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**STATE OF THE UNIVERSITY**  
**Oct. 25, 2022**

Good afternoon, Northeastern! Welcome faculty, students, alumni and special guests. It is an honor to stand before all of you as your President.

I want to thank Dr. Nancy Wrinkle and the Faculty Senate, sponsors of this event, for inviting me to deliver my fifth State of the University address. I greatly appreciate this opportunity.

**LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT**

Before I begin my address, I would like to read our NEIU Land Acknowledgement, and once again thank everyone who made it a reality.

As President, I am the number one advocate for our university and certainly the number one advocate for our students, who are the reason we are all here, but my work does not happen in a silo.

You, our faculty and staff, are the backbone of this university and do all you can to make Northeastern Illinois University a center of academic excellence and ensure our students receive a high-quality education, so they can succeed in our vibrant, multicultural world after graduation.  
THANK YOU!

I am also thankful for the Board of Trustees, our alumni who contribute so much to the University, our University friends and governmental officials, and all other groups who contribute to NEIU's success.

Finally, I want to acknowledge and say thank you to my cabinet. We are all working together to strengthen our university.

We began the academic year with several signature events and more will continue throughout the year.

Just last month, I was thrilled to welcome alumna, Dr. Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, back to our campus as part of our newly revived Presidential Lecture Series. In her presentations, she shared how, after two previous attempts at earning her undergraduate degree, once she came to Northeastern, it was a game-changer. She not only earned her bachelor's degree, but once she did, she went on to earn her master's and Ph.D. from Northwestern University. Today, not only does Dr. Taylor teach at Northwestern, but she is also a McArthur "Genius Grant" recipient, a Guggenheim Fellow, and one of the nation's most prominent scholars on Black liberation

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politics, social movements and racial equality. Let us applaud Dr. Taylor and all our NEIU alumni.

National Hispanic Heritage Month was celebrated these past few weeks. This year, the Pedroso Center's theme for the month was "Unidos (Unity) for a Stronger Golden Community." I want to thank everyone involved in the planning and execution for the month; we continue to support our Latino students and all students, and look forward to other celebrations that uplift our campus.

During last year's State of the University Address, I shared the Illinois Board of Higher Education's strategic plan, which outlines 25 strategies to achieve three goals across Illinois colleges and universities: Equity, Sustainability and Growth. Therefore, while there are many aspects of Northeastern that could be discussed today, I want to focus this address on three main areas: Enrollment/Retention, Budget and Strategic Priorities.

It has been over two years since COVID-19 changed our lives in ways we could never have imagined. There is no area of our lives the pandemic did not touch.—Many of us felt its impact on a very personal level—either through contracting the virus, being a caretaker to someone who caught it or forcing us to say goodbye to someone who could not withstand its effects. When Dr. Ngozi Ezike, former Director of the Illinois Department of Public Health, gave a presentation in this very auditorium this April, she likened COVID-19 to a hurricane and said we're still living in its aftermath.

COVID-19 had profound implications for our University, especially our black and brown students. I am grateful to the faculty and staff committed to applying the many lessons we have learned. Your commitment helped our students and this university move beyond the challenges the pandemic caused. **THANK YOU!**

Dr. Ezike also noted that no one's mental health is quite the same as it was pre-pandemic. Our mental health has a profound impact on our well-being and mental health care is a critical component of holistic care.

At Northeastern, students are not treated as numbers, but as people with full lives and unique needs in and out of the classroom. Under the direction of Vice President and Dean of Students for Student Affairs Dr. Terry Mena we are addressing concerns that have been previously expressed across campus: making sure we're looking at students holistically.

One component we are addressing IS the mental health needs of our students. I am proud of the work of our Student Counseling Services. We've hired more counselors and, in collaboration with Student Affairs, they've enacted several initiatives to address student mental health,

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including establishing Peer Wellness Coaches. These coaches are upper-level undergraduate and graduate students who assist students in accomplishing academic, social and personal goals.

We are also addressing the financial hardships our students face. Our NEIU For You scholarship and other financial aid incentives are helping us to grow our enrollment numbers.

## **ENROLLMENT and RETENTION**

Northeastern increased first-time, full-time enrollment numbers from 331 in Fall 2021 to 516 in Fall 2022. We also saw an increase in student housing. The Nest is at 84 percent student occupancy, which is the highest it's been since I've been President. One hundred and fifteen students living in The Nest are part of our Living Learning Community scholarship initiative.

The enrollment and student housing increases are significant and underscore the necessity for financial support for our students. Our Student Emergency Fund, which was established in 2018, exists with the sole purpose of financially supporting currently enrolled students who are unable to meet essential expenses due to temporary or unexpected hardships. Since its inception, we have been able to help hundreds of students avoid eviction, pay utility bills and meet other essential needs. Our Student Pantry helps provide students with nutritious foods to keep them going, and our Power Closet helps students dress for success as they go out and interview for jobs.

While we have many established programs to support our students, there is always more to be done. Following recent legislation approved by the state, I am working closely with Student Affairs to establish a Social Services Consortium at NEIU, which will not only support all the programs we currently offer, but will also enable us to enact a few more to address fundamental student needs, including homelessness, veteran's affairs, undocumented student support and navigating student benefits.

These initiatives are important to help our enrollment and retention numbers grow.

From Fall 2021 to Fall 2022, the retention rate of first-year students who returned was 62%. That number needs to improve. Our target is 70 to 80% retention for Fall 2022 to Fall 2023.

Under the leadership of Vice President for Enrollment Management Kimberley Buster-Williams, the University is implementing several new strategies to recruit and retain both traditional and non-traditional prospective students more effectively.

Key retention initiatives include:

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Weekly Academic Advisor meetings to share best practices and professional development opportunities that will impact retention.

Increased usage of the Starfish Advising software to advance student success and retention by improving communication between faculty, advisors and campus support staff by providing early alerts of student challenges.

Reorganization of the Retention and Success Committee to identify strategies and initiatives that better support student engagement for first-year freshman, transfer and continuing students.

Adequately staffing Project Success and Proyecto Pa'Lante.

Our graduation rates also need to improve. Looking at our graduation rates through an equity lens, there are clear gaps. While we are a Hispanic-Serving and Minority Serving Institution, we are not graduating our Black and LatinX students at the rates we should be.

We must do better, and we will do better.

When we graduate students, we know they continue to succeed. According to the most recent U.S. News and World Report "Best Colleges" publication, Northeastern was fifth among Illinois regional public universities in social mobility ranking and 46th among all Midwest regional schools, which demonstrates that when our students graduate, they move up the socioeconomic ladder. Our students' success impacts their families **AND** their communities.

We have implemented initiatives to improve recruitment too. Several key initiatives include:

The implementation of Slate, a new Customer Relationship Management (CRM) tool. This will allow the University to communicate more effectively with prospective students, their families, and referral sources, such as high school guidance counselors. Slate also allows us to utilize the CommonApp for recruitment of high school and community college students.

We have hired new Admissions staff who are, once again, going out to schools to meet principals, counselors and students throughout Chicago, surrounding suburbs, and nearby counties, as well as traveling throughout the Midwest. We are strengthening our relationships with Chicago Public Schools, collar county school districts, and community colleges, including Waubensee Community College. We are also strengthening our dual enrollment initiatives. I am grateful for my growing relationship with CPS Chief Executive Officer Pedro Martinez and Chancellor Juan Salgado, Chief Executive Officer of City Colleges of Chicago. We have met and established a common understanding of Northeastern's role in the continued education of students in their respective institutions.

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We are strengthening our relationships with community groups and nonprofits such as Hope Chicago, which offers students from select public high schools the opportunity to receive full tuition and housing scholarships to attend NEIU.

We are also increasing our efforts to recruit internationally. We currently have partnerships with 42 universities around the world. We are focusing efforts to expand partnerships in South America and also recently signed a Memorandum of Understanding with two high schools in South Korea and two universities in Colombia, South America (the Institucion Universitaria Salazar y Herrera).

Our Division of Marketing and Communications, under its new Executive Director, Chris Childers, is working more closely with Enrollment than ever before to roll out marketing campaigns to generate awareness, encourage new applications, and attract new undergraduate, graduate and transfer students to NEIU. The Enrollment and Marketing teams are developing more intentional Spanish language communications to better reach prospective students from predominantly Spanish-speaking households. Several of our instructors in the Department of World Languages and Cultures have assisted with translating projects, and I wholeheartedly thank them for their collaboration and support of these initiatives.

Everyone can contribute to the success of our enrollment goals. We must do all we can to spread the word about the great work that happens here by our faculty, staff and students. While many have said we're like a hidden gem in higher education, I want to position us to be a university of choice—a top choice—for students in Chicago, Illinois, and beyond.

## **BUDGET**

Although our first-time/full-time student numbers increased, the enrollment goals for transfers, graduates and continuing students were not met. At the census, the overall credit hour total for all students was 53,903, a 9.2% decline from last year and a 12% shortfall from the target. Over the course of the academic year, this decline translates to a reduction in tuition revenue of \$5.1 million.

Due to the University's enrollment and retention shortfall, NEIU required a mid-year adjustment in expenditure to ensure that revenues were sufficient to cover expenses moving forward. I tasked each vice president to adjust their Fiscal Year 2023 budgets to reduce expense targets of approximately six percent.

Expenditure adjustments included the elimination of some vacant positions and course scheduling adjustments and reduction in non-personnel costs.

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Through a combination of increased reliance on lost revenue grants through COVID-19 relief funding, an increase in anticipated interest income, higher-than-anticipated occupancy in The Nest—which leads to an anticipated reduction in The Nest occupancy contribution, delayed hiring of vacant positions, limited restructuring of operations, and some reduction in non-personnel expenses, we were able to balance the budget.

The revised budget was reviewed by the Board of Trustees and passed on Oct. 11. We are hopeful we will not need to revisit this exercise in the future.

I am grateful to Vice President of Finance and Administration Manish Kumar and the Finance and Administration team for this difficult work. Moving forward, it is critical that everyone contribute as we envision strategies to address our structural deficit and improve enrollment and retention thereby improving our financial position.

Within the next few months, we will begin the budgeting process in Springfield. As you know, our state funding contributes approximately 30% of our budget. I am thankful for Senior Executive Director of Government Relations Suleyma Perez for her leadership and advocacy work with Illinois legislators. It is critical that our elected officials understand the positive importance of the state dollars that impact our university and our students.

## **STRATEGIC PRIORITIES**

The last area I will discuss is several of our strategic priorities. At the top of the list is selecting a new Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs. This is a critical position for our university, is important to the overall success of our institution and the development of our new Strategic Plan. VP Buster-Williams, and this year's Audrey Reynolds Distinguished Teaching Award recipient, Dr. Pam Geddes, will co-chair this search.

Students—I have heard you! Last year, under the leadership of the Student Government Association President Edwin Medina, the SGA helped me and the members of the cabinet understand, from a student perspective, the desire and rationale for a formal athletics program being reinstated at NEIU. Dr. Mena will serve as the chair of the University Athletics Exploratory Committee, investigating how we might reestablish an athletics program and how such a program can contribute to recruitment, enrollment, and retention efforts, as well as invigorate university life in a new way.

Another focus is expanding our educational programs to meet the demands of a 21st-century workforce. Faculty are the academic backbone of this university, and we must continue to explore the development new academic programs to help drive enrollment and to meet the needs of all our students, including Adult Learners who seek online programs.

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We are a year into developing a new doctoral program in Urban Education led by Dr. Kamau Rashid. The program will be geared toward a wide range of working professionals who aim to impact the communities in which they currently work. It will be a program for educators and changemakers alike—from those who work in classrooms to those in community organizations, museums and libraries. The curriculum for this program will be written this spring.

In August, Dr. Concetta (Connie) Zak was hired as interim director for nursing. She and a working group of faculty and staff from across the campus are creating plans for a new nursing program and exploring what that program might look like.

Earlier this month, we also signed an agreement with Northern Illinois University's College of Law to offer two opportunities to our students. One opportunity is our new 3+3 program, which will allow Northeastern students to earn a Juris Doctorate in six years. Students will complete three years of undergraduate studies at NEIU, then take three years of courses at Northern. Upon successful completion of all six years, students will earn a bachelor's degree from Northeastern and a law degree from Northern. This is a fantastic opportunity to help our students earn their terminal degrees and diversify the legal professions. The second program will be a scholarship initiative to support students seeking to go to Northern's law school. So, not only are we creating a path for students to get to their law degrees faster, we will also help ease the financial burden that often comes with pursuing higher education.

During the Spring semester, we will move forward with our strategic planning process which will include envisioning a future for our two centers, the Jacob H. Carruthers Center for Inner City Studies and El Centro. Other important issues to be discussed are additional degree programs and modalities that will align with our state's workforce needs and our continued focus on enrolling, retaining students and graduating students **AND** providing career development support to improve the pipeline from the university to the workforce.

We must continue to find ways to support our students. The Office of Institutional Advancement, led by Vice President Liesl Downey, is starting to work on its next major fundraising initiative. Additionally, the NEIU Foundation has worked to increase funding for existing scholarships as well as establish several new scholarships, including the new full-ride scholarship in the name of Cyrus of Persia. Earlier this month, the NEIU Alumni Association hosted its annual Golden Gala, which celebrated our alumni and current students and raised over \$112,000 in scholarship funds. **THANK YOU** to everyone who attended the gala and all of you who support our various scholarships.

Beautification of campus and technology upgrades have also been a priority. Under the leadership of VP Kumar, Building and Finance has been engaged in several campus facilities

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modernization and risk mitigation projects, including new flooring and furniture in various buildings and increasing ramp accessibility, as well as a host of projects to streamline Human Resources practices, revamp our inventory control system and upgrade our technology systems. While the university year got off to a bit of a rocky start with D2L, University Technology Services and the Center for Teaching and Learning worked tirelessly to resolve those issues as quickly as possible and to make sure such issues don't recur.

One of the most significant outcomes of our campus Climate Study was hiring Executive Director of Equity, Diversity and Inclusion Dr. Shireen Roshanravan. Because of her exemplary work, Northeastern now has an Office of Equity, Diversity and Inclusion, and we are intentionally working to address student and employee equity gaps, embrace the diversity of our community even more strongly and gain an understanding of what it truly means to feel seen and welcomed at NEIU. The importance of the Joy and Wellness campaign cannot be overstated, and I **thank** all who participated in this community-building activity. Shireen will lead the newly restructured University Diversity Council, which is tasked with providing University-wide infrastructure to create exchanges about the multi-faceted efforts to build a more diverse, equitable, and inclusive university.

As Northeastern grows—in its offerings, population, and understanding of the ever-evolving landscape of higher education and the needs of its students—I am confident that we can meet the challenges ahead as we always have: together. We are all here, at this very moment, for a purpose, joined in a common goal: to make NEIU the very best it can be, a university rooted in academic rigor, but fundamentally grounded in social justice and compassion. We are each a unique part of the fabric, the incredible story of this place, and combined, we are the heart of Northeastern Illinois University.

So, let's uplift each other. Let's strive to be our best. Together, let's make sure that everyone in every corner of Chicago and beyond knows Northeastern Illinois University—not just in name but also in our values and the quality of our education.

I believe if we all work together, we will not only overcome our challenges, we will thrive and fulfill our ultimate goal of seeing every student receive their diploma and walk across the stage.

Thank you.