

**NEIU State of the University Address**  
**October 24, 2023**  
**Katrina E. Bell-Jordan**  
**Interim President**

**I. Welcome**

Good afternoon! I extend a warm welcome to all of our NEIU faculty, staff, students, alumni and guests joining us today and/or watching remotely. It is an honor and privilege to serve in the role of Interim President this year, and I thank Faculty Senate Chair, Nikolaus [Ho-el] and the Faculty Senate membership for the invitation to deliver this year's State of the University Address.

**II. Acknowledgments**

Since taking on the position of Interim President, and throughout my 26 years at NEIU, I have been gratified to work alongside a campus community that cares deeply about NEIU and that is invested in securing a strong future for the University. I see the role of the University President as essential to leading this charge, along with an "ensemble cast" of faculty, staff, academic and administrative leadership charting a path that moves the University forward in a productive and future-oriented way.

Thus I thank YOU, our faculty and staff for all you do in making NEIU such a special place to learn, teach and work.

*Would all NEIU faculty please stand to be recognized - full-time, part-time, adjunct, tenure line – ALL faculty.*

Thank you, our faculty, for centering academic excellence and a high-quality learning experience for our students, and for the mentorship and professional development support you provide to our students.

*Now, would all NEIU staff please stand to be recognized.*

Thank YOU for the guidance and support you provide to our students, and for your role in helping them achieve fulfillment and success in their personal and professional lives.

*And finally, would all NEIU students attending today please stand.*

We are all here for YOU. Everything we do at NEIU is in service and support for you, our students, and is a reflection of our commitment to providing you the best education and preparing you for graduation and career success.

Thank You.

Please also allow me to briefly recognize some of our University leadership groups, including:

- Faculty, staff and students serving in our Shared Governance groups, such as Faculty Senate, University Advisory Committee, UBPC, A&P Council, Civil Service Council, University Diversity Council and the Student Government Association.
- The leadership of NEIU's Collective Bargaining groups
- The NEIU Administrative Team of Deans, Directors & Department Chairs

I thank these NEIU leaders for bringing their knowledge, experience and commitment to NEIU to bear in working together to strengthen our University.

I would also like to recognize the NEIU President's Team – who are joining me here on stage today.

- R. Shayne Cofer, Interim Provost and VP for Academic Affairs
- Manish Kumar, VP for Finance and Administration
- Terry Mena, VP for Student Affairs and Dean of Students
- Liesl Downey, VP for Institutional Advancement
- Shireen Roshanravan, Executive Director, Equity, Diversity and Inclusion
- Sulyema Perez, Executive Director, Government and Community Relations
- Chris Childers, Executive Director, Marketing and Communications

I extend a sincere thanks to this team for welcoming me to the President's Office this year, and for their contributions to today's State of the University Address.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge our NEIU Board of Trustees – for their encouragement and support. They bring impressive professional experience to the Board, and I thank them for being a strong partner in moving the University forward.

### **III. A Transitional Year**

We are doing *so much* this year, and I see us striving to move in concert to stabilize and strengthen the University. In doing so, I hope we can also remember to seek encouragement – and joy – in knowing that all of our efforts have a direct impact on the support and success of the students and communities we serve. We also need to remember that as we seek answers to our questions and concerns, and make changes to respond to our challenges, we should NOT forget to recognize and continue to encourage the things we do WELL.

With that said, the State of the University Address gives me a chance to share the many activities and initiatives in the works at NEIU over the last year. And while today's session does not allow time to cover all the good work that has been accomplished and that is underway, I will begin my talk with some highlights from the launch of this transitional year, and then move on to discuss the following areas:

- Recruitment, Admissions and Enrollment
- Student Success and Retention
- A Budget Breakdown

- Updates from Key University Areas

I will close by sharing some thinking and planning that I hope we can engage in as a campus community this year.

#### IV. Highlights

##### Leadership

First, I have been gratified by the faculty and staff leaders who have stepped forward to serve in **leadership roles** this year, including in Academic Affairs, the Deans' Offices, Student Success and Retention, the First Year Experience program, and for our Living Learning Communities.

I am also very pleased to extend a warm **welcome to three new NEIU colleagues** who have joined us in key positions: Gretchen Lacivita [La-ci-vi-ta], our new Director of the Master of Science in Nursing program; Anthony Rankin, our new Executive Director for Facilities Management; and Chrystal Temples, serving as our new Director of Internal Audit. To be sure, each of these positions and individuals will play a key role in moving the University forward.

##### Enrollment Initiatives

I am pleased to share updates on **two important enrollment initiatives**, including the 2023-2024 launch of Cohort 2 of the Afghan Refugee Transition Program, funded by a special appropriation through an Illinois Department of Human Services (IDHS) grant that provides awardees a full scholarship to NEIU.

I am also very pleased that at the September 21 NEIU Board of Trustees meeting, the Board approved the proposed **NEIU For You 3.0 scholarship**, which will extend eligibility to transfer students and to veteran students, and which will begin in the **2025-2026** academic year.

##### NEIU “Big Picture” Planning

Just last week, members of the NEIU leadership team participated in our FY25 “Big Picture” meeting with the IBHE. The focus of this annual meeting was **NEIU’s planning** in key areas of the State’s ***Thriving Illinois Initiative: Equity, Growth and Sustainability***.

Our meeting this year highlighted:

- NEIU’s contributions to the **economic growth** of our city, state and region through our Business Innovation and Growth (BIG) Center and
- NEIU’s participation in the **Early Childhood Access Consortium for Equity (ECACE)**, a partnership among Illinois public and private higher education institutions, state agencies and community partners to deliver programs that meet workforce needs in Early Childhood education.

##### Facilities/Space Improvements

As you look around campus this semester, you can't help but notice the facilities and space improvements underway on the **campus grounds** – from sidewalks, parking lots and accessibility ramps, to **Science lab renovations** and **Media/Theatre lab technology upgrades**. We have also installed a **new sign** at El Centro and have new **campus signage** soon-to-be installed on the Main Campus as well.

It is also SO good to see the **NEIU Spirit Store** open this semester, thanks to the efforts of many folks at the University, and I am pleased that the store will be staffed primarily by student employees. So keep shopping!

Finally, we are closing in on a groundbreaking date for our **new Education Building**, which is slated to become a state-of-the-art facility that offers teaching, learning and conferencing spaces for the entire campus community.

We have also been working to implement a number of **technology upgrades**, including Workday, Chrome River and the ESM Procurement system. We have experienced many challenges in rolling out these new technologies, and a cross-section of University teams are working tirelessly to implement the upgrades, to support user needs, and to resolve issues so that we can benefit from the efficiencies we gain from these systems. Please keep an eye out for *Workday Adoption Project Updates* now being posted each Wednesday.

## **NEIU Programming**

We also began the academic year with several signature events and programs. There are too many to name, but some highlights include:

- Another successful **NEIU Faculty Institute**, with this year's theme being *Cultivating our Humanity in Times of Transition*.  
and
- A successful series of **NEIU Weekend**, **HSI Week** and **Hispanic Heritage Month** programs. For example, just last Tuesday, I was thrilled to welcome back to NEIU, double Alumna and 17th Ward Alderperson Jesse Fuentes, who gave the keynote address at the Pedroso Center's Homecoming event.

## **V. FY 24 Updates**

### **Recruitment, Admissions & Enrollment**

In the area of recruitment, admissions and enrollment, let me begin by thanking NEIU's Enrollment Management Team for their work in building out our Fall 2023 class; for their work on Spring 2024 enrollment; and for the work already underway to grow our Fall 2024 class. It has been gratifying to see the collaborations among the Enrollment Management team, Department leaders, faculty and staff from various areas in these efforts.

### Enrollment by the Numbers

In terms of our enrollment numbers, the main headline is that although NEIU's OVERALL fall enrollment (~~approx. 4.4%~~) and total credit hours (~~approx. 3.8%~~) decreased, we saw gains in our new student enrollment – with Fall 2023 enrollment numbers for FTFT, transfer and graduate students increasing across all three categories from last year.

While our Fall 2023 enrollment numbers have been updated in final reporting by the Office of Institutional Research, I will share the post-Census numbers reported to the Board at its September 21 meeting:

- NEIU increased our first-year student enrollment by 6.4% from Fall 2022 to Fall 2023 (*for a change of 516 incoming freshmen in Fall 2022 to 549 in Fall 2023*)
- We increased our new transfer student enrollment by 3.6% (*for a change of 581 incoming transfer students in Fall 2022 to 602 in Fall 2023*).
- And we saw a 9.6% growth in our new graduate student enrollments (*for a change of 449 incoming graduate students in Fall 2022 to 492 in Fall 2023*)

These gains represent strong recruitment and enrollment efforts, and they signal that we are moving in the right direction as we scale up our strategic and tactical planning.

### Recruitment

The following efforts will therefore continue to be key to NEIU's recruitment efforts and to enrollment growth:

- *First:* Leveraging Slate, our CRM tool, to communicate with prospective students, families, high school guidance counselors and community college advisors.
- *Second:* Deploying our Admissions staff throughout Chicagoland, our nearby counties and the Midwest – to share news of NEIU's academic excellence and affordability, and the successes of our students
- *Third:* Strengthening and re-establishing relationships with the Chicago Public Schools, area high schools, and our community college partners
- *Next:* Increasing Graduate student and International Student recruitment, including leveraging technology to optimize operations and increase outreach
- *Finally:* Marketing and communication that gets the word out – and that keeps the word out – about all that NEIU has to offer

### Student Success & Retention

From Fall 2022 to Fall 2023, the retention rate for NEIU's first-year students was 61%, a decrease from our Fall 2021 to Fall 2022 retention of 62%.

These are sobering numbers because we know how critical first-year retention is. We also realize it will take our work inside, around and outside of the classroom to grow our retention, so we continue to scale up our efforts – including providing the tools and resources our students need on their academic path, and ultimately to degree completion and graduation.

### Student Success & Retention Initiatives

Some major student success and retention initiatives are as follows:

- *First*, this October we are relaunching NEIU's Undergraduate Retention and Intervention Team (URIT) and the NEIUStar Functional Group
- *Second*: We are making progress on our institutional-level student success initiatives and career readiness initiatives
- *Next*: We are making improvements to our onboarding and Orientation processes, with more cohesive and consistent planning and messaging for enrollment events at our El Centro and Carruthers Center locations.
- *And*, we continue to secure financial support for new freshmen through the NEIU For You scholarship

## Budget Breakdown

On September 21, the NEIU Board of Trustees approved a **FY24 Final Operating Budget of \$85.3 million dollars**. The FY24 budget represents an **increase of 1.6 percent** over the budget for FY2023, and a reversal of the decline in budget levels seen over the past several years. The stabilization of the operating budget is thanks to:

1) our recruitment and retention efforts; 2) a **7.0 percent increase in our State appropriation**; 3) **strong investment returns**; and 4) the Board's decision to support the operating budget for FY2024 with **reserves of up to \$2.5 million**.

This budget incorporated meaningful investments in the University's future, including new agreements across Collective Bargaining units, expanded funding for recruitment and retention efforts, funding for a new Nursing Program, scholarship support for Living Learning Communities, and marketing for International Programs.

Looking at future fiscal years, we need these investments to begin paying off. The special allocation from reserves was intended as one-time support, and the reality is that this funding will need to be replaced by new revenues and/or expense reductions going forward.

## Northeastern Student Financial Aid

In terms of **financial support for our students**, 81% of NEIU's student population applies for financial assistance – including FAFSA, RISE Act, and other scholarships. However, overall Federal Student Loan borrowing by NEIU students has decreased from last year.

Here are some data points to explain further:

- The number of **FAFSAs filed as a whole increased by 13%** (~~for undergraduates the increase is 18.78%~~)
- The number of **financial aid packages increased by 13%** (~~for undergraduates the increase is 15.92%~~)
- The number of **Pell Grant recipients increased by 8.71%**
- Direct loan **borrowers decreased by 3%**

*So why are fewer students borrowing?*

- NEIU provides more in tuition discounts than other four-year public universities, including tuition waivers (e.g., for international and undocumented students); expanded eligibility for AIM HIGH and Golden Opportunity recipients; special circumstance funding; and the NEIU For You scholarship.

The bottom line is that our students' direct costs are primarily covered with financial aid. And a big thanks goes out to our Financial Aid team who prepare our students' financial packages together so they have a clear picture of the kind of support they can count on.

This is *again* why we are so pleased that the Board of Trustees has approved our proposed **NEIU For You 3.0 scholarship**, which will extend this “top off scholarship” to transfer students and veteran students, beginning in the 2025-2026 academic year – and which will help grow NEIU's level of financial support for even more students.

### **Academic Affairs**

On the academic side of the house, I would like to provide some important **program updates**, announce key **partnerships** and **grant awards**, and to offer some highlights from the **colleges** and the NEIU **libraries**.

#### New Undergraduate and Graduate Programs

I am very excited that NEIU was awarded a **Peace Corps Prep Program**, now housed in the Department of World Languages and Cultures, making NEIU the only university in Chicago to offer this program. We also have a new undergraduate Cybersecurity major, and recently approved interdisciplinary programs in Disability Studies and Data Science.

We are recruiting for a new **Master's program in Human Development**, which will launch next Fall, and our new **Master of Science in Nursing** and **Ed.D. in Urban Leadership** programs are sure to become new signature programs as well.

In looking at ways to expand our outreach, we are also developing **Accelerated Programs** and have begun recruiting this fall for our **Diversity Pipeline Scholarship Program** with the Northern Illinois University Law School, which was established last year.

#### Partnerships **[Slide 18]**

In addition to NEIU's **partnership with the Illinois Innovation Network (IIN)**, we are very pleased to have partnerships with the **CPS Focus Program, District 211** and the **Alternative Schools Network**. We also celebrate arts partnerships with the Chicago-based **Silk Road Rising Media and Performing Arts Company** and the **Black Ensemble Theater**.

#### Grants

NEIU also continues to distinguish itself as an institution that generates substantial external grant funding that supports **key institutional initiatives**. As you can see from this list of some of the most recent awards, the University has been awarded **FOUR multi-year – and multi-million dollar – institutional grants from the Department of Education in support of student success, retention and career readiness**; a major **science research** grant; and a critically important **Mental Health Services Grant in Counselor Education**.

#### College Highlights

There are a number of accomplishments to report from the academic colleges as well, and the list of contributions and outcomes is truly impressive. I have already referred to a few of these accomplishments in today's Address, but allow me to offer some additional key college-area achievements:

*The Goodwin College of Education (GCOE)* reports the excellent news that 14 of their licensure programs have been reviewed by the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) and earned an **“exemplary” designation**. As mentioned earlier, the new **Master of Science in Nursing program** is slated to launch in Fall 2025, and a new cohort of GCOE students will **resume their studies to complete** a B.A. in Urban Community Studies at NEIU's Carruthers Center. Also, a new **partnership with Teach Chicago Tomorrow** has resulted in more than 20 CPS juniors/seniors already committing to enrolling in GCOE programs next year, and to teach in CPS schools after college graduation.

*The College of Business and Technology (CBT)* has had a very successful launch of its new **Cybersecurity** program, and has restructured its **Computer Science** program to pursue affirmation from the Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology (ABET). The College also successfully held the **grand opening** of its **BIG Center Hub** at the Carruthers Center, and we are excited that construction is getting underway for the BIG Center's **Main Campus Hub**. The College also rolled out two new **CBT Speaker Series**, the first of which is a BIG Center “Founders” series, and the other is a CBT Faculty @ Wright College speaker series.

*The College of Arts and Sciences (CAS)* has launched a significant partnership with Argonne National Laboratories on a \$25 million **Community Research on Climate and Urban Science (CROCUS) grant**, funded by the Department of Education. The Argonne-led project seeks to understand how climate change affects urban areas, and NEIU was selected for installation of the first CROCUS field site on the BBH roof research deck. Next, the **Genocide and Human Rights Research in Africa and the Diaspora (GHRAD) Research Center** hosted its **10th annual conference**. And the **Student Center for Science Engagement (SCSE)** celebrated 15 years of its **Summer Research and Training Program** and its **Annual Student Research Symposium**. The CAS also continues to support NEIU's partnership with the Prison + Neighborhood Arts/Education Project (PNAP) to offer an undergraduate degree at the **Stateville Correctional Center through the UWW program**.

*The NEIU Libraries* also continue to encourage the adoption of **open educational resources** and to promote **affordable course materials**. The **University Archives** continue to preserve NEIU history, including digitizing archives of the Ensemble Español and NEIU student publications such as *The Independent*. The NEIU Libraries also have ongoing **collaborations with the Pedroso Center** to license films for viewing events, and to produce promotional materials for Banned Books Week, Black Heritage Month and other programming. And in direct support for our students, the Libraries have launched a **laptop lending program** and are **collaborating with Student Counseling Services** to provide spaces for peer wellness coaches to conduct consultations, art therapy, and other activities.

## **Student Affairs**

In terms of Student Affairs, we continue to provide services and support to meet the various needs of our students.



### Looking at Students Holistically

For example, we are increasing our students' **access to mental health resources**. In addition to NEIU's Student Counseling Services offering in-person and online support, we have now launched TimelyCare, which offers 24/7 mental health services. This is a critical resource to our students, who can now access this Care via smartphone, tablet or computer, and who can speak to a crisis counselor immediately or schedule an appointment.

The **Peer Wellness Program** now includes a diverse group of coaches who offer one-on-one mentoring and coaching sessions for NEIU students, and the program also offers support groups and spaces for spa therapy and art therapy, women's wellness, men's mental health, and support for veterans and our students with children.

Student Affairs has also worked to enhance operations and services offered by the **Student Pantry** and to work with students seeking to apply for SNAP benefits (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program). NEIU's **Power Closet** continues to provide free business attire to students preparing for job interviews, and we look forward to showcasing a remodeled Power Closet space in preparation for next month's **Career & Internship Fair**, *for which we are expecting 80 employers to participate and 400 students and alumni to attend.*

NEIU's **Living Learning Communities (LLCs)** enrolled 101 students across 7 LLC offerings this year – from the Social Justice and Future Teachers LLC, to the STEM and new College of Business and Technology LLC. We are also fortunate to have strong faculty and staff leadership guiding and supporting our students in navigating their living-learning experiences.

### The Nest and Student Support

This Fall 2023, occupancy in the **Nest** has reached over 94%, compared to 87.4% in Fall 2022. This higher occupancy rate is made possible because of the University's financial investment in Living Learning Communities through LLC scholarships and housing awards, including Hope Scholars and the Afghan Refugee Transition Program.

In terms of **student support**, since the beginning of the school year, the Nest has held a **series of successful programs** focusing on academic success, physical wellness, mental health and substance awareness. These programs have been well attended, and students indicate that the programming is making a difference in their sense of belonging and connection to NEIU.

### Student Emergency Fund

NEIU also continues to provide support through the **Student Emergency Fund**, which reminds us of the reality that many of our students experience housing insecurity, food insecurity, and/or cannot pay for emergency medication or medical treatment. The Student Emergency Fund provides limited financial support to students who can't meet such essential expenses due to a temporary or unexpected hardship.

## Establishing a Social Services Consortium

Finally, Student Affairs continues to work on establishing a Social Services Consortium at NEIU, which will not only support the programs we currently offer, but also provide resources that respond to some of our students' most basic needs.

## **Marketing & Communications**

I'm also pleased to share major initiatives from the Division of Marketing and Communications.

*First*, we're undergoing a **significant website overhaul**, set for completion in August 2024, to transform our online presence.

*Second*, through our **Mosaic Profile Project**, we are posting a series of student testimonials (in both English and Spanish) that offer insight into NEIU through the eyes of our freshmen, transfer, and graduate students.

The *third* venture is the roll-out of a strategic **outdoor advertising campaign**, showcasing NEIU's "Affordable Excellence" via billboards and transit ads throughout Chicago and our surrounding areas.

*Last*, we're bringing the NEIU experience directly to viewers through a series of "**A Day in the Life**" videos; the first video is live on YouTube and features a third-year English major at NEIU.

These Marketing and Communication initiatives will be key to raising NEIU's profile, and to promoting the high-quality and affordability of an NEIU education.

## **Equity, Diversity and Inclusion**

Next, I am proud to report some strong efforts and a few "big wins" in the area of equity, diversity and inclusion:

First, NEIU has filed our **ILEA (Illinois Equity in Attainment) Plan**, and progress is being made on institutional strategies to close equity gaps in the retention and graduation of our Black, Latinx and Pell-eligible students, such as:

- NEIU participation in the **Developmental Education Reform Accelerator Academy** and establishment of **College Equity Teams**
- A relaunch of **faculty training** on our **NEIUSar Early Intervention Alert System**, and training in **NEIUSar strategic data analytics**.

as well as

- The **DEI Microcredential Program** being offered through the CTL for faculty training on inclusive pedagogy

NEIU was also selected to participate in **two major student success and equity initiatives**:

- The **AASCU Student Success Equity Intensive** (Association of American State Colleges and Universities) – funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation – which provides 3 years of support to NEIU to develop and implement our equity plans

and

- The **Gardner Institute’s Equity-in-Retention Academy**, a 5-week intensive series attended by NEIU faculty, staff and students, that included data analysis, peer analysis and work on institutional "Equity-in-Retention” mission statements.

NEIU also launched two **Truth, Racial, Healing and Transformation Initiatives**, including:

- The *Latinx Testimonio Project on Language Shame, Resistance and Healing*, featuring video testimonials from Latinx students about their resistance to linguistic racism

and

- NEIU’s **collaboration with the *Black Ensemble Theater*** to produce NEIU student stories for performance on the BET stage.

## Government Relations / Legislative Priorities

In terms of government relations, shortly after my appointment, I started **meeting with the Illinois public university presidents**, with **IBHE leadership**, and with **elected officials** to get acquainted, and to provide updates on the University.

In July, I met with the officials representing NEIU, including **State Representative Mike Kelly and Chicago Alderman Samantha Nugent**. Later in September, NEIU hosted a **joint visit with State Representative La Shawn Ford** (~~Chair of the House Appropriations Higher Education Committee~~) and **State Senator Mike Hal-pin** (~~Chair of the Senate Higher Education Committee~~). And in early October, I was invited to participate in the **Latino Legislative Leadership Forum**, and among the legislators I met was State Representative Dagmara Avelar, an NEIU Alumna, who shared wonderful recollections of her NEIU experience.

Looking ahead, as the legislative session begins this year in Springfield, I will be preparing for appropriation hearings and to advocate on behalf of NEIU. As usual, we will keep the campus community informed on major Springfield developments, and will invite you to join our “Call-to-Action” activities leading up to the General Assembly’s budget approval.

## Fundraising and Development

In terms of NEIU Fundraising and Development, each year NEIU supporters contribute in so many ways to advancing the University’s mission and commitment to delivering high-quality programs that lead to the success of our graduates.

### FY 23 Fundraising Outcomes

In FY 2023, the NEIU Foundation raised **\$2.4 million in new donor commitments**. Through your help in awarding scholarships, partnering to secure grant support, and activating the

Foundation resources in your areas, the Foundation distributed \$2.6 million to the University, **including \$834,000 in scholarship support.**

#### Foundation Endowment Performance

The NEIU **endowment has also grown to \$18.3 million**, up from \$11.7 million in FY 2018. The Foundation's well-diversified investment strategy has resulted in returns, such that the Foundation's current endowment value now exceeds the principal investment.

#### 5 Top Fundraising Priorities

With donor and community feedback from a Spring 2022 campaign feasibility study, the NEIU Foundation and Institutional Advancement have identified **FIVE key fundraising priorities** to focus on for the next two years. Each of these priorities seeks to respond to different barriers our students face along their academic journey.

- *First* is the **Dual Enrollment Scholarship**, which is intended to be a resource for high school and community college students seeking dual enrollment or dual admission opportunities.
- *Second* is the **Momentum Scholarship**, which supports students in the critical first and second year, and seeks to “*stop the ‘stop-out’*” by helping eliminate financial barriers.
- The **Come Home Scholarship** encourages students who have left NEIU to return to complete their degree.
- The **Tomorrow's Teachers Fund** provides assistance to the 300+ students completing student teaching each semester.
- *And Finally*, the **Finish Line Scholarship** supports students who are within one year of graduation, but who face financial burdens preventing them from registering for classes to complete their degree.

These are the fundraising priorities we had an opportunity to share just a few weeks ago when the NEIU Foundation hosted a **networking event called “Amplify | Elevate: Building NEIU’s Community,”** in which a group of community, business and educational leaders were gathered to be introduced/re-introduced to NEIU, and encouraged to help advance NEIU’s mission and message.

#### **VI. What Does it Mean to Be a *Serving* Institution?**

As we look ahead, I want to take a moment to recognize the pause in the University’s plan to begin work on a new NEIU Strategic Plan.

In preparation for that important step in **charting NEIU’s path forward**, I believe strongly that our campus community is overdue for engagement about:

1. *First*: How we think about our past, present and future as an Hispanic-Serving Institution and Minority-Serving Institution; as a four-year public comprehensive institution; and as an urban university that serves a *majority of traditionally underrepresented students* in higher education (e.g., first generation, Pell-eligible students).

AND

2. *Second*: What it means to serve this population of students. In other words: ***What does it mean to be a “Serving” institution? – and What does this mean at the classroom, department, college and university level?***

This year, I am calling for **Campus-Wide Conversations** – formal and informal; program or area promoted; self-directed and/or part of department, college and classroom discussions – to share and engage in our thinking about these questions; to see where our shared understandings and common lenses interface with differences in our understandings and ways of seeing the university, and what it means to serve.

The goal of these campus-wide conversations is NOT necessarily to generate a report or formalized document; Rather, it is to help us ***engage with one another*** about the nature of our serving; how we see serving similarly and differently; and how this can help inform future discussions around the University’s priorities and strategic planning to advance these priorities. Thus, I see this as a **CALL** for our campus community to take informal opportunities within and across our respective areas – when/where possible over the course of the year – to engage the question of *What it means to be a “SERVING” institution* – and how this manifests itself in our work across our respective areas.

I will also endeavor to suggest some possible formats/forums – from University-wide meetings, panel discussions and shared governance meetings, to Cafe Conversations and Brown Bag Discussions – where both informal and more structured engagement can occur, and that can even be “hosted” by different areas of the University.

My hope is for these conversations to “ebb and flow” across campus over the course of this year, and that the discussions can help us engage how our service mission informs our University priorities. Ultimately, I believe this will make our campus community better prepared for a future strategic planning process that helps solidify a strong and solid future for NEIU.

## **VII. Conclusion & Thank You**

In conclusion, I want to reiterate what I have stated on several previous occasions – and a what I have brought to the role of Interim President: And that is my strong belief that NEIU is well positioned to advance our mission, vision and goals – AND to respond to the challenges that come our way. This is due to my confidence in the **experience and expertise** of our faculty, staff and administrative colleagues; my **optimism** in the interest so many of you have expressed in finding ways to collaborate, and the **care, commitment and resiliency** of the NEIU community. I continue to be encouraged by your energy and enthusiasm for NEIU, and look forward to working with you all this year.

With that said, I offer one last note – and reminder – that the **December 10 commencement** is not too far away, and is the next time we will gather as a Faculty Assembly. I am always energized by experiencing commencement with our students, and I hope to encourage our faculty and staff to join in the celebration. I know how much it means to our

students to have faculty and staff supporters at commencement to show how proud we are of their accomplishments, and to celebrate this momentous occasion with them.

I also truly appreciate that semester grades are due the next day and that end-of-semester tasks will come due that week. So I thank all of you who can participate, and ask that you please notify our University Events colleagues as soon as possible if you will attend.

With that said, I appreciate your attendance at today's State of the University Address. And as always, I thank you for your ongoing commitment and support for NEIU.