Northern Illinois University

Strategic Enrollment Management Plan 2.0

2022-2025

Northern Illinois University
Your Future. Our Focus.

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Executive Summary

This summary provides an overview of the Strategic Enrollment Management (SEM) Plan 2.0 goals and strategies that will guide our enrollment-related efforts over the next few years. The full report that follows provides an important context that aligns with our strategies. Timelines and accountable parties have been added to each strategy in the SEM Accountability Plan 2.0 to ensure that we are able to make progress toward achieving our goals.

Our overarching purpose remains to attract, retain and graduate students representing the diversity of our region, our nation and our world. This provides a general framework for our new plan's goals and strategies that must be implemented to achieve success. It is noticeable that many of the goals and strategies are similar to the prior SEM Plan. This is purposeful as these goals and strategies are interwoven into our mission, vision and values. However, some of the goals and strategies have been updated, or are completely new, as times have changed considerably due to the impacts from COVID-19 and other factors. Within this framework, we have identified the following goals and supporting strategies:

Goal 1: Strengthen and promote our distinctive identity as a diverse, engaged public research university that transforms lives by combining educational opportunity and personalized support with meaningful student engagement experiences.

> **Strategy 1.1:** Further hone our brand identity through a perception study to better understand NIU's reputation with specific audiences and implement recommendations to improve the overall brand perception and enrollment opportunities.
> **Strategy 1.2:** Amplify Huskie pride to support NIU and the NIU Foundation in our efforts to demonstrate and celebrate the benefits of an NIU education and the successes and contributions of our students, faculty, staff and alumni.
> **Strategy 1.3:** Improve the tracking of NIU graduates' career outcomes and leverage outcomes data to better represent the value of an NIU education to key audiences.

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

Strategy 2.1: Utilizing new and existing partnerships, enroll a new student population that mirrors the demographics of our region through increased completion of admission application files, an improved yield experience for admitted students, tailored communication plans, development of signature recruitment and yield events, and revised transfer credit procedures.

Strategy 2.2: Launch a campaign to reenroll NIU stop-out students — including a case management approach, new student support services, and promotion of existing and expanded options of online degree-completion programs — providing flexibility for returning students.

Strategy 2.3: Provide enhanced financial advising initiatives to students, such as multiyear financial planning, along with robust training and education to campus partners on Student Financial Advising Services, to support enrollment, retention and completion initiatives.

Strategy 2.4: Using multiyear financial modeling and a comprehensive review of NIU's scholarship/waiver awarding philosophies, optimize the efficacy of all institutional aid funding (including identifying and piloting innovative aid programs) to attract students and ensure their success.

Goal 3: Support access, opportunity and success for all students — employing an equity lens and striving to sustain a diverse student body — where diversity is defined broadly.

Strategy 3.1: Provide programs, processes and support networks that ensure students transition successfully into the Huskie experience, being mindful of students' diversity.

Strategy 3.2: Deliver on our value proposition to students as an institution that emphasizes social mobility, academic success and leadership development in an environment that celebrates diverse perspectives and lived experiences, ensuring that all students have the support they need to be successful and engaged.

Strategy 3.3: Support, develop and assess programs that are responsive to the evolving mental and emotional health needs, wellness and physical health needs, and the safety of our students.

Introduction

Guided by our Strategic Enrollment Management (SEM) Plan (2019-2023), NIU developed and introduced new programs and strategies designed to make an NIU degree even more accessible, equitable and affordable. The positive impact is reflected in growing numbers of new and high-achieving students and, prior to the pandemic, positively trending first-year retention rates, total enrollment and the reduction of equity gaps. A list of highlights and accomplishments from the SEM Plan (2019-2023) can be found on our website.

Disappointingly, even though NIU made significant gains in the size of its freshman classes and experienced other highly positive enrollment trends, the university experienced a modest decrease in its overall 2021 enrollment, largely attributable to pandemic-related challenges. Switches in learning modalities (online, in person, hybrid) and technology deficiencies, along with financial, time-management and personal stresses brought on by the pandemic, made it challenging for our students, particularly freshmen and first-generation students, to stay focused on their studies and engage with support networks designed to help them succeed. Retention of first-year students dipped about five percentage points below the pre-pandemic level. These struggles of NIU first-year students reflected nationwide trends.

A February 2022 article authored by Lewis Sanborne, Ph.D., vice president of enrollment and student success at Ruffalo Noel Levitz and a nationally recognized leader in enrollment management states, "The amount of change and disruption the pandemic brought actually makes the case for stronger strategic enrollment planning and a more inclusive strategic approach. If we are not imagining how prospective and current student mindsets are changing, we cannot build strategies to meet them where they are and will be. Resilient institutions will be those who transition out of pandemic responsiveness with clear plans to become stronger and more sustainable." To respond to the disruptions introduced by COVID-19, NIU has created this new SEM Plan 2.0 to ensure that the proposed tactics and activities continue to support our overarching enrollment and equity goals. These actions and others are needed to respond to our dynamic operating environment, to continue to improve outcomes for all students and to respect our mission, vision and values.

To accomplish this, the university will need to enhance its services to students, but this will not be easy in the current context. While NIU has seen stronger financial support from the state in the past few years, the university is still highly dependent 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 enrolling full-time, traditional-age high school and community college students. Redoubling recruitment efforts is important but won't be enough. To be successful, our efforts must recognize that effective enrollment management requires intentional strategies for retaining currently enrolled students and for fostering an environment that encourages all our students to persist and complete their degrees.

This plan is our response to the challenges faced by NIU — directly identified by our students, faculty and staff — and it signifies our commitment to coordinating strategic efforts to achieve our recruitment, retention and completion goals. Our enrollment plan is strategic, forward-thinking, multiyear, 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 leadership and accountability for enrollment.

Enrollment History

As of the fall 2021 semester, NIU's enrollment was just above 16,200. While the Law School has remained relatively flat in enrollment over the years, the undergraduate and graduate student enrollment, thus overall head count enrollment, has mostly declined each year over the past decade and a half.

However, prior to the pandemic — fall 2019 and into 2020 — it was evident the SEM Plan (2019-2023) was working and had been achieving projected enrollment results, including an increase in total student enrollment in the fall 2020 semester. Figure 1 is a projected enrollment chart from the previous SEM Plan (2019-2023), which shows the difference between projected enrollment with the implementation of the SEM Plan and a projection of enrollment if we didn't progress on the SEM Plan initiatives. The newly added red line demonstrates how closely our actual enrollment was tracking to the SEM Plan projected enrollment prior to the impact of the pandemic (shown in vertical shaded bar) beginning in fall 2020 through present.

According to a November 2021 report from National Student Clearinghouse, colleges and universities nationwide enrolled almost 1 million fewer students in fall 2021 than fall 2019, the year prior to the pandemic, with the most precipitous decline at community colleges. As issues of student mental health, social disengagement and academic preparedness arose, universities across the country — including NIU — witnessed disruptions to students' ability to complete their degree or even remain enrolled.

Figure 1: SEM Enrollment Projections Compared to Actual Enrollment

Legend:
- Projection With SEM Plan
- Projection WIthout SEM Plan
- Actual Enrollment
- During the pandemic
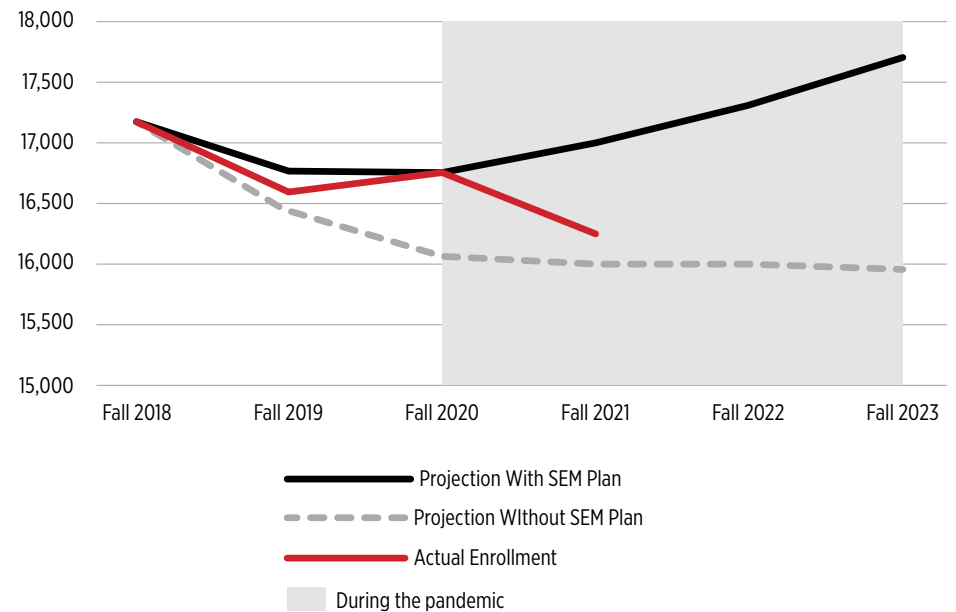
Over the past three-year period of the initial SEM Plan (see Figure 2):

- Total head count has declined 2% (from 16,609 to 16,234).
- Undergraduate enrollment has declined 2% (from 12,131 to 11,834).
- Graduate enrollment has declined 3% (from 4,204 to 4,079).
- Law enrollment has increased 17% (from 274 to 321).

Figure 2: Enrollment History — Total Head Count
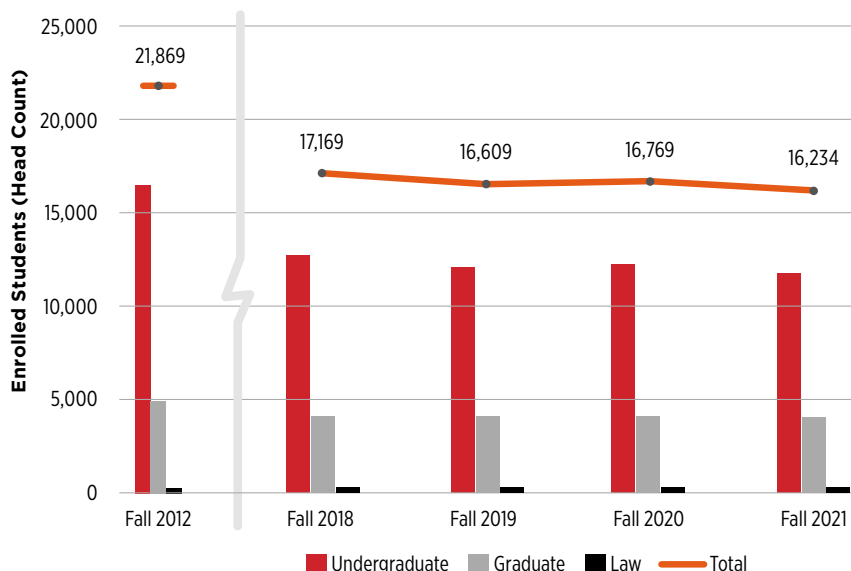
Several colleges at NIU have seen positive gains in total enrollment over the past few years, while others have shown slight declines. However, as noted previously, almost all colleges were seeing overall enrollment growth or maintaining flat enrollment prior to the fall 2021 semester when the pandemic impacted enrollment most significantly. More specifically, between fall 2019 and fall 2021 (see Figure 3):

- The College of Business has declined 2% (from 3,034 to 2,962).
- The College of Education has increased 3% (from 2,382 to 2,456).
- The College of Engineering and Engineering Technology has declined 14% (from 1,583 to 1,367).
- The College of Health and Human Sciences has increased 2% (from 2,706 to 2,754).
- The College of Liberal Arts and Sciences has declined 3% (from 4,990 to 4,833).
- The College of Visual and Performing Arts has increased by 1% (from 888 to 895).

**Figure 3: Enrollment History — College**
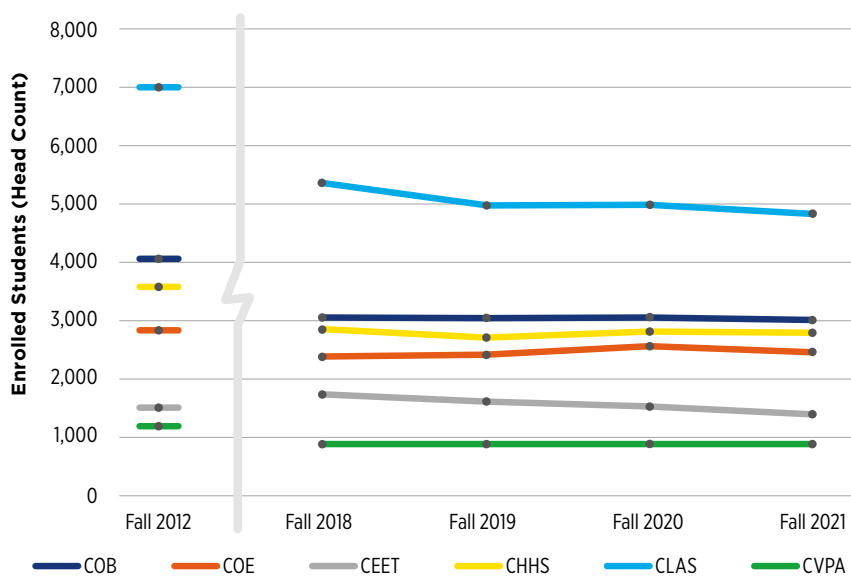
For a more detailed and historical view of NIU enrollment, please see the "Enrollment History" section of the Strategic Enrollment Management Plan (2019-2023) or contact the Office of Institutional Effectiveness.

Changing Demographics

NIU has a long history of serving underrepresented students (those who come from lower-income households, are first in their family to attend college or are students of color) and we are committed to providing opportunities for all students in our region. Changing demographics within Illinois have led to the enrollment of an increasingly diverse student population at NIU. Despite the decline in white and Black student high school graduates, NIU will continue to work with internal and external stakeholders to maintain its long history of recruiting and enrolling talented students from these populations. We also will focus efforts on enrolling the growing number of Asian American and Latinx high school graduates over these next few years.

In particular, there has been a significant increase in NIU's enrollment of Latinx students. If sustained, this trend can position the university to qualify to become a designated Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) within the next several years with at least 25% of the

Figure 4: Undergraduate Enrollment History – Race/Ethnicity
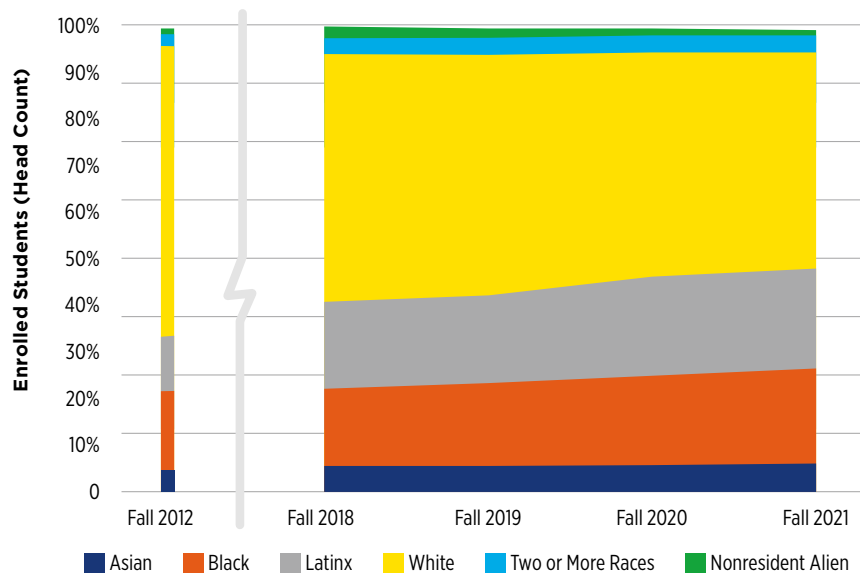
undergraduate population identified as Latinx.

Over the past three years (see Figure 4), of the total undergraduate population:
- All students of color increased significantly from 46% to 53%.
- Asian students remained flat at 6%.

- Black students increased from 17% to 20%.
- Latinx students increased from 19% to 22%.
- White students declined significantly from 52% to 46%.
- Nonresident Alien/International students dropped from about 2% to 1%.

Over this same period (see Figure 5), of the total graduate population:

- All students of color increased significantly from 24% to 28%.
- Asian students remained flat at 5%.
- Black students increased slightly from 7% to 8%.
- Latinx students increased from 10% to 12%.
- White students declined slightly from 59% to 58%.
- The percent of Nonresident Alien/International students declined slightly from 16% to 15%.

Figure 5: Graduate Enrollment History – Race/Ethnicity

Legend: Asian, Black, Latinx, White, Two or More Races, Nonresident Alien
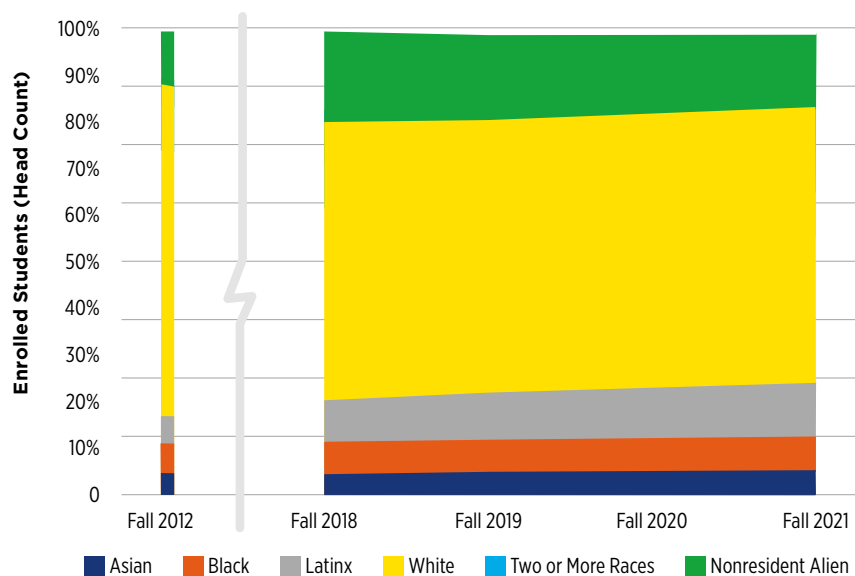
Challenges and Enrollment Impacts

While acknowledging that there have been, and will continue to be, other external factors that could impact enrollment (such as state and federal aid funding, free community college programs, economy and jobs market), below are the most known disruptors at this time.

Pandemic

In the drafting of the original SEM Plan (2019-2023), several challenges were identified that could impact future enrollment. However, no one could have predicted the rise of a pandemic, which has impacted life well beyond higher education and enrollment. The pandemic has created new and exacerbated existing challenges and barriers for college students, especially those who are first generation or from underserved communities. These challenges are having an impact on their academics, financial status, mental health and social engagement.
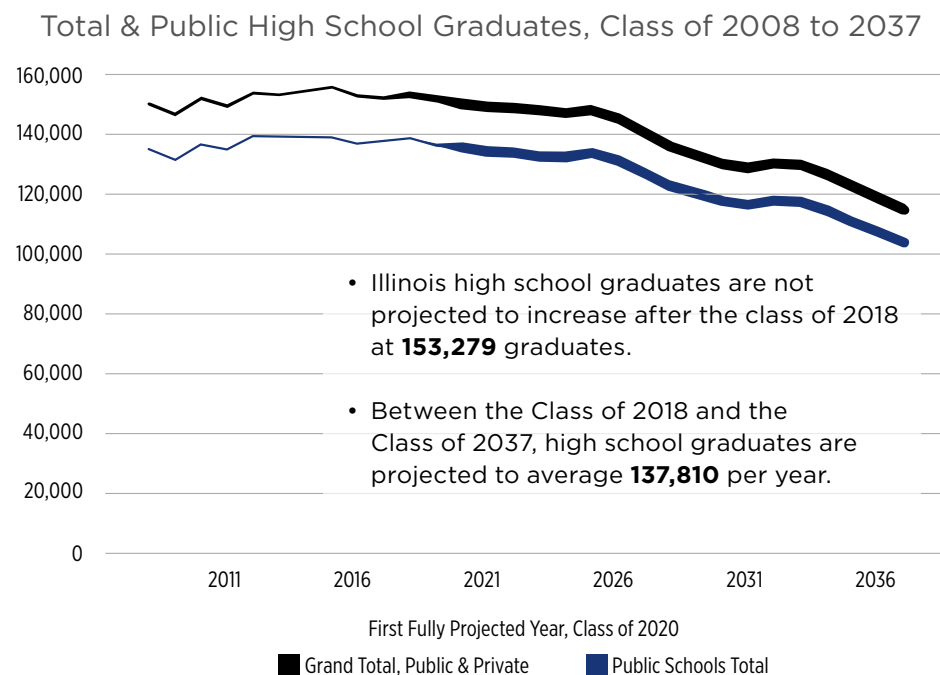
According to a November 2021 report from the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, "Postsecondary enrollment is now running 2.6 percent below last year's level, for a total 5.8 percent drop since 2019. Undergraduate enrollment declined 3.5 percent from last fall or 7.8 percent from fall 2019."

Declining Traditional Student Population

Over the next three years it is projected that Illinois will remain relatively flat in students graduating high school (see Figure 6), followed by a significant, prolonged decline. Further, this comes after many years of a slow reduction in this student population. This impacted not only the number of new first-year students, but also the number of students in the pipeline to transfer as well as undergraduate students seeking to attend graduate schools.

Figure 6: Graduate Enrollment History – Race/Ethnicity

Total & Public High School Graduates, Class of 2008 to 2037

- Illinois high school graduates are not projected to increase after the class of 2018 at **153,279** graduates.

- Between the Class of 2018 and the Class of 2037, high school graduates are projected to average **137,810** per year.

First Fully Projected Year, Class of 2020

■ Grand Total, Public & Private   ■ Public Schools Total

"Knocking at the College Door," WICHE (2020).

Competition for Shrinking Market

The climate for student recruitment in Illinois has remained increasingly competitive over the past decade, with negative impacts on both undergraduate and graduate enrollment at NIU and most Illinois public universities. 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. As adult learners show interest in completing an undergraduate or graduate degree, 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.

Students Choosing to Go Out-of-State

Although improving since the last SEM Plan, there remains a large number of Illinois students attending college out of state, which contributes to a shrinking pool of qualified applicants. According to a January 2022 IBHE outmigration report, "High school graduates leaving Illinois to go to four-year institutions has been trending slightly downward from 47.7% for those graduating in 2017, to 47.3% in 2018, and to 46.8% in 2019. The top destination states for recent Illinois high school graduates have largely remained unchanged. The top six states: Wisconsin, Indiana, Iowa, Missouri, Michigan, and Ohio continue to account for six out of every ten Illinois outmigrants." State-funded initiatives such as the AIM HIGH program have been put in place with a focus to continue to keep more Illinois students in state. As such, there will continue to be an opportunity and urgency to create and promote the strong value proposition of an NIU education to prospective students who may consider attending an institution outside of Illinois.

Process and Methodology

Although the previous SEM Plan was slated to run through 2023, the tremendous impact of the pandemic necessitated a new plan that demonstrated NIU's commitment to flexibility and nimbleness. In addition to the impact of the pandemic, the new SEM Plan 2.0 is now also in alignment with the president's university goals, NIU's ILEA (Illinois Equity in Attainment) 2020-2025 Plan, HLC (Higher Learning Commission) Quality Initiative and the university's multiyear budget planning.

While the previous SEM Plan utilized multiple retreats with senior leadership to develop many of the foundational goals, strategies and objectives, the SEM Plan 2.0 is much more inclusive as a shared process. We proactively reached out to the campus community and encouraged and received excellent feedback, particularly focused on student success. It was especially important to hear directly from our students, so we engaged with student government, other student organizations and leaders. NIU's SEM Committee (with individuals representing a variety of areas across the campus including individuals from each college; Office of Undergraduate Studies; Graduate School;

Division of Academic Diversity, Equity and Inclusion; Division of Enrollment Management, Marketing and Communications; and Student Affairs) worked with faculty and staff in their respective colleges and divisions to better understand students' challenges while also identifying specific ideas to address these barriers, with questions such as:

1. What institutional barriers (NIU's responsibility) impact our students' retention and success? What solutions do you propose to improve/remove these barriers?
2. When you speak with our students, what are some of their challenges you're hearing? What are they experiencing?
3. What are the most effective practices we are currently undertaking to address retention and student success?
4. How might we help our students acclimate to the campus environment and feel they are a part of our Huskie family?
5. What types of professional development would be most beneficial to help our faculty/staff effectively execute the SEM Plan?

The following statements are in direct response to the questions posed to NIU students, faculty and staff about student success.

"Understand who our students are and the realities of their lives. Hear student voices so we can ensure we are providing instruction, advisement and support in ways that make sense to and are appealing to our students. [We need] a clear set of specific retention strategies to implement so college faculty and staff are not left to guess what they should do to support student retention."
— NIU faculty member

"The advisors are the primary support for students to troubleshoot enrollment errors and manage holds. This comes at the same time that advisors are at their highest advising appointment levels, managing orientation and approaching graduation, so response time is ultimately delayed leading to student frustration and incomplete enrollment. Having a central person who could help students specifically with completing enrollment would be such a benefit to students as well as our overall enrollment numbers as students could enroll more quickly and with equitable access to a resource."
— NIU staff member

Comments continued.

"Offer summer transition programs that introduce students to the college experience and success strategies (resources, workload/time commitment requirements, involvement opportunities, four-year path, financial aid requirements, etc.)."

— NIU staff member

"I believe the university has the responsibility to assist our students in transitioning to college-level learning in a pandemic-informed way. It has always been the responsibility of colleges and universities to help students transition academically, but our incoming students are bringing different and more varied experiences with them resulting from the length and quality of their virtual learning experience. Many students are not entering college with the level of academic rigor, social awareness and maturity that we have been accustomed to. If they are to succeed at NIU, how do we help bridge that gap?"

— NIU staff member

"I think there are several ways we can assist our students [to] acclimate to the campus environment. First, we have to consider their 'pandemic life experience' and the impacts of that experience. How have lockdowns, virtual learning, modified social experiences, disappointments, etc. impacted how they learn, study, seek help or interact with their environment? What can we learn from high schools to help us prepare and respond to students who bring these experiences to our campus? Second, we need to find a way to bridge the gap between the assistance they need and their hesitation or lack of awareness in seeking that help. How can we change the touch points that might impact that gap, including orientation, first year experience programs, residence hall programming, support services, etc.? Are we doing things differently than we did two or three years ago? We certainly should be."

— NIU staff member

"[My friends and I] did a paper on student retention rates on first year students and the issues found are financial insecurity, inability to fit in, homesickness and depression as they do not know who to ask or where to begin their search. Institutions should have welcoming initiatives for first-year college students and an office that would offer students resources, a sense of belonging, support with adjusting to college, and help those at risk of dropping out."

— NIU student

"When I speak to students, especially students outside of CoB [College of Business], they have talked about not having the resources in the classroom to build their résumé or create a LinkedIn profile. I wonder if we can start making it a requirement for students to attend Career Services' workshops for all colleges at NIU. It's important for students to have knowledge about their area of study, but it's also important to support students in their job search."

— NIU student

"Those who start college are overwhelmed by all the information. Students would benefit from some unified, single stream of communication. Need a word-of-mouth platform, website, that everyone knows where to go to. What is advising? Where do I go to eat? COVID-19 made students not leave their dorms and without access to a social safety net to learn the ways of NIU or how to be a college student."

— NIU student

Based on the feedback that we received, the result is a student-focused plan with overarching goals and specific, measurable strategies. 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

Goal 1:
Strengthen and promote our distinctive identity as a diverse, engaged public research university that transforms lives by combining educational opportunity and personalized support with meaningful student engagement experiences.

Strategy 1.1: Further hone our brand identity through a perception study to better understand NIU's reputation with specific audiences and implement recommendations to improve the overall brand perception and enrollment opportunities.

Strategy 1.2: Amplify Huskie pride to support NIU and the NIU Foundation in our efforts to demonstrate and celebrate the benefits of an NIU education and the successes and contributions of our students, faculty, staff and alumni.

Strategy 1.3: Improve the tracking of NIU graduates' career outcomes and leverage outcomes data to better represent the value of an NIU education to key audiences.

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

Strategy 2.1: Utilizing new and existing partnerships, enroll a new student population that mirrors the demographics of our region through increased completion of admission application files, an improved yield experience for admitted students, tailored communication plans, development of signature recruitment and yield events, and revised transfer credit procedures.

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Strategy 3.2: Deliver on our value proposition to students as an institution that emphasizes social mobility, academic success and leadership development in an environment that celebrates diverse perspectives and lived experiences, ensuring that all students have the support they need to be successful and engaged.

Strategy 3.3: Support, develop and assess programs that are responsive to the evolving mental and emotional health needs, wellness and physical health needs, and the safety of our students.

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

Strategic Theme 1: Brand Identity.

Strategic Theme 2: Targeted Enrollment Efforts and Improving Access and Affordability.

Strategic Theme 3: Improving Student Success, Persistence and Graduation.

This document's presentation of the goals and strategies are organized in alignment with these strategic themes. Each section that follows includes important contextual information in addition to the specific goals and strategies. 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 Theme 1:
Brand Identity

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 has required a thoughtful strategy as well as a targeted investment of additional resources.

Since 2019, we've been able to develop paid advertising strategies and tactics that are designed to support the objectives of the SEM Plan. We've increased the frequency of our presence by coordinating both digital and out-of-home efforts, while utilizing new tactics and platforms to better engage target markets, including the introduction of lead-generation campaigns. During the pandemic, we localized placements to better reach prospective students and their parents/families. Recognizing the diversity of our prospective audiences, we invested in the development of more personalized content and translation services for improved, relevant communication with priority audiences. We have also expanded our undergraduate focus to include collaborative work with inside and outside partners for online and graduate recruitment.

To hone NIU's brand identity, it is critical in today's competitive market to understand our reputation with our primary audiences: prospective students and their families, current students, faculty, staff, alumni and donors, high school counselors, and the local community. NIU has completed two similar perception studies previously, in 2016 and 2019 (just before the pandemic began). While every three years is a nice cadence to reevaluate our brand identity, it's particularly critical to understand audience perceptions of NIU since the onset of the pandemic.

The results from the 2019 study provided NIU with actionable recommendations for next steps that are being implemented into our strategic communication and marketing plans — several of which are initiatives found in this new plan. A brand perception study in fall 2022 will not only provide recommendations that will positively impact our brand identity and provide new enrollment opportunities, but also allow NIU to benchmark with our own prior studies and with top competitor institutions.

Amplify Huskie Pride

NIU has exceptional and engaged students, faculty, staff, alumni and supportive community members, as well as a long history of success. We embrace and take pride in our academic excellence, diversity, our relentless determination, commitment to engaging our community, and awareness and sensitivity to social justice. As a nationally recognized, engaged public research university, NIU spurs the area's economy, enriches our educational environment and attracts exceptional faculty and students. Our research activities engage students, improve retention, foster a sense of belonging and self-efficacy, and promote higher graduation rates. Recognition of our achievements continues to grow in such areas as research, social mobility, workplace and diversity, equity, and inclusion. These are just a few of the characteristics that distinguish NIU from other universities.

We have a great opportunity to share and to celebrate the experiences and successes of our community — both internally and externally. By leveraging NIU "influencers" (current students, faculty, staff, alumni and supportive community members) as brand ambassadors and creating new marketing advisory groups, we will be able to develop new activities and stories that celebrate the achievements and contributions of our students, faculty, staff and alumni to amplify Huskie pride and improve promoter scores (willingness to promote NIU to others from those who are happy with their experience).

Additionally, to ensure that all faculty and staff are prepared to celebrate and support academic success for all students, it will be critical to offer ongoing professional development and continuing education opportunities that focus on equity, inclusion and culturally competent practices both in and out of the classroom.

Career outcomes

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. However, this

is challenging to promote to multiple audiences without collecting alumni career outcomes data in a way that accurately represents the value of an NIU education. We are seeking to identify outcomes data of our alumni more easily in various categories, such as employers, occupations, job titles, percentage of graduates working in their field of study, estimated salaries and social mobility. Once produced, we will communicate this data, along with career planning and alumni networking, as a strong value proposition to key audiences. This information is a primary driver for enrollment decisions.

Through its alumni and partners, the NIU Foundation also continues to advocate for our students. The engagement and support of our donors and alumni is always invaluable, but even more so as the Foundation nears launching NIU's most aspirational multiyear comprehensive fundraising campaign. Through a united effort and a visionary plan for the future, our ability to amplify Huskie pride and leverage outcomes data to better represent the value of an NIU degree — while also meeting the financial needs of our students — will be enhanced and energized.

Strategic Theme 2:
Targeted Enrollment Efforts and Improving Access and Affordability

New First-year Students

As of fall 2021, new first-year enrollment had increased by 27% (almost 500 more students) compared to the fall 2016 semester. We don't expect that this level of significant growth will persist, but will plateau now at this higher level, with only small growth rates in the next few years.

The numerous, successful partnerships and equity-based initiatives deployed over the past few years, including test-free admission and merit scholarships, have led to dramatic increases in the number of new first-year students enrolling at NIU. NIU saw its new first-year enrollment climb in fall 2021 by 12% over the prior year. It was the fifth consecutive year of gains in NIU's new first-year class enrollment, and the largest percentage increase in more than two decades. It was the most diverse class in university history, and the average high school GPA of the fall 2021 first-year class was 3.34, the second highest for an entering class at NIU in 10 years.

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 and partnerships to maintain or increase the number of new first-year students who mirror the demographics of the region.

However, given the general downward trend of high school students in our state and region, NIU remains committed to attracting more students from out of state and outside the country. For the first time in recent years, NIU enrollment of U.S. students from outside of Illinois exceeded 1,000 in fall 2021.

Research from The Common App (an application used by more than 900 institutions, including all Illinois public universities), shows a 10% increase in application volume since the 2019-2020 academic year. Yet the number of individual applicants rose only 1% during the same period. This demonstrates that students are applying to even more colleges, which will inevitably lower yield rates (percentage of admitted students who enroll) and make the incoming class sizes more unpredictable. In similar fashion, as the number of admission applications to NIU has grown substantially, we must shift our focus on the yield experience to enroll more admitted students.

Undergraduate Students with Prior Credit (Transfer Students)

NIU also has a rich history of serving undergraduate students with prior credit through established seamless transfer pathways. Almost half of NIU's undergraduate population transferred from other institutions, mostly from community colleges in Illinois. A 2020 IBHE report on transfer states, "Illinois is recognized nationally as a model for transfer student success. Illinois now leads the nation in bachelor's degree completion rates among community college students who transfer to four-year colleges, significantly exceeding the national average." However, as the state's population and number of high school graduates has declined, most of the Illinois community colleges have also seen significant downturns in enrollment.

Looking at data from NIU's top 15 feeder community colleges, in aggregate they have declined in total enrollment by almost 40,000 students in just the past five years. Other major impacts, such as the pandemic,

have also caused major disruptions with this population — in Illinois and across the nation. The National Student Clearinghouse Research Center's report also states, "Community college enrollment is now down a total of 14.8 percent since 2019." These significant reductions have clearly impacted the number of students who are eligible to transfer to NIU.

NIU's transfer student population is not only critical to enrollment efforts, but these students also persist and graduate at very high rates from NIU. 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 interest in online programs. Therefore, against the many challenges presented, NIU must do more to attract and enroll students with prior credit — utilizing innovative and impactful partnerships with both community colleges and corporations — and seek additional ways for these students to finance their education. Most importantly, for NIU to be a top destination for this population, we must improve our evaluation processes for awarding transfer credit to an NIU degree based on prior learning or work experience.

International

As noted earlier, the percentage of NIU's international student population has been relatively flat over the past decade, although the pandemic has certainly impacted their ability and likelihood to enroll. The majority of international students at NIU are working toward graduate degrees. That said, there are potential opportunities for growth in both undergraduate and graduate international students.

NIU colleges have been developing and strengthening international relationships to expand our recruitment pipelines, and there are opportunities to train current international students, faculty and alumni to promote NIU and individual academic programs when they travel abroad. Also, the development of new, targeted communication plans for all prospective and admitted international students should greatly benefit the recruitment process.

The next permanent associate vice president of International Affairs will have the opportunity to assess current practices and processes, and future enrollment projections will be updated later.

Graduate

Graduate students account for about one quarter of NIU total 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 enrollment is likely to come from online degree and certificate programs.

In 2019 NIU created new inquiry forms for prospective graduate students to complete to learn more about NIU's programs prior to applying for admission. The next step of developing new, targeted communication plans for all prospective and admitted graduate students should greatly benefit the recruitment process. The next permanent dean of the Graduate School will have the opportunity to assess current practices and processes, and future enrollment projections will be updated later.

Reenrollment of Stop-outs

Stop-out students are those who were enrolled but left the university without completing their degree — from NIU or another institution. While there are numerous reasons why students don't complete their degree, we find that the majority of stop-out students are still in good academic standing. Therefore, not only can this help with enrollment, but there is a moral imperative for NIU to assist these students in all ways possible to earn their degrees, especially if they already have accumulated student loan debt.

In a typical year, there are several hundred students who leave NIU prior to completing their degree and without enrolling at another university. Of these students, they tend to come from underrepresented populations — students of color, first-generation students, low-income students and older adult learners. The onset of the pandemic has exacerbated these numbers at NIU and across the nation.

As stated in the president's university goals (FY 2022), NIU will "plan and launch a reenrollment campaign that targets students who 'stopped out' of NIU over the past five years." The emphasis will be placed on students who have left within the previous two semesters as well as on prioritizing students who have a higher number of credits earned and are closest to completing their degrees. Students who demonstrate interest in returning will have dedicated reenrollment advisors to provide a case management approach: to help them set academic and career goals; prepare for potential obstacles, such as balancing work and family responsibilities; and to connect them to on-campus resources, including financial aid/financial advising, mental health services and academic supports.

Online

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. This growth has expectedly soared since the onset of the pandemic.

NIU 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 that differ in many respects from those of traditionally aged, main campus students.

Online credit and noncredit-bearing academic programs and courses represent one of the growth opportunities for the university's enrollment. 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.

NIU has been working with a partner (Wiley University Services) since 2019 to provide needed marketing, recruitment/lead generation and concierge online student support services to grow enrollment in eight high-demand, online academic programs: Master of Accountancy (MAC), Master of Business Administration (MBA), Master of Science in Digital Marketing (MSDM), Master of Science in Data Analytics (MSDA), RN to B.S. in Nursing (RN-B.S.), Master of Science in Nursing (MSN), Master of Public Health (MPH), and Doctor of Nursing Practice (DNP). The partnership has leveraged the expertise of NIU faculty and staff in course content and delivery with Wiley's expertise in marketing, recruitment and online student support services. Over the past three years, NIU has increased enrollment in these programs by 378% or 667 new students.

To further grow online enrollment, the university will need to identify additional online graduate, undergraduate, professional and undergraduate degree-completion programs and courses for consideration, based on market demand and demonstrated potential for significant enrollments. In addition, the university must offer additional undergraduate general education courses online to enable students to complete full undergraduate degree programs online, incentivize growth in online programs and launch student support services to meet the current needs of online students. These actions will also enhance efforts to increase enrollment of students with prior credit, working adults seeking career changes and reenrollment of stop-out students.

Access and Affordability
NIU remains dedicated to its mission of making a college degree attainable, and we celebrate the rich diversity of our student population (including growing numbers of first-in-the-family to attend college, students of color and students with high financial need) while being one of the most affordable colleges in Illinois for both in-state and out-of-state tuition.

Beginning with the 2021 entering class, NIU began using a test-free admission process when awarding merit scholarships that is based on national higher education studies and the university's own data, both of which show that a student's high school GPA is a better indicator of future academic success than performance on a standardized ACT or SAT test. We are correcting the misperception that access to higher education is created solely through the admission process, but that it can be even more impactful to create access through the financial aid and scholarship process.

Our Huskie Pledge program is helping to ensure that qualifying Illinois students from lower-income households can attend college with no tuition or general fees for their first year and potentially beyond. Our Rockford Promise NIU Scholarship will create opportunities for hundreds of students from the city of Rockford to earn NIU degrees without having to pay tuition or fees. These and other efforts represent a major university financial commitment to our vision of advancing the social mobility of our students by broadening opportunities for underrepresented students, including students of color, first-generation college students and those from low-income households.

The majority of the students who attend NIU are lower- to middle-income with a high need for financial assistance (more than 50% are eligible for federal Pell Grants). Despite student access to institutional aid, MAP (Monetary Assistance Program) and Pell Grant programs, as well as the actions taken by NIU to hold down tuition and fees, many of our students still have unmet need that prevents them from remaining enrolled through completion of their degree programs. It is clear that additional financial aid options would be helpful, and NIU constantly explores such options.

State Funding
Over the past two decades, the amount of state appropriation support for higher education institutions had steadily declined. However, since the previous SEM Plan (2019-2023), state funding has levelled off. Although not close to funding levels historically, this is welcome news for NIU. Further, Illinois students with the highest financial need have seen increases in MAP funding, while NIU has also been grateful to receive the state-funded AIM HIGH program (with NIU matching fund requirements), which supports the highly successful Huskie Pledge program.

NIU Foundation Campaign

More than 86% of NIU students rely on scholarships and other forms of financial aid. In addition, an extremely high percentage of NIU students must work to earn their way through school. As previously noted, for some the stretch becomes too much, and we see far too many drop out prior to earning their degree because of financial pressures. Just recently, an annual giving event showcased the importance of supporting students and, once again, our amazing donors clearly demonstrated their desire to be a catalyst for student success. The new fundraising campaign will increase the financial aid that lets students enroll, persist and graduate with less debt — so they can kick-start their future success.

Student Financial Advising Services

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 enroll or remain enrolled. Almost half of NIU students are Pell Grant eligible, and many have jobs needed to cover their education costs, basic needs and/or family finances. Further, we know that many of our financial processes can be complex and challenging to navigate — especially for students who are the first in their family to attend college. As mentioned before, the impact of COVID-19 has further exacerbated the financial stress (and other stressors) on our students and their families. We needed to develop additional ways to proactively reach out to them and provide the strategies that are required to be successful.

The newly formed Office of Student Financial Advising Services opened in the summer of 2021 to assist. The primary goals of this unit are for financial advisors to help our students understand how to reduce expenses (such as making decisions about medical insurance, payment plans or creating a budget) and to maximize available resources (including scholarships, employment income, institutional/state/federal aid and loan options). The focus is on helping students to engage in long-term planning and develop critical thinking skills involving personal finances.

The new office's financial advisors serve as a bridge between the Office of Financial Aid and Scholarships and the Office of the Bursar. The advisors are trained in financial aid policies and procedures, financial literacy advising techniques, and student account policies and procedures. Financial advising provides guidance from a more holistic — and integrated — approach and runs throughout the entire student life cycle; prioritizing students with the greatest need for services. Student Financial Advising Services seeks to build stronger relationships with students and their family members, and to provide them with connections to other campus contacts, resources and services.

Our financial advisors plan to support and prepare our students so each will have a multiyear financial plan at the beginning of their NIU education. This can't be completed overnight, but Student Financial Advising Services plans to begin with the incoming class for fall 2022 as part of their orientation or first-year experience, prioritizing students with the greatest need.

Now that Financial Advising has a solid base of operations, we need to make sure that the campus community is aware of and educated on these resources so anyone can refer students. This will help us achieve an integrated and holistic approach to student support.

Multiyear Financial Modeling

NIU began a financial aid optimization partnership in late 2019 to help us determine the most effective and strategic use of institutional aid to impact enrollment of new first-year students and maximize revenue. Moving forward, NIU will also create a financial aid model for new undergraduate students with prior credit and then incorporate a multiyear, longitudinal financial aid model that will impact not only the enrollment of new students but also current student success and persistence.

We will continue exploring ways to make an NIU education more affordable, whether through more strategic use of new/existing institutional funds or through new partnerships with organizations that are in alignment with our mission, vision and values.

Strategic Theme 3:
Improving Student Success, Persistence and Graduation

Every student who attends NIU deserves the support necessary to achieve success. The relevant measures of academic success are retention and persistence rates (reenrollment from semester to semester), graduation rates and time to degree (the number of semesters that have elapsed from first enrollment to graduation). 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 (see Figure 7). Students must be retained before they can graduate from NIU, therefore, retention is a critical first step on the path to graduation.

In the previous SEM Plan (2019-2023), NIU focused efforts on increasing the first-year retention rate by developing a model for holistic advising, creating and enhancing support services (i.e., the Center for Student Assistance and Huskie Academic Support Center), and analyzing and removing barriers to persistence and graduation. While all aspects of the student experience contribute to retention and persistence to graduation, the greatest impact can be achieved by establishing an intentional and coordinated retention strategy that includes both the alignment of existing efforts and the development of programs and initiatives that recognize key opportunities for success. Our initial approach to retention-coordinated efforts across colleges and divisions refined the first-year experience, focused attention on developing equitable student-centered policies and procedures that removed barriers to student success, and closed equity gaps. While these efforts showed initial promise, the advent of COVID-19 disrupted the lives of our students in profound and unanticipated ways. This plan acknowledges the effect of COVID-19 and focuses more attention on intentional and seamless college transitions, student success and wellness.

Despite challenges from the pandemic, NIU has seen steady improvement in degree completion rates. Over the past five years, NIU's four- and six-year undergraduate graduation rates for new, first-year cohorts have seen significant increases. The four-year undergraduate graduation rate for new, first-year students has increased by nearly nine percentage points, from 24.6% for entrance year fall 2013 to 33.3% for the fall 2017 entrance year. The five-year graduation rate, which many students and families now plan for

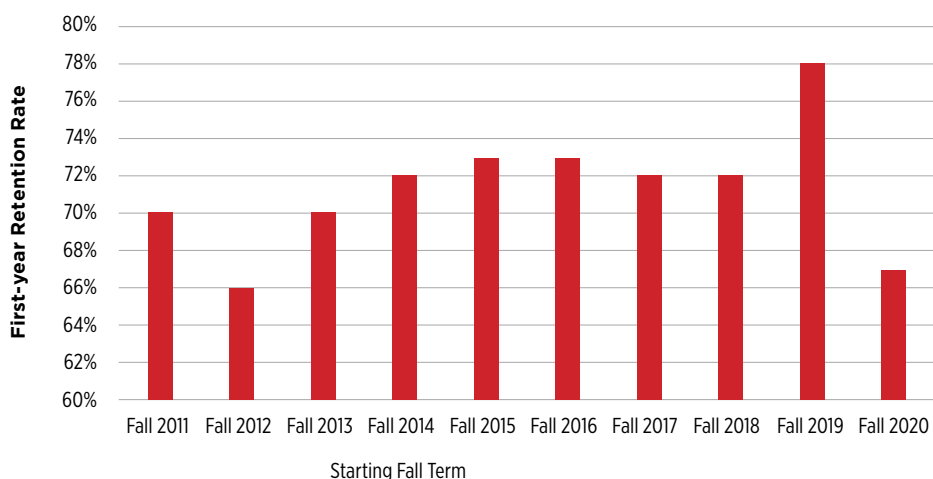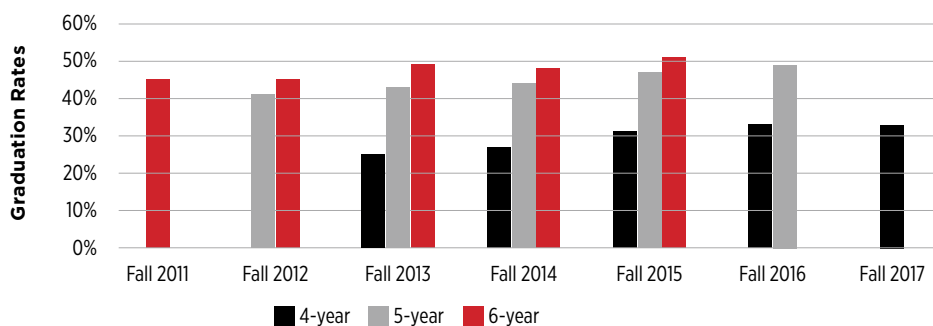**Figure 7: Retention Patterns of New First-year Cohorts**

Figure 8: Graduation Patterns of New First-year Cohorts

their college education, has increased by almost eight percentage points, from 41.3% for entrance year fall 2012 to 49.0% for entrance year fall 2016. The six-year undergraduate graduation rate has increased by more than six percentage points, from 44.5% for entrance year fall 2011 to 50.6% for entrance year fall 2015 (see Figure 8). These increased rates have shown tremendous promise. With continued focus on intentional strategies, we anticipate additional growth in each of these graduation rates.

With the end goal of successful degree completion, significant focus is given to effective student transitions, holistic support to student success and the mental, physical, social and emotional needs of students. NIU has a strong history of programs that provide students with an immediate connection to faculty and the resources they need to be successful. Considering the disparate needs of our incoming students, this plan prioritizes transitions into our Huskie family.

Effective Transitions Into Our Huskie Family

NIU is committed to inclusive approaches and resources that successfully transition all incoming Huskies, empowering them to reach their potential, achieve their academic aspirations and honor their rich lived experiences. Throughout the first year of transition, incoming students will participate in programming and activities designed to acclimate them to our Huskie community. These intentional involvement programs provide new students with opportunities to become actively engaged in social and learning activities designed to be foundational for the rest of their NIU career. These programs begin at the summer Orientation, run through the Week of Welcome and continue throughout the fall semester and beyond. One area of particular focus is creating an effective process for evaluating prior learning and granting appropriate credit toward degree completion. A variety of strategies will be utilized to proactively identify students' needs to connect them to campus resources.

Holistic Support to Ensure Student Success

The SEM Plan 2.0 pays particular attention to holistic and coordinated student experiences in and out of the classroom that promote student success, equity, inclusion and belonging. NIU is committed to student success that ensures all Huskies have rich academic and cocurricular student experiences. It is then imperative that NIU continues to create a culture and environment that encourages and supports engagement using an equity lens. NIU strives to improve outcomes for all students by identifying and removing barriers that disproportionately hinder the academic achievement and student experience of historically and currently underserved populations. An equity-minded framework

requires us to be conscious of the academic achievement gap and work to reduce it. This begins by changing policies and practices to better support each individual student.

The strategies identified in this plan address complex needs: learning loss, navigating the college environment and corresponding expectations, varied learning styles, lack of engagement, sense of belonging, physical and emotional health, and psychosocial needs. While much of this work will be done outside the classroom, the strategies require NIU to understand and respond to the complex needs of our diverse student population by adopting engaging and research-based pedagogies, examining our classrooms and curriculum to enhance student majors, ensuring career relevance and reflecting on students' lived experiences. Our strategies will require concerted efforts including:

- Expansion of effective and inclusive teaching resources and professional development programs available to faculty, instructors and teaching assistants.
- Increased assistance to students to reduce failing grades and withdrawals in gateway courses and ultimately elimination of equity gaps in courses.
- Developmental, holistic and high touch advising experiences for all students consistent across all colleges.

In addition, we will prioritize the assessment of the climate and environment in the classroom and on campus to ensure students have a strong sense of belonging and engagement. Students who are engaged with faculty, staff and other students are more likely to persist and graduate. One priority of the SEM Plan 2.0 is to ensure that all students have multiple solid connections to the NIU campus and a network of support. We must make it easy for students to engage with each other through student organizations, leadership and training opportunities, cultural programs, events and activities, cultural resource centers and other opportunities. This, too, will require coordinated efforts including:

- Promotion of student organizations and activities.
- Leveraging the work of the Greek Life Revitalization Task Force to promote the values associated with fraternity or sorority affiliation.
- Communication and implementation of an expanded Diversity, Equity and Inclusion office, social justice, and belonging plan to promote inclusive community-building initiatives that engage NIU faculty, staff, students and the community.
- Implementation of an annual communication plan to encourage students to participate in cocurricular engagement programs and opportunities.

Above all, the SEM Plan 2.0 plan confirms a renewed commitment to addressing individual student pathways to completing a degree at NIU. We continue to leverage newly available technology and partnerships that will benefit our students. These new opportunities enable us to be responsive to student needs in ways not previously available. The Huskie First Survey and Navigate software platform allow us to implement high touch, proactive communications to promote individualized academic support and campus resources to meet individual student needs by managing a campuswide network of coordinated support efforts.

We anticipate the benefits of new and expanding engagement programs to have positive spillover effects. Beginning in their first year, for example, this plan calls for students to be exposed to opportunities in ongoing leadership development, with opportunities continuing to be offered throughout their NIU careers. One way NIU is adapting to meet the expanding needs of our students is through a new partnership with Braven. This platform provides a series of intentional opportunities to expand skills, gain professional experience and build an expansive mentoring network of working professionals spanning the country to best position students successfully as they pursue post-graduation opportunities. This new corporate partnership enhances our internal, broad-based student engagement program that provides a curriculum for leadership development. With these innovative resources, students will be better-equipped to provide effective management of their organizations while also expanding and fine-tuning their skills which will be useful throughout their lives.

Mental, Physical, Social and Emotional Needs of Students

Another key emphasis of this plan prioritizes the mental, physical, social and emotional needs of our current and future students. Our students' well-being is, and always has been, our top priority at NIU. Students are facing mental, emotional, physical and/or wellness needs outside of the classroom, and COVID-19 has only exacerbated many of these complex needs. The American College Health Association (ACHA) issued a report in the summer of 2020, highlighting several impacts of COVID-19 on college students' well-being. This report identified areas of college student mental health that were significantly impacted by the pandemic. Areas that were called to attention were additional financial stressors, personal safety concerns, the witnessing of race-based discrimination, difficulties accessing mental health care resources, increased feelings of depression and anxiety leading to a negative impact on their academics and, overall, lower levels of psychological well-being. While this is not a comprehensive list of all the challenges facing our students, it highlights some of our students' growing needs. Responding to the emotional toll that has been placed upon students by unprecedented global and national events since spring 2020 will require further investment in our students.

Toward this end, this plan prioritizes services to address holistic student wellness, including the provision of culturally responsive programs and services. Our efforts will include:

- Ensuring timely student access to a variety of services addressing mental health and emotional health needs.
- Increasing the capacity of our existing counseling services for students.
- Developing trauma-informed programs and restorative justice practices that are responsive to the evolving wellness and physical health and safety needs of our students.
- Implementation of the Truth, Racial Healing and Transformation Center, made possible through an American Association of Colleges and University Grant (AAC&U).

Enrollment Projections

To assess the impact of our proposed enrollment management strategies, we have constructed an enrollment projection. As with any projection, this considers the expected impacts of new strategies and initiatives in this plan, together with historic data and baseline assumptions on yield rates for new incoming students, reenrollment and graduation rates for currently enrolled students, as well as a variety of external assumptions, such as the ability to maintain stable funding from the state legislature, statewide and regional enrollment trends, and the impact from the pandemic.

Acknowledging the significant disruptions to the previous enrollment projections from the pandemic, we are mindful of circumstances outside of our control that can positively or negatively impact longer-term projections. Therefore, we are providing an enrollment projection only for the upcoming academic year. After that year's census date (where final enrollment is reported), we will recalculate and update the next year's enrollment projection in this chart.

To forecast enrollment for fall 2022, we must anticipate enrollment by the following groups:

- New first-year students.
- New undergraduate students with prior credit (transfer students).
- Continuing undergraduate students.
- Graduate students (new and continuing).
- Law students (new and continuing).

Based on these forecasts, we project the total enrollment at NIU in fall 2022 to be between 15,600 and 16,100.

Call to Action

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

Key to the full implementation of the SEM Plan 2.0 is the establishment of an organized accountability structure that includes clear expectations, regular reporting and assigned responsibility (found in the SEM 2.0 Accountability Plan). At the highest level, the goals and strategies set forth in this plan are in alignment with the president's university goals approved by the board of trustees, signaling the commitment of the university's leadership to this endeavor. Further, the success of this plan requires an environment that integrates enrollment management across campus supported by a culture of shared leadership.

Success in implementation will require not only organization and accountability, it also will require prioritization, commitment and effort. Many of the efforts needed to achieve success will involve working collaboratively across units. Beyond those individuals, units and working groups charged with direct responsibility for implementation, the entire campus community's support and involvement are needed. We are all called upon to embrace the values of the institution that are set forth to attract, retain and graduate successful students who represent the diversity of our region, our nation and our world.

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