explorer and environmentalist Robert Swan has stated, "The greatest threat to our planet is the belief that someone else will save it." There is a pressing need for leadership, expertise and effort focused on sustainability and climate science, and NIU has enviable capability in both areas. Toward that end, our state has begun the design-build phase of the \$23 million [Northern Illinois Center for Community Sustainability](#).

NICCS, as it is known for short, will strengthen and intensify sustainability research. Part of the Illinois Innovation Network, the center will work to improve water resources; predict and manage environmental change; and stimulate innovation in food systems. It will build upon momentum created by our Institute for the Study of the Environment, Sustainability and Energy. While NICCS' groundbreaking is still down the road, NIU sustainability research already is thriving in such areas as groundwater impacts of prairie restoration; electrochemical



technologies for water treatment; conversion of trash into usable products; and development of robotic technologies for crop production.

NICCS, along with the planned state of the art Health Informatics Technology Center, will be major West Campus anchors. I'm also thrilled that in the coming year we will welcome to campus the Central Midwest Water Science Center of the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS). This USGS Center will locate in renovated space previously occupied by the NIU print shop.

Importantly, all three of these West Campus developments promise to create additional transdisciplinary research opportunities for faculty and staff, and exciting hands-on-learning experiences for students.

NIU must lead by example in sustainability areas beyond research performance, and we're making good progress as evidenced by completion of a greenhouse gas inventory and other baseline sustainability assessments. These will inform an organized planning process led by our sustainability coordinator, Courtney Gallaher, and a recently appointed Sustainability and Climate Action Planning Task Force. That group will work collaboratively with campus leaders to establish concrete goals for a more sustainable NIU in areas such as transportation, food production, renewable energy, buildings and grounds, recycling and waste management and more. Specifically, the task force will outline our climate action planning process and set a target for our campus to reach "net zero" greenhouse gas emissions by 2050 or earlier. A draft plan is expected this coming spring; we're hoping by Earth Day. When available, it will be presented for public comment.

I'm very excited about this initiative. Sustainability aligns perfectly with our mission and encompasses DEI initiatives through environmental justice. It's also the best choice from a long-term operational standpoint – it makes financial sense. Most exciting is that our students will be central to the effort. As our campus is transformed to a living laboratory on sustainability, they will be provided with a multitude of hands-on learning experiences and opportunities for climate action.

My hope is that you see the important linkages between shared leadership, student success and innovation, *and* that you can see where you can be involved and have a voice. We will continue to lean in on these areas, and we will do more to share and celebrate our accomplishments and Huskie contributions. For our faculty, we have an array of university-level honors for those who excel at various aspects of our mission. We'd like to do the same for staff, and are expanding our staff awards program. We have revised the criteria, simplified the nomination process, created seven new award categories and tripled their funding to be more inclusive and reflective of how every staff member can make a meaningful contribution. Among the new annual awards:



- **The Staff Award for Student Impact** will recognize up to two NIU staff members who go above and beyond their normal job responsibilities to positively impact the quality of student life and/or student experience. This includes staff from all divisions and all job types who exhibit excellence and impact students in a positive way.
- **The Rising Huskie Award** will recognize up to two staff members who, while new to NIU, demonstrate excellence, innovation, and performance that has a significant impact at NIU in a short period of time.
- **The Presidential Award for Creativity and Innovation** will recognize one group or team for proposing and/or implementing new or improved processes, methods, systems or services while encouraging reasonable, calculated risk-taking among their colleagues and/or teams.

I appreciate the opportunity to address our community today. We have achieved so much throughout the past year. Indeed, our faculty and staff have accomplished so much during difficult times that have included the pandemic and its ripple effects. That's why earlier this year, when we recognized that inflation presented hardships for many, we supplemented earnings of eligible employees and graduate students with a one-time bonus to demonstrate appreciation for your commitment, resiliency and continued success.

Huskie Nation is home to outstanding students, dedicated employees and generous supporters. *Together* we raise up people, ideas and opportunities.

Thank you to our students for your inspiration and faith in us.

Thank you to faculty and staff for changing lives and improving our world.

And always – GO HUSKIES.