Northern Illinois University Strategic Enrollment Management Plan

2019-2023

January 2019

Northern Illinois University
Your Future. Our Focus.

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Executive Summary

This summary provides an overview of the Strategic Enrollment Management goals and strategies that will guide our recruitment- and retention-related efforts over the next five years. The full report that follows provides important context and measurable objectives that align with each strategy. Tactics will be developed and assigned to each objective. Clear timelines will be developed and accountable parties will be identified to ensure that we are able to make adequate progress toward achieving our goals.

Our overarching purpose is to attract and retain students representing the diversity of the region, nation and the world. This provides a general framework for our plan's goals and the goal-specific strategies that must be implemented to achieve success. Within that framework, we have identified the following goals and supporting strategies:

Goal 1: Strengthen our distinctive identity as a public university that combines educational opportunity with student engagement.

>**Strategy:** Refine and reinforce our brand identity to best differentiate NIU to our target markets.
>**Strategy:** Leverage NIU's brand and values to attract, retain and engage employees to serve as brand advocates.

Goal 2: Achieve student enrollment that respects our mission and values while positioning NIU for fiscal sustainability.

>**Strategy:** Clearly define recruitment targets and create tailored, comprehensive plans to drive action.
>**Strategy:** Provide enhanced, responsive and effective scholarship and financial aid options that will attract students and ensure their success.

Goal 3: Support equitable access, opportunity and success for students from diverse backgrounds where diversity is defined broadly.

>**Strategy:** Clearly define retention and completion goals and create tailored, comprehensive plans to best support the specific needs of our diverse student population (also serves Goal 2).
>**Strategy:** Clearly identify gaps in academic achievement and create tailored and comprehensive plans to reduce these gaps (also serves Goal 2).

Introduction

Northern Illinois University is recognized for our intersection of research and knowledge creation with educational opportunity and upward social mobility. A 2017 Brookings Institution report identified NIU as a leader in both research and social-mobility objectives, placing it first in the state and in the top 60 nationally among selective public research universities.

NIU has a long, rich tradition of academic excellence with a breadth of programmatic offerings that meets the modern and evolving workforce demands. The nationally and internationally recognized faculty are not only dedicated to advancing their academic disciplines, but, in collaboration with NIU staff, are also focused on providing meaningful curricular and co-curricular experiences that prepare NIU students to be successful in their future careers. A fiercely proud alumni base of well over 200,000 boasts accomplished careers in a diverse array of fields and professions. They primarily reside in the northern Illinois region, creating dynamic professional networks for NIU students and faculty, and providing economic vitality to the region and state.

NIU takes great pride in its historical success at providing an accessible, affordable and high-quality education to talented students from underserved populations (first generation in the family to attend college, students of color or students with high financial need). The university remains dedicated to its mission of making a college degree attainable, and we celebrate the rich diversity of our student population. NIU is ranked in the top third of *Colleges Worth Your Investment*, and is of the most affordable colleges in Illinois for both in-state and out-of-state tuition. NIU also has a rich history of serving transfer students through established seamless transfer pathways.

NIU has a continuing obligation to serve our region and execute our mission in the face of significant economic and demographic headwinds. To accomplish this, the university will need to stabilize enrollment, and enhance its service to students with unmet academic and financial needs, but this will not be easy in the current context. The university is facing financial challenges as the result of unreliable and diminishing state support, and increased dependency on tuition, fees and philanthropy. At the same time, changing demographics signal that, for the extended future, the university will not be able to rely solely on its traditional recruiting populations of high school graduates and community college transfer students.

These external drivers for change are not unique to NIU; rather, they are in effect for all of public higher education in Illinois and across the country. Going forward, our response to the changing environment must be true to our institutional vision, mission and values. Moreover, to be successful, our efforts must recognize that effective enrollment management is about more than recruitment, and requires intentional strategies for retaining currently enrolled students and for fostering an environment that encourages students to persist and complete their degrees. This plan is our response to the challenges faced by NIU, and it signifies our commitment to coordinating strategic efforts to achieve our recruitment and retention goals.

Our enrollment plan is strategic, forward-thinking, multi-year, intentional and integrated, with the ability to achieve measurable outcomes and provide regular performance evaluation and benchmarking. To be successful in executing this plan, we will need to create an organizational structure, processes and environment that integrates enrollment management across the university, supported by a culture of shared responsibility and accountability for enrollment.

Enrollment History and Profiles

NIU's current enrollment is just above 17,100, with approximately 15,500 on-campus students and approximately 1,600 off-campus and online students. NIU's peak enrollment, in 2007-08, was just above 25,000 students, of whom almost 23,000 were on-campus students. Historically, we have enrolled approximately 1,800 off-campus or online students, most of whom were enrolled part-time. While the Law School has remained relatively flat in enrollment over the years, the undergraduate and graduate student enrollment, thus overall headcount enrollment, has declined each year over the past decade.

Over this 10-year period (see Figure 1):

- Overall headcount has declined 30 percent (from 24,424 to 17,169).
- Undergraduate students have declined 30 percent (from 18,277 to 12,788).
- Graduate students have declined 29 percent (from 5,838 to 4,121).

Figure 1: Ten-Year Enrollment History – Total Headcount
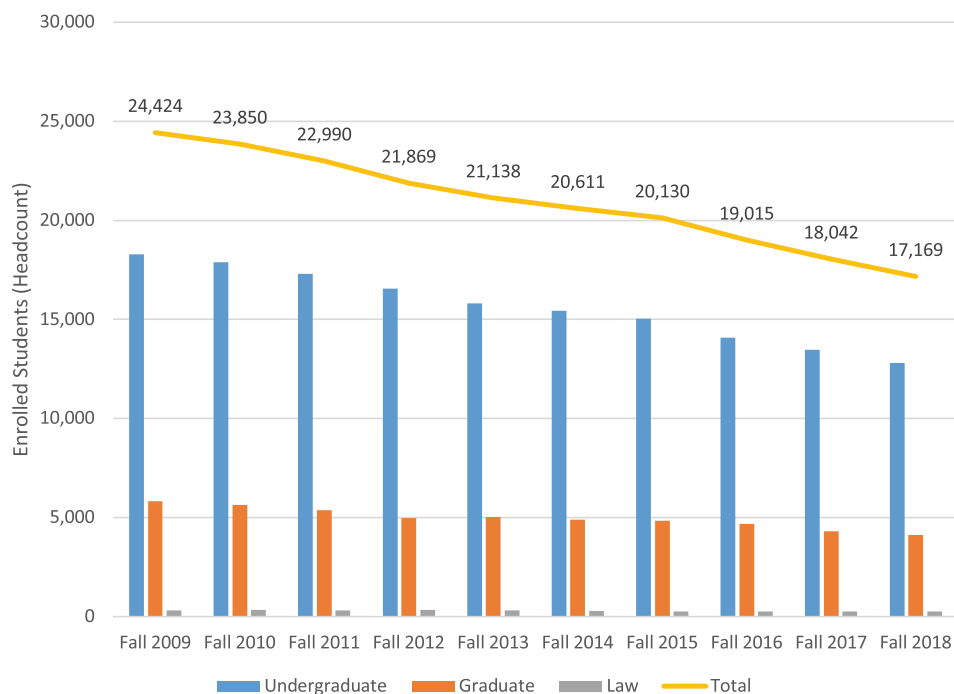
While several colleges at NIU have seen positive gains in total enrollment over the past 10 years, all have noticed at least a small decline within the past few years. More specifically, between Fall 2009 and Fall 2018 (Figure 2):

- The College of Engineering and Engineering Technology is the only college with an increase in enrollment over the 10-year period, a 24 percent gain (from 1,380 to 1,714).
- The College of Business has declined 29 percent (from 4,270 to 3,046).
- The College of Education has declined 38 percent (from 3,840 to 2,369).
- The College of Health and Human Sciences has declined 19 percent (from 3,532 to 2,858).
- The College of Liberal Arts and Sciences has declined 31 percent (from 7,753 to 5,354).
- The College of Visual and Performing Arts has declined more than 26 percent (from 1,193 to 877).

Figure 2: Ten-Year Total Headcount by College
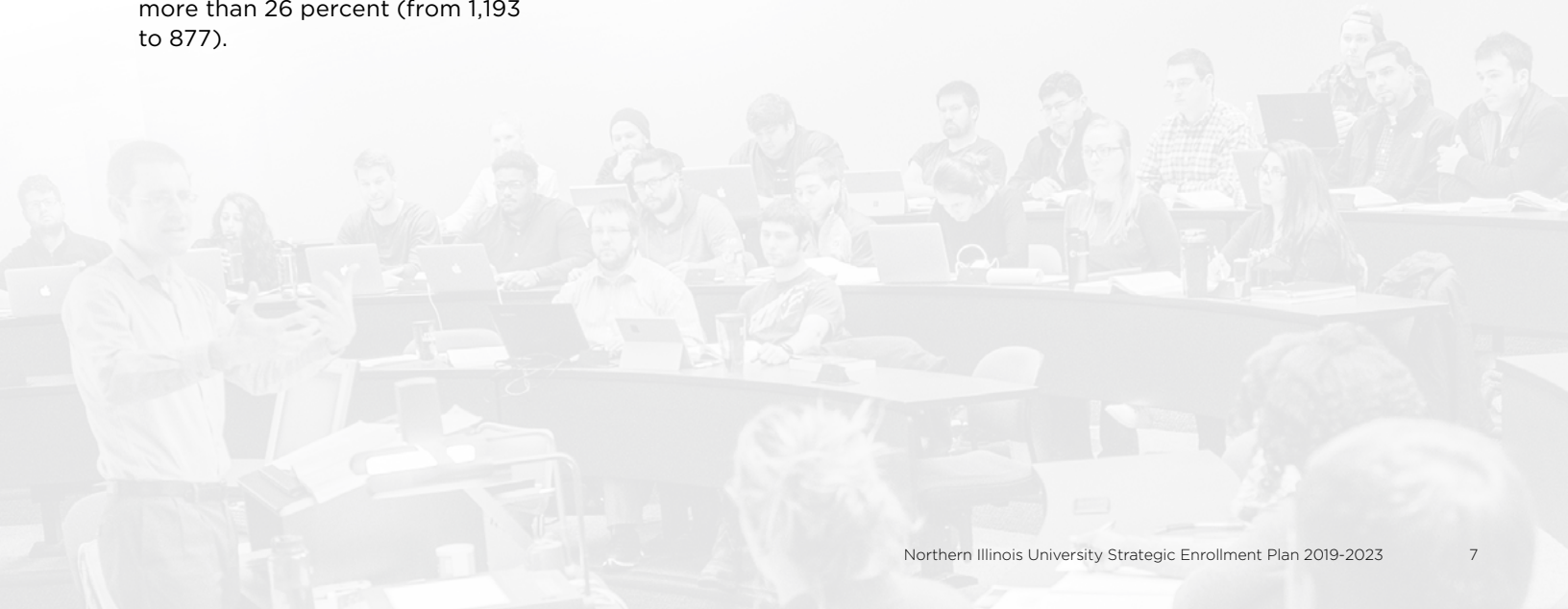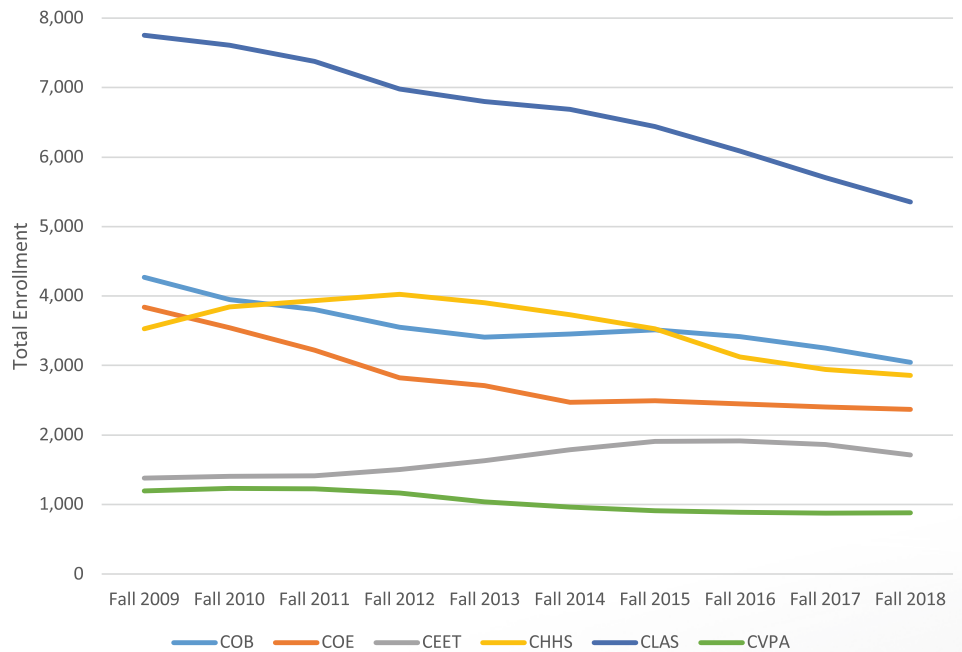
Changing Racial Demographics

NIU is committed to providing opportunities for the diverse students in our region. Changing racial demographics within Illinois over the past 10 years have led to the enrollment of an increasingly racially diverse student population at NIU. Despite the decline in White and Black student high school graduation, NIU will continue to work with internal and external stakeholders to maintain its long history of recruiting and enrolling talented students from these declining populations. We also will focus efforts on enrolling the increasing number of Asian American and Latinx high school graduates.

In fact, there has been a major increase in NIU's enrollment of Hispanic/Latinx undergraduates. If sustained and encouraged, this trend can position the university to become a designated Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) within the next several years with at least 25 percent of the undergraduate population identified as Hispanic/ Latinx. Over the past 10 years (see Figure 3), of the total undergraduate population:

- The percent of all students of color has increased significantly from approximately 29 percent to 45 percent.
- The percent of Hispanic/Latinx has increased from 8 percent to 19 percent.
- The percent of Black Non-Hispanic has increased from about 15 percent to 17 percent.
- The percent of Asian Non-Hispanic students has remained relatively flat at about 6 percent.
- The percent of Non-Resident Alien (international) has increased from 1 percent to 2 percent.

As we will see below in Section VIII, these trends in NIU's undergraduate population follow the broad demographic trends for Illinois high school graduates.

Figure 3: Ten-Year Undergraduate Headcount History – Race/Ethnicity
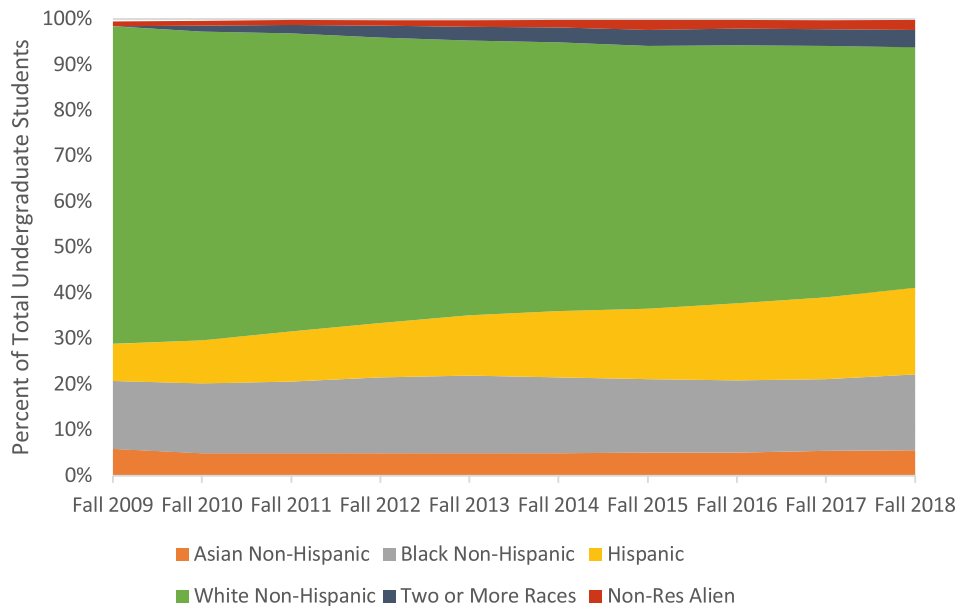
Over this same period (see Figure 4), of the total graduate population:

- The percent of all students of color has increased from approximately 17 percent to 23 percent, with the largest specific gains in Hispanic/Latinx from 6 percent to 9 percent.

- The percent of Black Non-Hispanic has increased slightly (from 6 percent to 7 percent) and Asian Non-Hispanic has remained relatively flat around 5 percent.

- The percent of Non-Resident Alien (international) has increased from 12 percent to 17 percent.

Figure 4: Ten-Year Graduate Enrollment History – Race/Ethnicity
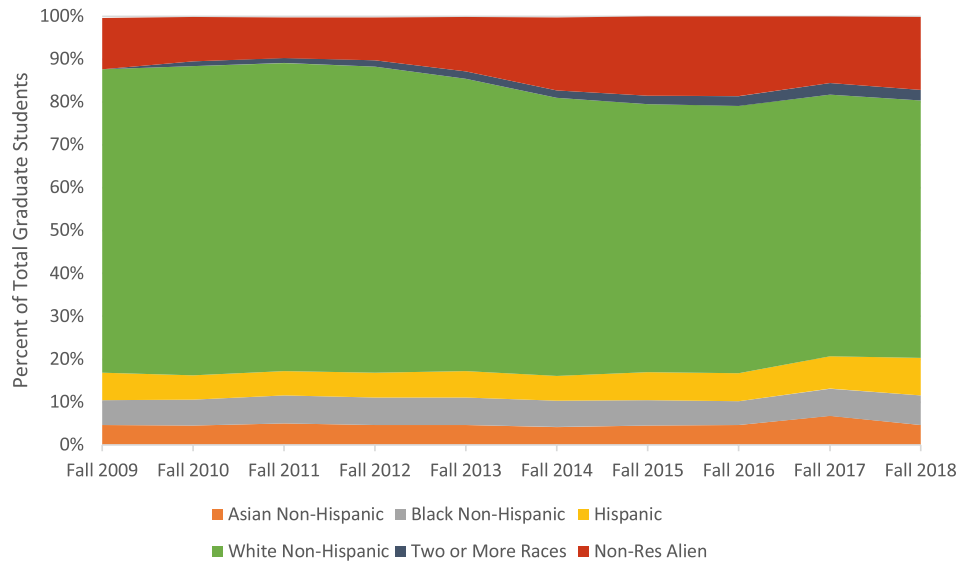
Challenges and Enrollment Impacts

The climate for student recruitment in Illinois has become increasingly competitive over the past decade, with negative impacts on undergraduate and graduate enrollment at NIU and most Illinois public universities. The obvious challenge associated with a decline in the number of traditional college-bound students in the Midwest is exacerbated by a number of state and national trends: disinvestment in public universities in the face of escalating unfunded mandates; burgeoning costs and burdensome student debt-loads that discourage prospective students with greater financial need. All of these tend to erode public confidence in the value of higher education. At the same time, a strong economy has had a negative impact on both transfer and graduate student enrollment patterns.

State Funding

There is no question that the political stalemate that led to almost two years without a state budget negatively affected NIU and all of the Illinois public universities from an enrollment and overall budget perspective. However, as shown in the Illinois Board of Higher Education (IBHE) figure at right (Figure 5), where university income funds equate to tuition and fees, even prior to the budget impasse, "state support for public universities has continued to steadily decline (as measured by state appropriation support) and dependence on tuition and fees as a revenue source has increased." This issue becomes even more challenging at NIU, where such a large percentage of the student population has a high financial need and requires increased institutional funding to support its successful recruitment, retention and completion.

Figure 5: Educational and Related Revenues at Illinois Public Universities

(in thousands)
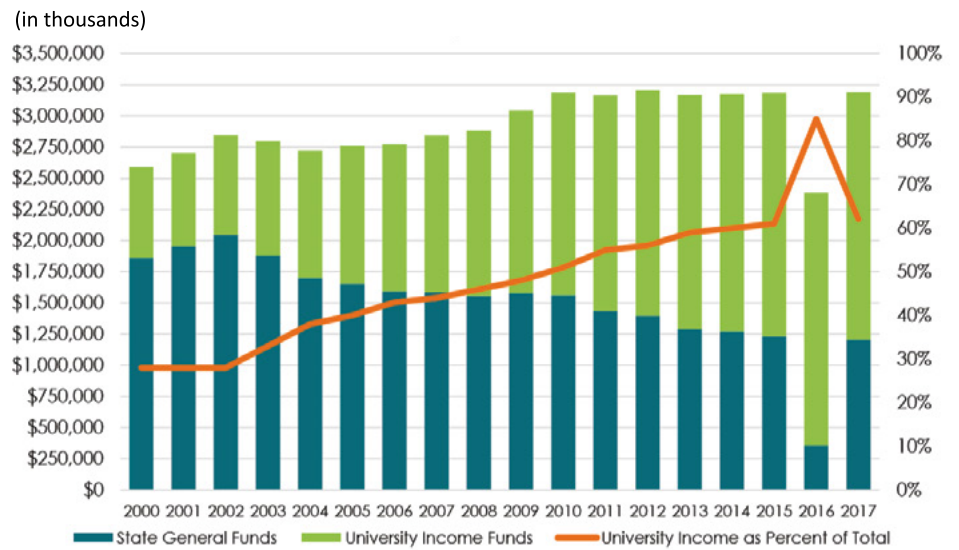
"Examining the Relationship between State Appropriation Support and Tuition and Fees at Illinois Public Universities," IBHE (2018)

Increasing Competition

Hundreds of universities from across the nation come to Illinois to recruit our talented students. Peer and competitor universities are increasingly spending millions more in marketing and advertising, and providing competitive scholarships and financial aid packages, targeted at highly qualified and diverse students. Even graduate and law programs offer significant donor and university-funded graduate scholarships to attract the best students.

Dramatic changes in the pool of prospective students also are taking place as the number of adult learners is projected to grow over the next decade. This represents an opportunity for program growth, but other trends, such as flexible degree options, credit for prior learning or experience and online learning options, are changing the competitive market of higher education. Additionally, alternative pathways for learning and obtaining academic credentials are currently available and becoming more accessible at lower costs, challenging traditional higher education models.

Declining Traditional Student Population

Over the next five years (2019-2023), it is projected that Illinois will have almost 5,000 fewer students graduating high school (see Figure 6). This will impact not only the number of new freshmen, but also the number of students who will be in the pipeline to transfer and undergraduate students seeking to attend graduate schools.

Figure 6: Overall High School Graduate Trends – Illinois
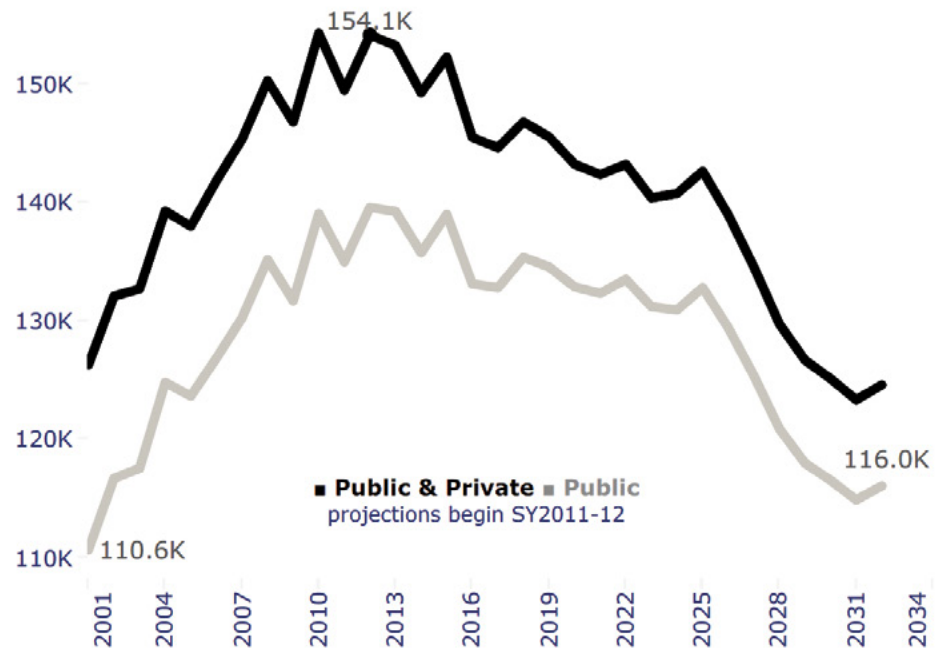
"Knocking at the College Door," WICHE (2016)

Students Choosing to Go Elsewhere or Nowhere

There is also an increasing number of Illinois students attending college out of state, which is contributing to the shrinking pool of qualified applicants (see Figure 7). According to a 2017 IBHE outmigration report, Illinois ranks second only to New Jersey in net loss of students to other states.

Figure 7: Net Migration of High School Graduates – Illinois

2,117 students
came to Illinois for public college

16,461 residents
left Illinois for other states
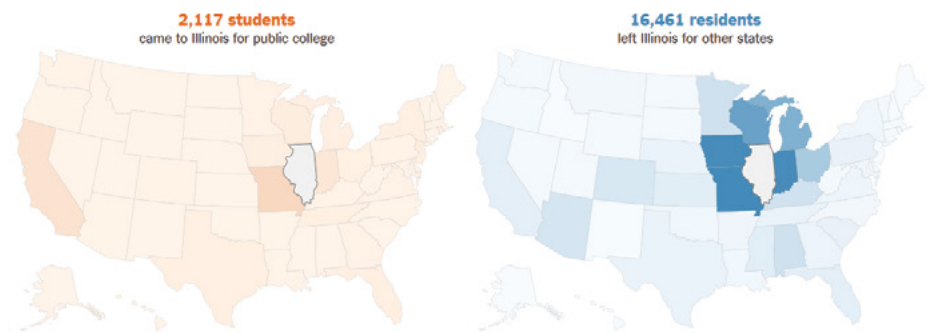
"The Great Out-of-State Migration: Where Students Go," New York Times (2016)

Close to half of all Illinois high school graduates who went to four-year colleges attended college out of state, predominantly choosing large public institutions in neighboring Missouri, Iowa, Indiana and Wisconsin. IBHE and Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) data confirm this trend regarding "students who go elsewhere" (see Figure 8), and also demonstrate a larger issue concerning "students who go nowhere" – the considerable number of students who do not enroll at any college or university the year after graduation. In fact, there are significantly more graduating high school students in Illinois who go nowhere than go elsewhere.

Figure 8: Where Illinois High School Graduates Enroll

- 4 Yr. Out-of-State — 22%
- 4 Yr. In-State — 23%
- Not Enrolled — 37%
- 2 Yr. In-State — 17%
- 2 Yr. Out-of-State — 1%
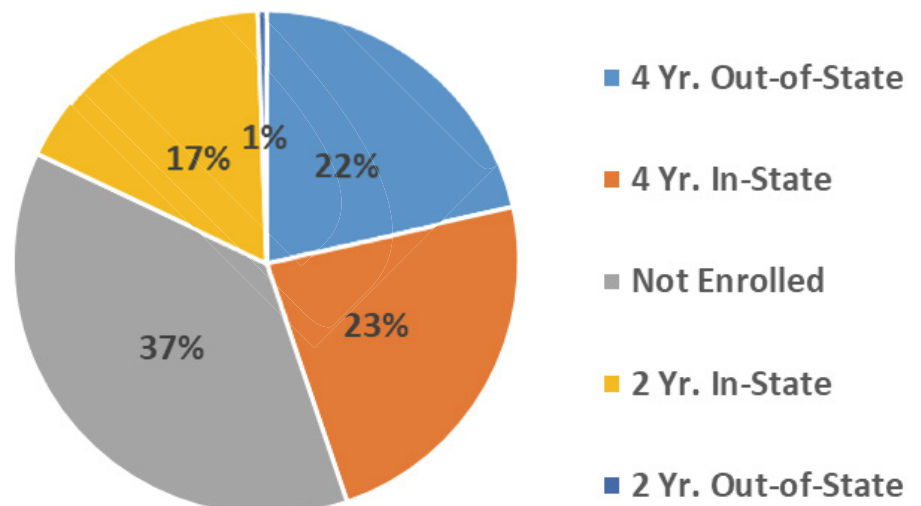
The number of students who have been admitted to NIU but don't enroll at any college by far exceeds the number of students who enroll at any other college or university. In the Fall 2018 semester, more than 1,000 students (733 freshmen and 308 transfers) who were admitted to NIU did not enroll at any college, per data received through the National Student Clearinghouse (see Figure 9).

Figure 9: Top Destinations for Students Admitted to NIU Who Do Not Attend Fall 2018

New Freshmen	Count	Transfer Students	Count
No Higher Education	733	No Higher Education	308
University of Illinois at Chicago	512	Illinois State University	63
Illinois State University	469	University of Illinois at Chicago	61
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign	340	Aurora University	33

It is important to note that this cohort of students who go nowhere includes highly qualified individuals. The 733 students who were admitted at NIU but went nowhere not only met NIU's admission criteria, but they also had an average high school GPA of 3.37 and an average ACT of 21.4. They represent a talent pool of highly qualified students who are not being served by higher education, and as such represent an opportunity for NIU.

Process and Methodology

Despite the challenges at hand, a number of opportunities exist and have been identified to guide the enrollment and fiscal sustainability efforts at NIU over the next five years. To this end, this plan presents an overarching framework, along with goals, goal-specific strategies and specific objectives. These include new efforts to recruit students, including an additional focus on a more diversified student population that mirrors changing demographics; implementation of best practices in retention and completion initiatives; more strategic financial aid leveraging; and improvement of equity gaps.

President Lisa Freeman is committed to developing and implementing a mission-driven and forward-looking enrollment plan. Beginning in the summer of 2018, the president convened two retreats with university leadership, including deans, vice presidents, leaders of shared governance groups and other key individuals whose primary responsibilities directly influence enrollment. Their work was facilitated by Professor Mahesh Subramony from NIU's College of Business, and structured to ensure alignment with NIU's mission and core values. Over the course of the two retreats, the assembled team focused on NIU's value proposition, completed an enrollment

SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats) exercise for both recruitment and retention, and then drafted the goals, strategies and measurable objectives for the enrollment plan. Their work product was subsequently shared with the Strategic Enrollment Management (SEM) Committee for further development.

NIU's SEM Committee is a provost-appointed committee comprised of individuals representing a variety of areas across the campus including individuals from each college, the Office of Undergraduate Studies, Graduate School, the Division of Outreach Engagement and Regional Development, the Office of Academic Diversity, Equity and Inclusion, and Student Affairs. During the fall of 2018, SEM members worked with faculty and staff from their respective colleges and divisions to revise and refine the draft plan, with a focus on optimizing objectives and developing tactics.

The result is a plan with overarching, university-wide goals and strategies along with specific, measurable global objectives. Collectively, these will drive organizational and cultural change designed to result in a more comprehensive and strategic approach to enrollment management.

Strategic Enrollment Management Framework

Goals and Strategies

As an outgrowth of the university leadership retreats, the following goals and aligning strategies have been identified:

Goal 1: Strengthen our distinctive identity as a public university that combines educational opportunity with student engagement.

> **Strategy:** Refine and reinforce our brand identity to best differentiate NIU to our target markets.
>
> **Strategy:** Leverage NIU's brand and values to attract, retain and engage employees to serve as brand advocates.

Goal 2: Achieve student enrollment that respects our mission and values while positioning NIU for fiscal sustainability.

> **Strategy:** Clearly define recruitment targets and create tailored, comprehensive plans to drive action.
>
> **Strategy:** Provide enhanced, responsive and effective scholarship and financial aid options that will attract students and ensure their success.

Goal 3: Support equitable access, opportunity and success for students from diverse backgrounds where diversity is defined broadly.

> **Strategy:** Clearly define retention and completion goals and create tailored, comprehensive plans to best support the specific needs of our diverse student population (also serves Goal 2).
>
> **Strategy:** Clearly identify gaps in academic achievement and create tailored and comprehensive plans to reduce these gaps (also serves Goal 2).

These goals and associated strategies can in turn be naturally grouped into three strategic imperatives:

Strategic Imperative: Brand Penetration
- Strategy: Refine and reinforce our brand identity to best differentiate NIU to our target markets.
- Strategy: Leverage NIU's brand and values to attract, retain and engage employees to serve as brand advocates.

Strategic Imperative: Increasing Targeted Recruitment Efforts and Improving Access
- Strategy: Clearly define recruitment targets and create tailored and comprehensive plans to drive action.
- Strategy: Provide enhanced, responsive and effective scholarship and financial aid options that will attract students and ensure their success.

Strategic Imperative: Improving Undergraduate Retention and Student Success
- Strategy: Clearly define retention and completion goals and create tailored and comprehensive plans to best support the specific needs of our diverse student population.
- Strategy: Clearly identify gaps in academic achievement and create tailored and comprehensive plans to reduce these gaps.

This document's presentation of the strategies and objectives are organized in alignment with these strategic imperatives. Each section that follows will include important contextual information in addition to the specific goals, strategies and objectives.

In order to achieve the SEM goals articulated in this plan, the following key elements are essential:

- Funding must be aligned with identified strategic priorities.
- Data must be easily accessible, accurate and user-friendly.
- Policy, procedure or process barriers must be identified, addressed, eliminated or updated.
- Faculty and staff must understand and uphold a standard of excellence that is supported by an equity and student-centered mindset.
- Responsible parties must be held accountable for the achievement of outcomes associated with all performance indicators.

As NIU pursues its enrollment management strategies, it also will continue to monitor and address these requirements.

Strategic Imperative:
Brand Penetration

Brand Identity

As noted earlier, Illinois is a highly competitive recruitment landscape, which includes peer institutions from Illinois along with hundreds of institutions from around the country seeking our diverse, academically capable students. For NIU to succeed in this competitive environment, the university must be intentional about establishing and sustaining a strong reputation and distinct brand perception in one of the country's largest—and most expensive—media markets. This will require a thoughtful strategy as well as a targeted investment of additional resources.

According to Forbes Magazine, "Schools that don't have a unique brand will be casualties. They can spend more on marketing, they can bribe applicants with more financial aid, but in the long run they will lose to schools whose brands can survive without offering the lowest price."

To improve NIU's brand positioning,

it is critical in today's competitive market to incorporate three critical components of strong marketing: be consistent, compelling and customized. Each piece of content that is produced at NIU, regardless of medium, must be consistent in purpose and voice. Also, it is important that NIU's messaging is customized to the specific target populations that we are recruiting to give prospective students a more unique, personalized experience that signals to them that we know who they are. Students should be able to see themselves in the marketing materials and feel that we are speaking directly to them. Finally, all produced content should be compelling, intriguing and stand out to differentiate NIU from the other institutions in the saturated higher education marketplace. Over the long term, this consistent, integrated approach will develop a stronger NIU brand and have positive impacts on enrollment.

Brand Advocates

NIU has a long, rich tradition in serving students from diverse backgrounds as reflected in our core values. Our state's demographics have changed, and will continue to change, and this creates greater opportunity to share and to celebrate the experiences and successes of our students— both internally and externally. We embrace and take pride in their academic excellence, their relentless grit and potential, their awareness and sensitivity to social justice, and their commitment to their community, while providing additional support to students who may yet face challenges, obstacles or have special needs along the way. Our students graduate from NIU prepared to work effectively on teams with colleagues who have different social identities and lived experiences. They are well-positioned to solve problems and break down workplace barriers through effective collaboration. This is NIU today and moving forward.

It is extremely important that the faculty and staff at NIU—those who already are members of our community, as well as any who will be joining—understand and embrace NIU's core values. To ensure that all faculty and staff are prepared to celebrate and support academic success for all students, it will be critical to offer on-going professional development and continuing education opportunities that focus on equity, inclusion and culturally competent practices both in and out of the classroom.

Brand Penetration: Goals, Strategies and Objectives

The strategic imperative of brand penetration was identified to advance NIU toward Goal 1:

Goal 1: Strengthen our distinctive identity as a public university that combines educational opportunity with student engagement.

In light of the trends and opportunities in brand penetration outlined earlier, NIU will advance the following strategies to fulfill this goal. These strategies will be achieved through tactics developed to address each of the identified objectives.

Strategy: Refine and reinforce our brand identity to best differentiate NIU to our target markets.

Objective: Increase the financial investment in university marketing and advertising by fiscal year 2020 to stand out in the competitive market.

Objective: Complete a comprehensive brand tracking study by spring 2020 to better understand NIU's reputation and key branding and enrollment opportunities with key audiences.

Objective: Centralize critical brand activities such as advertising, media buys and graphic design by fall 2019.

Strategy: Leverage NIU's brand and values to attract, retain and engage employees to serve as brand advocates.

Objective: Define, articulate and celebrate the diversity of students who we serve, in alignment with NIU's core values, and incorporate into all recruiting and onboarding activities for all new faculty/staff by spring 2019.

Objective: Increase the number of faculty and staff who complete cultural competency training annually to 25 percent (current 15 percent annually).

Strategic Imperative:
Increasing Targeted Recruitment Efforts and Prioritizing Access

New Freshmen

Ninety-five percent of the current undergraduate population hail from Illinois, and NIU is proud to serve its primary region. To this end, NIU will build upon current recruitment initiatives, aimed at targeted audiences and across various admission stages, to maintain or increase the number of new students from northern Illinois.

However, given the downward trend of high school students in our state and region, NIU is also committed to attracting more students from out of state and outside the country. Effective in the fall of 2018, NIU eliminated the out-of-state tuition rates that were previously in place, essentially creating one base tuition rate for all domestic undergraduate students. We believe the benefits of this change will include increasing access, affordability and diversity, which are reflective of NIU's guiding principles; enhancing the national reputation and prestige of NIU; and increasing the work force for the region and state, from both enrolled students and alumni who remain in Illinois after graduation (evidence demonstrates that college students are more likely to remain in the region and state after graduation to start their careers if they attended college in that state).
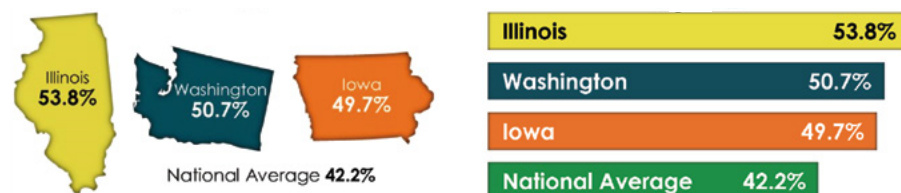
Transfer Students

Almost half of new undergraduate students enrolling at NIU are transferring from other institutions, mostly from community colleges in Illinois. It is imperative that we have strong partnerships and seamless transfer pathways for these students. NIU is a demonstrated leader in creating such collaboration: We currently have six reverse transfer agreements and 17 Guaranteed Admission Program (GAP) agreements with community colleges in Illinois, as well as dozens of departmental articulation agreements. The GAP agreements create a seamless and transparent process, where students are simultaneously admitted to both NIU and the participating community college, and the students work with NIU advisors early on to help navigate the transfer process. Ultimately, by providing smooth pathways leading to timely graduation, we are naturally increasing our recruiting opportunities and attractiveness. In addition, NIU is working on dual-credit opportunities and partnerships so that students can

earn college credits while still in high school and so that we can help shorten their time to degrees — before fully enrolling in college.

According to a 2018 report by the IBHE (see Figure 10), "Illinois now leads the nation in bachelor's degree completion rates among community college students who transfer to four-year colleges." This is particularly noteworthy as Illinois has a considerably larger population of students each year transferring to its four-year institutions, compared to the other national leaders.

Building upon our current successes and partnerships throughout the state, NIU has an opportunity to build even stronger pipelines of incoming transfer students — whether into on-campus programs or the growing portfolio of online and off-campus programs. We also plan to create new community college articulation agreements and partnerships with community colleges in surrounding states so that transfer students from outside of Illinois enjoy a more seamless transition to NIU.

Figure 10: Rates of Bachelor's Degree Completion among Community College Transfer Students

Illinois	53.8%
Washington	50.7%
Iowa	49.7%
National Average	42.2%

"Transfer Success in Illinois," IBHE (2018)

Graduate Students

Graduate students account for 25 percent of NIU enrollment. While traditional face-to-face programs will continue to be an important element of NIU's graduate portfolio, the most significant growth in graduate enrollments will result from the development of online degree and certificate programs.

International Students

In 2017, NIU hired a recruiter based in Shanghai to develop and strengthen relationships with schools and programs in China, and we believe similar efforts and resources will have success in India over the next several years. NIU colleges also are developing and strengthening international relationships to expand our recruitment pipelines, and the proliferation of online NIU programs will further expand the opportunities available for all non-resident students to access NIU degrees.

Online Learners

While enrollment in higher education has been declining overall, both at NIU and nationally, there has been significant growth in the number of students seeking the flexibility of earning a degree or certificate online. As shown in Figure 11, NIU online and online plus face-to-face combined student credit hours have increased from 4.4 percent in 2011-12 to 10.9 percent of total student credit hours earned in 2016-2017.

NIU also is positioned to serve a region that contains a significant number of adult learners, and to do so in ways that provide students with complete pathways to their individual goals. A focus on students who seek online degree programs must take into account that this population is made up of individuals with educational trajectories, goals, needs and dynamics, which differ in many respects from those of traditionally aged main campus students.

Credit-bearing academic programs and courses offered in locations or modalities other than face-to-face on the main campus in DeKalb represent one of the greatest growth opportunities for the university's enrollments. While Illinois has fewer than 150,000 graduating high school seniors every year, the number of adults ages 25 to 64 with only high school diplomas or the equivalent is approximately 1.54 million. Additionally, the number of adults ages 25 to 64 living in Illinois with "some college" (but no degree) is close to 1.36 million. In addition to serving individuals seeking baccalaureate degrees, as noted earlier, students seeking graduate education are increasingly turning to online options.

Among the university's online degree programs, including both those currently offered and those under development, NIU has prioritized a set of specific programs for intensive marketing and recruitment efforts. This initial priority list reflects the programs that show the greatest potential for growth. The university will identify additional online graduate, undergraduate, professional and undergraduate degree-completion programs and courses for priority consideration, based on market demand and demonstrated potential for significant enrollments. In addition, the university is focused on offering additional undergraduate general education courses online to enable students to complete full undergraduate degree programs online.

NIU will be developing an aggressive marketing and advertising plan to recruit students to online programs. Complementing this, we also will deploy a student support service (often called a concierge service) to support applicants from their initial inquiry through enrollment. The online support services will continue to support students once enrolled, ensuring that student needs from advising to technology to financial aid are addressed in a timely manner.

Figure 11: Percentage of Total Student Credit Hour Production by Mode of Delivery
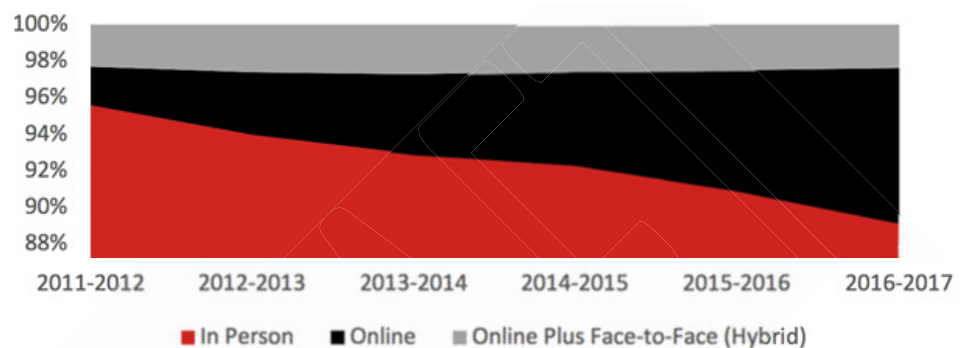
Hispanic/Latinx Enrollment

NIU celebrates the rich diversity of our student population, and is committed to remaining a university that provides opportunities to talented students with different social identities and lived experiences. To this end, the university will continue to work with internal and external stakeholders to maintain our long history of recruiting and enrolling talented students from the declining populations of white and black high school graduates. NIU will also focus efforts on enrolling the increasing number of Asian American and Latinx high school graduates. The latter group presents an excellent opportunity for enrollment growth, as detailed in the following paragraphs.

The number of Latinx students graduating from high school in Illinois is increasing. As demonstrated in Figure 12, through the year 2025, there will continue to be a sharp rise in the Hispanic/Latinx college-bound population throughout the state (a more than 13 percent increase, from 31,884 to 36,137 projected high school graduations).

Latinx enrollment at NIU also has increased over the past decade, from 8.1 percent of all undergraduate enrollments in fall 2009 to 19.0 percent in fall 2018. Accordingly, with a concerted effort to enroll and retain a larger population of Hispanic/Latinx students, NIU is poised to achieve 25 percent within the next several years and thereby meet the threshold for designation as a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI).

In addition to aligning with our commitment to recruiting and retaining a diverse student body, the benefits of becoming a designated HSI include expanded access to U.S. Department of Education grants. These include financial resources that can be used to support faculty development; development and improvement of academic programs and curricula; laboratory equipment; renovation of instructional facilities; mentoring; tutoring; counseling programs; and student support services. NIU also will achieve the opportunity for full membership in the Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities, which will provide professional resources including advocacy through government relations, conferences and events, publications, advertising and educational webinars.

Figure 12: High School Graduate Trends by Race/Ethnicity – Illinois
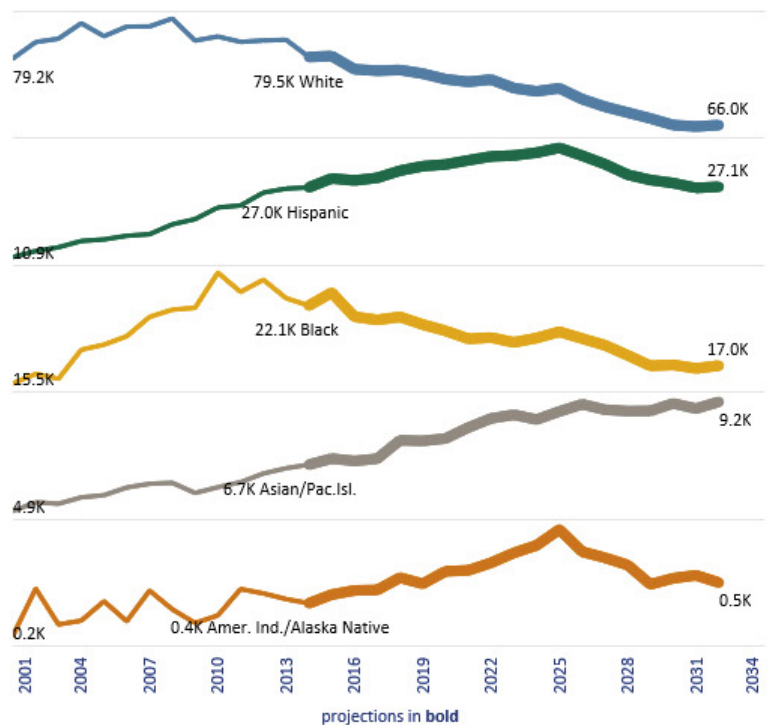
"Knocking at the College Door", WICHE (2016)

Students Who Don't Enroll Anywhere

As noted earlier, there are a large number of academically strong students who were admitted to NIU but did not enroll at NIU or any other institution in that semester. The data on this critical student population needs further study. NIU is committed to learning more about the reasons why these students don't attend college, and to providing new resources that will assist these students and enhance their likelihood to enroll. For example, we already know that 66 percent of these students are the first in their families to attend college. As we learn more about these students, we will be able to develop targeted messaging and more effective financial aid leveraging.

Admission/Scholarship Criteria

Numerous national studies demonstrate that SAT and ACT scores most strongly correlate with family income, gender, first-generation status and students who speak a second language at home, and that standardized test scores are less-effective predictors of college success (defined by college cumulative GPA and graduation rate) than student performance in high school courses. NIU's longitudinal data confirms that this is true at our university.

The experiences of other institutions provide evidence that a well-executed, test-optional admission policy can lead to an increase in overall applications as well as an increase in the representation of underrepresented students (both numeric and proportionate) in the applicant pool and the freshman class, without negatively impacting academic quality, retention rates or graduation rates. In fact, a 2018 national study of 28 test-optional admission institutions has shown that students who did not submit test scores for admission "ultimately graduated at rates equivalent to, or marginally higher than, Submitters, the ultimate proof of success."

NIU will undertake additional analysis, directed toward the adoption of test-optional admission and scholarship criteria. This would benefit NIU by providing opportunities for enrolling new students, especially those who are high-performing students academically in high school, but are disadvantaged in standardized testing.

Institutional Funding/Financial Aid Leveraging

In addition to state-funded MAP (Monetary Assistance Program) Grants and federally funded Pell Grants available to eligible students, NIU provides significant institutional aid toward meeting students' documented financial needs. Three years ago, NIU increased merit scholarships from two-year commitments to four-year commitments, enhancing transparency for prospective students/families, increasing the incentive for admitted students to enroll and improving retention and completion rates. This past year, NIU awarded more than $14 million in merit scholarships and almost another $4 million in the need-based Huskie Advantage Grant. Approximately two-thirds of our undergraduate students who receive merit scholarships also have demonstrated financial need.

Building on these steps, NIU will continue to improve its awarding of financial aid, to make the best possible use of institutional aid (including philanthropic scholarship funding through the NIU Foundation) and state and federal aid. The financial aid leveraging initiative will include a thorough analysis and updating of NIU's institutional aid processes and strategies. For example, NIU already has started to encourage private giving toward unrestricted scholarships to promote maximum flexibility in supporting students.

At the same time, we are evaluating our protocols for merit-based and need-based awards. We are examining the impact of institutional aid in the enrollment decision-making process of students by various populations (underrepresented, Pell-eligible, college/department, academic level, geographic region, first-year, transfer, etc.) as well as the impact on first- to second-year retention. The evaluation of our own practices will be grounded in competitor benchmarking data and national best practices related to financial aid leveraging.

Alternate aid options

The majority of the students who attend NIU are lower to middle income with a high need for financial assistance (more than 40 percent are eligible for federal Pell Grants). Despite the actions taken by NIU to hold tuition and fees constant for multiple consecutive years, and their access to institutional aid, MAP (Monetary Assistance Program) and Pell grant programs, many of our students still have unmet need that prevents them from remaining enrolled through completion of their degree programs. On average, about 10 percent of those eligible for MAP each year do not receive it. It is clear that additional financial aid options would be helpful, and NIU constantly explores such options. One such option is participation in income-share agreements, a mechanism that provides additional funding to specific students who agree to make payments after graduation based on a percentage of their income for a set period of time. Income-sharing agreements are gathering momentum nationally as a way of filling a gap in financing an education, and are being used at other public and private universities in the Midwest.

Financial literacy

The ability of our applicants and students to make informed financial decisions is critical, as financial concerns are often cited by students as a challenge that impacts their ability to remain enrolled. Given that nearly half of NIU students are Pell-eligible and that many are working on- or off-campus to not only cover the cost of their education, but their basic needs or family finances, financial literacy education can provide students with an important life skill that will serve them well during their time at NIU and beyond.

Recruitment and Access: Goals, Strategies and Objectives

The strategic imperative of recruitment and access was identified to advance NIU toward Goal 2:

Goal 2: *Achieve student enrollment that respects our mission and values while positioning NIU for fiscal sustainability.*

In light of the trends and opportunities in recruitment and access outlined above, NIU will advance the following strategies to fulfill this goal. These strategies will be achieved through tactics which will be developed to address each of the identified objectives.

Strategy: *Clearly define recruitment targets and create tailored, comprehensive plans to drive action.*

Objective: *Increase all new freshman enrollment 10 percent (2,052) by fall 2023 (1,856 in fall 2018), while maintaining academic quality and diversity measures.*

Objective: *Increase all new transfer enrollment 5 percent (1,656) by fall 2023 (1,577 in fall 2018).*

Objective: *Increase all new graduate enrollment 5 percent (894) by fall 2023 (851 in fall 2018), while maintaining academic quality and diversity measures.*

Objective: *Increase new international student enrollment 20 percent (294) by fall 2023 (245 in fall 2018).*

Objective: *Increase overall online program enrollment by 1,000 students (1,773) by fall 2023 (773 in fall 2018).*

Objective: *Become a designated Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) by increasing the number of new undergraduate Hispanic/Latinx students by at least 9 percent each year (727 in fall 2018).*

Objective: *Double the enrollment of new domestic out-of-state undergraduate students (238) by fall 2023 (119 in fall 2018).*

Strategy: *Provide enhanced, responsive and effective scholarship and financial aid options that will attract students and ensure their success.*

Objective: *Complete a comprehensive research study by end of spring 2019 on current undergraduate admission and scholarship criteria to consider implementing alternate options.*

Objective: *Complete a comprehensive study by end of summer 2019 to analyze students who are admitted to NIU but do not enroll at any college in order to identify barriers to enrollment and strategies for re-engagement.*

Objective: *Optimize the efficacy of financial awarding, including both institutional aid and Foundation programs, by fall 2020.*

Objective: *Pilot alternative means of student financial aid support by fall 2020.*

Strategic Imperative:
Improving Undergraduate Retention and Success

During a downward trend in high school graduates and college-bound students, the best way to maintain enrollment is not to solely focus on recruiting new students. Rather, it is less expensive and more efficient to place more emphasis on the retention of currently enrolled students.

Retention can be measured in a variety of ways, and can focus on a variety of student populations. The retention measure that typically receives the greatest attention is first-year, fall-to-fall retention: the percentage of first-year students in a cohort who return for a second year. Students who are retained in their first year are more likely to persist to graduation, therefore creating conditions that promote retention and student success are critical. Over the past five to six years, NIU has focused efforts on increasing the first-year retention rate through the use of high-impact practices (HIPs), such as first-year seminars, internships, undergraduate research, service learning and living-learning communities. These efforts have been associated with improvement of the first-year, fall-to-fall retention rate from 66 percent up to a consistent 73 percent (see Figure 13).

In contrast with fall-to-fall retention, there is a longer-term measure of persistence: the continuing return of students year after year

Figure 13: Retention Patterns of New Freshmen Cohorts
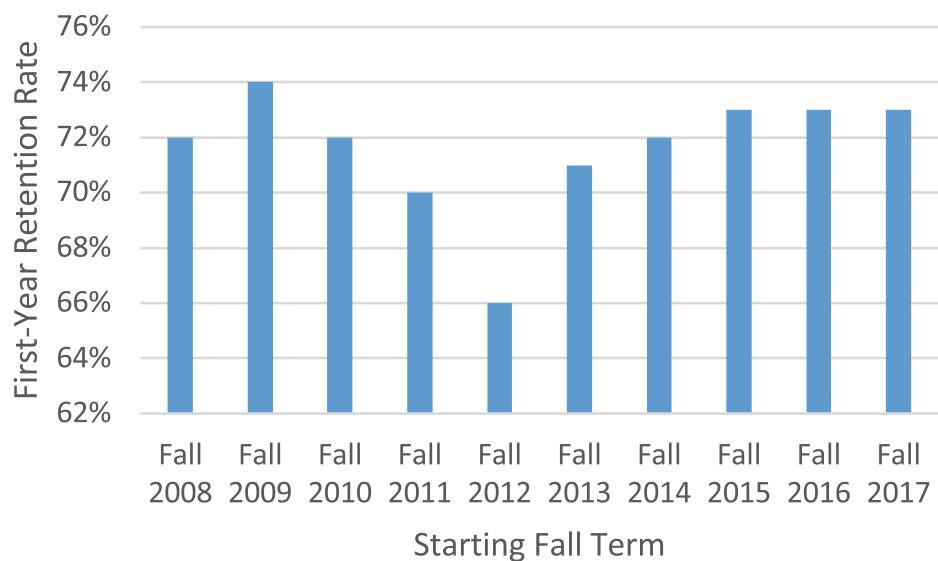
until graduation. Persistence is generally based on a variety of factors, including the quality of their experiences and their ability to access and benefit from support services on campus.

While all aspects of the student experience contribute to retention and persistence to graduation, the greatest impact can be achieved by establishing a coordinated retention strategy that includes both the alignment of existing efforts and focused attention on key opportunities. Our retention strategic imperative therefore addresses the coordination of effort; a focus on the first-year experience; and a focus on equity and inclusion issues to close the attainment gap.

Coordinating Retention Efforts

Nationally, academic advising has been identified as a key factor impacting undergraduate student retention. In 2015, the National Association for Academic Advising (NACADA) developed a report for NIU indicating several recommendations for improving advising at NIU. These include (1) aligning the advisor-to-student ratio with the national average (1:300); (2) developing and implementing a comprehensive, regular assessment of academic advising; (3) establishing and implementing an effective training and professional development model for advisors to ensure common expectations and opportunities for reward and recognition; and (4) where possible, assigning professional advisors and faculty mentors to students. In addition to ensuring that each student has a customized pathway to success, advisors must be key contributors to college- and campus-level discussions about retention and completion and, in some cases, could be assigned to coordinate targeted interventions.

This coordinated approach to advising will be most effective where there is linkage between a local-level strategic organizational structure in place to manage retention and student success initiatives and an institutional level structure created to assess outcomes and ensure accountability. Supplementing the university-level SEM committee with aligned committees at the unit levels will establish the organizational structure necessary to achieve the identified retention and equity goals. Advising directors, as well as associate deans, equity team leaders and other key staff and faculty, will be key players on local-level SEM committees, and will be tasked with performing regular analyses of critical enrollment data, defining appropriate interventions and the staff/faculty responsible for managing them, leveraging the use of NIU Navigate as a critical retention tool and coordinating all local efforts related to retention and completion. Intentional coordination of efforts and tracking of outcomes will be essential for producing positive outcomes.

Focus on the First Year

A coordinated and developmental approach to the first-year experience creates opportunities for creating important traditions, and embedding critical information such as financial literacy and academic expectations. Such integration promotes more strategic deployment of human and financial resources at NIU. It also provides an opportunity for colleges and the Student Experience Team (SET, consisting of Student Affairs, the Office of Undergraduate Studies and the Office of Academic Diversity, Equity and Inclusion) to eliminate redundancies and to partner on developing requirements that have mutual benefits. NIU has a strong baseline of existing programs that have been developed to provide students with an immediate connection to faculty and the resources they need to be successful.

The first-year experience begins with the transition to college. Prior to the fall semester, all first-year students attend summer orientation. In addition, several cohorts of students have targeted programs to guide the transition to college, known as bridge programs. These include bridge experiences for the CHANCE program, the Honors program, the marching band and the Summer Math Bridge in the College of Engineering and Engineering Technology. On any given year, there can be more than 800 first-year students on campus prior to the scheduled move-in date, representing about 45 percent of the incoming first-year class.

Moreover, support for the first-year transition continues after students begin classes. In the fall 2017, 72 percent of first-year students were enrolled in UNIV 101, NIU's freshmen seminar. Assessment of this course has shown that students who enroll in UNIV 101 are retained at higher rates than those who do not, and many students indicate that their engagement in this course helped them to feel more connected to campus and more prepared to navigate the complex university system.

Orientation, bridge programs and UNIV 101 all represent important components of the first-year experience; however, each is coordinated independent of the other, thereby missing opportunities to create important synergies and to more efficiently and effectively map the full first-year experience.

Prioritizing Equity and Inclusion

There is an important connection between retention efforts and NIU's commitment to diversity and inclusion. NIU has a long tradition of providing access and opportunity to underserved populations (Pell-eligible, students of color, first-generation) who come to college, not only to achieve their personal and career goals, but also to make a difference in their families, communities, state and nation. Collectively, students from underserved populations comprise 74 percent of NIU's student body: 44 percent students of color, 41 percent low-income and 52 percent first-generation. The diversity of our student body is one of NIU's greatest strengths, and represents an indispensable dimension of academic and cultural excellence. We are invested in ensuring an environment where students feel welcome and included, and see themselves thriving and growing academically, personally and professionally. However, analysis of retention, persistence and graduation data shows that our diverse student populations do not meet with equal success. These differences in retention and graduation rates are known as equity gaps, and are a central concern in our retention efforts. Further analysis suggests that these equity gaps cannot be explained solely by student's level of academic preparation.

Recognizing this, NIU has taken on the responsibility of creating an academic culture that ensures equal outcomes for all of our students. The data suggests that reducing equity gaps, particularly for Black and Latinx students, will have a significant impact on retention and degree completion. Reducing equity gaps through targeted retention efforts will result in marked improvements in overall retention and completion. For example, if we increase the fall-to-fall retention of Black and Latinx students to the campus average (73 percent), overall retention will increase by 3 percentage points (73 percent to 76 percent). Identifying targeted strategies and developing an intentional and coordinated approach will allow for this type of impact.

In addition to attention to the identified underserved populations, NIU also is committed to addressing the needs of students with disabilities. Recent discussions with NIU students with disabilities have identified ongoing concerns. Students indicate feeling misunderstood and unsupported. The lack of understanding among faculty and staff of salient issues that students with disabilities face can leave students with disabilities feeling alone and insufficiently prepared to advocate for their needs. The core issue for many students is that their disabilities are not visible, which can result in inaccurate perceptions and unfair judgments about the need for requested accommodations. Other students with more visible disabilities indicate concerns related to physical access to classrooms. Increasing awareness can reduce perceived hostility toward providing accommodations and foster a safe, inclusive and positive learning environment for students with disabilities.

A focus on a student abilities and opportunities, rather than on weaknesses, is referred to as equity-mindedness. The opposite mindset, deficit-mindedness, attributes unequal achievement rates to deficiencies in the students themselves. In that view, student struggles are seen as the product of inferior academic preparation, lack of motivation, familial demands that intrude on the student's ability to commit fully to their education, or any number of other perceived deficits that are seen as the sole responsibility of the student. Deficit-mindedness absolves the institution of responsibility for students' success and undermines the development of a campus culture that measures success not by how many students are granted access to higher education, but by how many students are retained and earn their college degrees.

A central element of our retention efforts will be the development of programs, workshops, policies and practices that help to shift the campus culture from deficit-mindedness to equity-mindedness. To promote equity mindedness, social justice education, cultural competency workshops and ally training will be employed to assist in educating faculty, students and staff on the needs of our diverse student populations. These programs will engage faculty, staff and students in best practices in coalition-building, culturally responsive teaching, implicit bias education and how to build an inclusive community that promotes and fosters a positive learning environment for all students.

Collaborative Efforts in Equity and Inclusion

Addressing issues of equity and inclusion is a challenge for many higher education institutions. Yet it is of the greatest importance, because understanding and closing equity gaps in degree attainment informs best practices for increasing college attainment for all. NIU is committed to being a leader in this area as evidenced by our involvement with a number of emerging regional and national partnerships, including Excelencia in Education's *Presidents for Latino Student Success*, the Association of Public and Land Grant University's *Power of the Publics* initiative, and the Partnership for College Completion's *Illinois Educational Attainment* initiative (ILEA). As part of *Presidents for Latino Student Success*, NIU has committed to accelerating Latinx student achievement by conducting analyses and collaborating across institutions to inform educational policies and advance institutional practices. As part of *Power of the Publics*, NIU is a member of a team of eight universities from California, Arizona, Texas, Illinois and New Jersey that will be collaborating over the next five years to address issues of common interest, including financial literacy, cultural competency, equity gaps and improving transfer policies. As part of the *ILEA*, NIU is one of 25 universities and community colleges in Chicagoland that are collaborating to address achievement gaps. These initiatives will allow NIU to experiment, to share challenges and solutions and to leverage data. The *Power of the Publics* and *ILEA* are in the planning stages, which will allow NIU to align our enrollment management plans, including our student success initiatives, with these collaborative efforts.

Retention and Success: Goals, Strategies and Objectives

The strategic imperative of retention and success was identified to advance NIU toward Goal 3:

Goal 3: Support equitable access, opportunity and success for students from diverse backgrounds where diversity is defined broadly.

In light of the trends and opportunities in retention, equity and student success outlined earlier, NIU will advance the following strategies to fulfill this goal. These strategies will be achieved through tactics which will be developed to address each of the identified objectives.

Strategy: Clearly define retention and completion goals and create tailored, comprehensive plans to best support the specific needs of our diverse student population.

Objective: Increase the overall first-year retention rate to 75 percent by fall 2023 (from 73 percent in fall 2018) with implementation beginning in fall 2019 of a coordinated retention, persistence and completion model that includes accountability at the college, department and university levels.

Objective: Improve the overall six-year graduation rate by

5 percentage points (51 percent) by fall 2023 (46 percent in fall 2018).

Objective: Increase the first-year retention rates for Latinx and Asian-American students by 5 percent by fall 2023, understanding that "at average" can fluctuate annually by 1 percent or 2 percent.

Objective: Redesign the first-year experience to bolster student success by fall 2020.

Objective: All faculty and staff will complete training on compliance regulations and the needs of students with disabilities by fall 2023.

Objective: Increase the financial investment in resources necessary to ensure that requests for reasonable accommodations for students are met in a timely manner by fall 2020.

Objective: All new first-year and transfer undergraduates will complete cultural competency education by fall 2023

Objective: Develop a financial literacy program for students that increases awareness of personal financial management by fall 2020.

Strategy: Clearly identify gaps in academic achievement and create tailored and comprehensive

plans to reduce these gaps.

Objective: Increase six-year graduation rates by reducing equity gaps for Latinx students to 5 percent or less by fall 2023 and remain consistently with gaps no greater than 5 percent.

Objective: Increase first-year retention rates by reducing equity gaps for Black new freshmen to 10 percent or less by fall 2023, understanding that success will mean consistently staying with 1 percent to 2 percent of that range for at least three years.

Objective: Increase first-year retention by reducing equity gaps for Black transfer students to 6 percent or less by fall 2023, and remain consistently with gaps no greater than 6 percent.

Objective: Increase the six-year graduation rates by reducing equity gaps for both Black new freshmen and transfer students to 10 percent or less by fall 2023; understanding that success will mean consistently staying with 1 percent to 2 percent of that range for at least three years.

Objective: Enhance the design of gateway courses and courses with high equity gaps by incorporating engaging pedagogical approaches by fall 2023.

NIU Enrollment Projections

To assess the impact of the proposed enrollment management strategies, we have constructed enrollment projections. These projections take into account the recruitment and retention objectives, together with historic data on re-enrollment and graduation rates. As with any projection, these are based on a variety of assumptions, including the ability to maintain stable funding from the state legislature; statewide and regional enrollment trends; and projected impacts of the new initiatives included in this plan on the recruitment of new students and the retention and completion of currently enrolled students.

As long as we continue to receive stable funding, and do not have added financial burdens placed on us by the state, we first project a stabilization and then a small increase in total enrollment nearing 18,000 total students by the Fall 2023 semester. We believe there is the most potential to grow enrollment of our online student population, with an opportunity to increase online enrollment by at least 1,000 students.

Figure 14: Five-Year Enrollment Projections

Student Group	Fall 2018	Fall 2019	Fall 2020	Fall 2021	Fall 2022	Fall 2023
Total Main Campus Undergraduate	**12,427**	**11,787**	**11,569**	**11,606**	**11,737**	**11,892**
New Freshmen	1,856	1,883	1,916	1,960	2,013	2,072
New Transfers	1,577	1,593	1,613	1,637	1,665	1,699
Continuing Undergraduates	8,994	8,311	8,040	8,009	8,059	8,121
Online Undergraduates	**361**	**378**	**395**	**412**	**432**	**451**
Online Graduates	**412**	**574**	**736**	**898**	**1,060**	**1,223**
Main Campus Graduate	**3,699**	**3,739**	**3,779**	**3,819**	**3,859**	**3,899**
Law	**270**	**270**	**270**	**270**	**270**	**270**
Total Enrollment	**17,169**	**16,748**	**16,749**	**17,005**	**17,358**	**17,735**

As noted, these projections factor in both the objectives of the enrollment management plan and the historic trends of recruitment, re-enrollment and graduation. To assess the impact of the enrollment management plan, we have projected what enrollments might be if we took none of the steps indicated. The difference between the two, shown in Figure 15, reveals the impact of the enrollment management plan. By Fall 2023, there would be a positive impact of 12 percent, with approximately 1,825 more students than NIU would enroll without the plan in place.

Figure 15: Impact of Enrollment Management Plan

Without EM Plan — With EM Plan
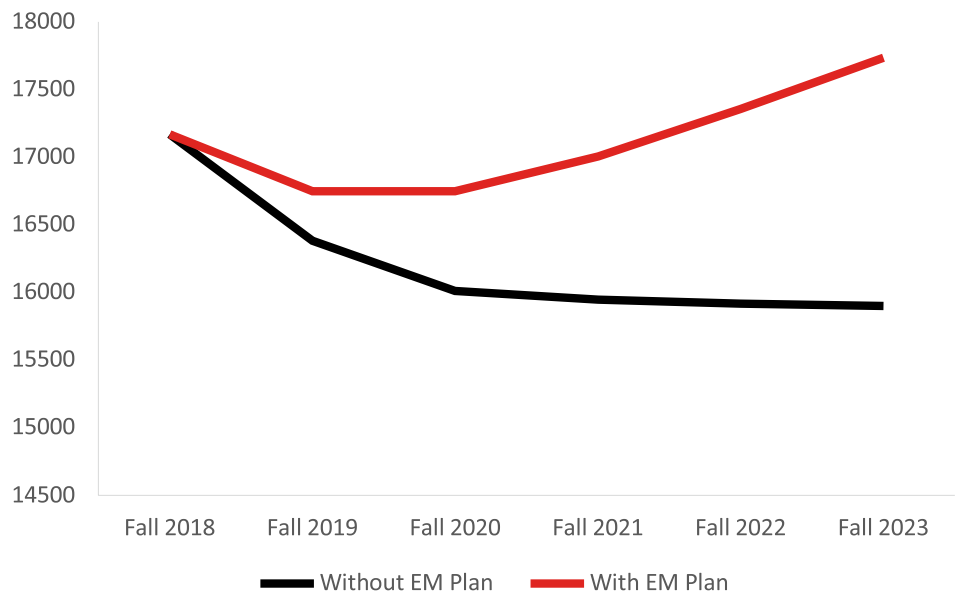
Call to Action

The goals identified in this plan are fundamental to the mission and vitality of the university, and the achievement of the objectives that support those goals will call on all of the NIU community.

Key to the full implementation of the SEM plan is the establishment of an organized accountability structure that includes clear expectations, regular reporting and assigned responsibility. At the highest level, the goals, strategies and objectives set forth in this plan already have been aligned with the presidential goals approved by the Board of Trustees, signaling the commitment of the university's leadership to this endeavor. The next step is the development of action plans for each prioritized strategy, including the identification of both broad implementation steps and localized specific tactics; assigned responsibility and completion dates; and assessment measures. Further, the success of this plan requires an environment that integrates enrollment management across campus supported by a culture of shared responsibility and accountability. The university-wide goals, strategies and objectives will drive organizational and cultural change designed to result in a more comprehensive and strategic approach to enrollment management.

In the coming weeks, the Executive Vice President and Provost and the Vice President for Enrollment Management, Marketing and Communications will facilitate the identification of expectations and accountability. This will identify who is responsible for tactics to advance the stated objectives, as well as critical deadlines to ensure that we are able to achieve these goals. These expectations will be made public in an accountability plan that balances the need for clear expectations against the need for flexibility to learn from our efforts and to adapt to a rapidly changing environment.

Success in implementation will require not only organization and accountability; it also will require commitment and effort. Many of the efforts needed to achieve success will involve working collaboratively across units. The implementation process will include a reshaping of the SEM committee to create working groups charged with carrying forward aspects of the plan. These working groups also will be delineated in the accountability plan, and will evolve as the needs of the plan evolve. Beyond those individuals, units and working groups charged with direct responsibility for implementation, the entire campus community's support and involvement is needed. We all are called upon to support the implementation efforts of the working groups. We all are called upon to embrace the values of the institution that are set forth here to attract and retain students who represent the diversity of the region, nation and world.

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