Northeastern
ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY

Strategic Plan

2026-2031

INTRODUCTION

For more than 150 years, Northeastern Illinois University has met the needs of each new generation of students. The 2026–2031 Strategic Plan has been guided by the priorities of rebuilding, stabilization, and growth—strengthening core systems, restoring institutional momentum, and positioning the University for long-term success. The plan positions NEIU to advance opportunity, elevate its identity, and expand its regional impact at a time when public higher education demands clear outcomes, accountability, and relevance.

By aligning priorities, resources, and partnerships around a shared vision for the future, this Strategic Plan affirms NEIU's commitment to student success, institutional excellence, and measurable progress, while reinforcing the University's role as an urban, public comprehensive university serving Chicago and the region.

BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE

The University's last Strategic Plan was created in 2008 and refreshed in 2014. Our goal is to develop a new plan to guide us forward, enabling NEIU to strengthen its impact as a minority-serving and Hispanic-serving institution committed to providing a high-quality and accessible education.

NEIU's Strategic Planning will be informed by three major frameworks:
1. Best practices for HSIs and MSIs
2. Core components of the Excelencia framework
3. Data-informed methods and analysis

KEY FEATURES OF NEIU'S NEW STRATEGIC PLAN:

Commitment — Uniting our community around institutional priorities that support our mission

Goals — Defining actionable goals to guide NEIU's direction and decisions

Planning — Identifying resources and investments that foster growth and impact

Assessment — Establishing metrics to measure progress and ensure accountability

Adaptability — Creating a framework that anticipates future trends and challenges

FRAMEWORK

The framework for NEIU's Strategic Planning process is one shared by the Society for College and University Planners (SCUP). SCUP is an association of higher education professionals that fosters an inclusive community of practice in integrated planning to advance colleges and universities.

According to SCUP, five coordinating actions occur in strategic planning.

- Assess the Landscape
- Develop a Planning Roadmap
- Create a Plan
- Implement a Plan
- Evaluate the Outcomes

STRATEGIC-PLANNING PROCESS OVERVIEW

The NEIU strategic planning process was guided by the five coordinating actions of strategic planning and designed to outline the work required to build a new comprehensive strategic plan. This plan focused on developing the strategic framework, with implementation and evaluation phases to follow upon adoption. Aligned with this framework, a phased planning model was used to organize the process, structure engagement, and ensure a data-informed and inclusive approach to plan development.

The strategic planning process was led by the Strategic Planning Leadership Team, which included:

- R. Shayne Cofer, Interim Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs
- Chris Childers, Executive Director of Marketing and Communications
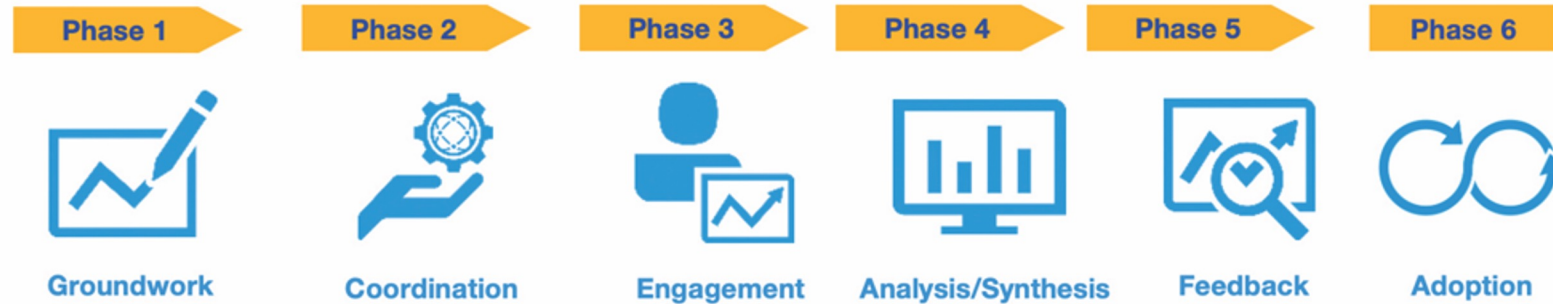- Claudia Mercado, Interim Vice President for Enrollment Management

STRATEGIC PLANNING CORE TEAM

The Strategic Planning Core Team included a cross-section of Northeastern Illinois University faculty, staff, and student volunteers who facilitated the University's strategic planning process. The team drove the planning effort by engaging University stakeholders, analyzing institutional and external data, supporting the development of strategic priorities and goals, and contributing directly to the drafting of the plan.

The Core Team led the strategic-planning development process and was composed of representatives from key internal constituent groups. A stakeholder mapping matrix was used to inform team composition and ensure broad representation. The Core Team's purpose was to coordinate the planning process, facilitate stakeholder engagement, organize opportunities for input and feedback, review and synthesize data, and collaborate on communication and engagement activities throughout the planning cycle.

STRATEGIC PLANNING GOAL TEAM

The Strategic Planning Goal Team guided NEIU's comprehensive strategic planning process by translating the university's mission, vision, and values into clear, actionable priorities. The team engaged campus and community stakeholders, synthesized institutional and external data, and identified key challenges and opportunities. This work directly informed the development of NEIU's five strategic priorities and the drafting of the five institutional goals, including associated key performance indicators as measures of success.

PHASE 1-GROUNDWORK
- Assess institutional context (August/September 2024)
- Identify and map stakeholders (October 2024)
- Identify the core planning team (October 2024)
- Design the planning process (October 2024)
- Create communication plan (October 2024)
- Analyze the environment (October/early November 2024)

PHASE 2-COORDINATION
- Onboard the Strategic Planning Core Team (mid-November 2024)
- Conduct SWOT survey (November 2024)

PHASE 3-ENGAGEMENT AND FEEDBACK
- Plan engagement opportunities (January 2024)
- SWOT input survey (December 2024/January 2025)
- Data summits (February/March 2025)
- Stakeholder roundtables (February/March 2025)
- Stakeholder survey (Early March 2025)

PHASE 4-ANALYSIS AND SYNTHESIS
- Review and thematize data from all engagement opportunities (mid-March/mid-April 2025)

PHASE 5-FEEDBACK
- Gather stakeholder feedback on draft strategic goals (August through October 2025)

PHASE 6-ADOPTION
- Final strategic plan document completed and approved
- **Final strategic plan document to be adopted February 2026.**

GOAL 1: STRENGTHEN STUDENT SUCCESS AND RETENTION

Improve student progression, engagement, and persistence to support the success of NEIU's diverse student body. This goal will ensure students have the resources, support, and sense of belonging needed to thrive from initial enrollment through graduation.

Tactic 1: Improve first-year student retention and persistence

Develop and implement a coordinated first-year retention strategy that integrates academic advising, proactive outreach, and data-informed decision making. Use predictive analytics as a tool—not the focus—to identify at-risk students early, personalize interventions, and ensure that each student receives the right support at the right time. Emphasize relationship-building, inclusive communication, academic planning, and financial support to create a seamless and affirming first-year experience that leads to higher retention and continued engagement.

Tactic 2: Advance equity-driven retention and graduation for African American and Hispanic students

Engage in intentional, culturally responsive efforts to understand and address the unique factors influencing African American and Hispanic student retention by leveraging the CBD framework and increased student progression tracking. Conduct deep qualitative analyses of student experiences to identify what fosters or hinders persistence. Pilot and refine micro-initiatives that promote academic planning, financial planning, sense of belonging, student empowerment, and academic success, and scale effective models across the institution in quick measures.

GOAL 1: STRENGTHEN STUDENT SUCCESS AND RETENTION - *Continued*

Tactic 3: Enhance student engagement and sense of belonging

Cultivate a vibrant and inclusive campus environment where students feel seen, supported, and connected. Expand student peer leadership and coaching, and first-year experiences that foster personal and academic growth. Provide a student-success marketing guide and supporting materials. Strengthen the campus climate by increasing opportunities for cultural celebration, community engagement, and dialogue that affirms student identity and voice.

Tactic 4: Strengthen pathways to completion and career readiness

NEIU will strengthen pathways to completion by integrating academic advising, career development, and experiential learning into a coordinated, student-centered framework. Advisors and faculty will use data-informed tools and technology to align degree planning, career exploration, and real-world learning. The university will expand practicums, internships, cooperative education, and workforce partnerships to connect classroom learning with professional opportunities. This integrated approach ensures that every student graduates prepared to succeed in their career and contribute meaningfully to their community.

GOAL 2: ENHANCE CURRICULAR INNOVATION, SCHOLARSHIP, AND FACULTY/ STAFF EXCELLENCE

Advance program innovation, expand learning modalities as appropriate, and provide faculty and staff development to meet evolving student and workforce needs. This goal affirms NEIU's dedication to academic excellence and continuous professional growth.

Tactic 1: Continuous review and improvement of academic programs to expand and strengthen cross-disciplinary collaboration and scholarship and to drive tangible outcomes in research excellence, curriculum development, and instructional innovation.
This tactic establishes support structures to facilitate collaboration between academic units across campus and create a network for peer-to-peer support in the areas of scholarship, pedagogy and professional development to position NEIU to better serve our student and community needs.

Tactic 2: Systematically expand the adoption of student-centered, evidence-based curricular and instructional practices to achieve consistent, high-impact learning outcomes across the university.
This tactic provides incentive and support for scaling evidence-based practices that contribute to student learning, engagement and success. Grows use of evidence-based teaching practices by department, tracking the percentage of faculty in each department that consistently uses evidence-based teaching practices. Data will be collected to build a repository of implemented practices.

Tactic 3: Develop and expand pathways for certificates and micro credentials to advance learners' intellectual and professional development while strengthening alignment with workforce needs and community engagement.

This tactic adds credential pathways that align with learner, community, and workforce needs, offered in expanded modalities of learning, and provides flexibility that serves a wide variety of students. Examples of additional credentialing pathways are micro credentials, certificates, digital badges, bundle/ladder options, etc.

Tactic 4: Enhance faculty capability to design and integrate inclusive, high-impact learning experiences that measurably advance equitable access, participation, and success for all students.

This tactic ensures that faculty have the knowledge and skills to create accessible, inclusive learning environments essential for meeting legal compliance requirements while also advancing educational equity for students with diverse learning needs. NEIU can proactively remove barriers to student success rather than reactively addressing accessibility issues. This investment in faculty development ultimately creates a more equitable learning community where all students, regardless of ability or learning preference, can fully engage with course content and demonstrate their knowledge.

Tactic 5: Foster a culture of inclusivity, collaboration and well-being

This tactic recognizes that creating a strong, connected community begins with ensuring every employee feels seen, supported, and included. Through transparent communication, increased participation in shared governance, expanded wellness programming, and intentional recognition of values-based behaviors, we will cultivate a workplace rooted in belonging and collective care—ensuring employees have the support they need to thrive personally and professionally.

Tactic 6: Strengthen employee skills and career growth opportunities

This tactic will build a supportive, equitable environment where all employees have access to meaningful professional development. By expanding learning opportunities, creating clear pathways for growth, and investing in mentorship, training, and modern learning systems, we will cultivate a skilled, engaged workforce equipped to advance both individual careers and institutional excellence.

Tactic 7: Develop a university-wide 'Start with Care' Initiative

This tactic launches the Start with Care Initiative, a human-centered, equity-driven, and culturally responsive framework designed to transform how colleges and universities serve their students. Built on three foundational pillars—Understanding, Listening, and Action—this initiative strengthens institutional culture in ways that directly support student success, sense of belonging, and persistence.

The initiative equips all employees—faculty, staff, administrators, and student workers—with the shared knowledge, skills, and practices needed to deepen their understanding of who their students are and the systems students navigate; to listen with care, curiosity, and cultural humility; and to take meaningful action through warm handoffs, timely follow-through, and supportive problem-solving. This approach ensures that every student interaction is grounded in care, clarity, and responsiveness, ultimately driving improved student satisfaction, retention, and completion.

GOAL 3: IMPROVE INFRASTRUCTURE FOR A SUSTAINABLE, ACCESSIBLE, AND STUDENT-CENTERED UNIVERSITY

Tactic 1: Conduct a master planning process that considers accessibility, sustainability, and equitable access to current and future physical spaces and technological resources.
Conduct a comprehensive, university-wide audit and master plan integrating accessibility, sustainability, technology, and universal design across all campuses (Main, El Centro, and CCICS). Develop and implement a coordinated Master Plan and Sustainability Framework aligned with Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), Universal Design for Learning (UDL), Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED), and campus technology standards to enhance both physical and digital environments.

Tactic 2: Enhance student experience and overall university experience through technology standardization and modernization.
Prioritize and elevate the student and overall university experience through the deployment of sustainable, innovative classroom and lab technologies, enhanced enterprise systems, and a reliable, scalable infrastructure. Integrate AI models and advanced digital platforms that empower students and employees to streamline official university business processes, help students excel academically, and equip graduates with the technological skills required for future career success.

Simultaneously, optimize and modernize student-facing services by streamlining redundant support models, standardizing processes, systems, and workflows; and implementing defined technology refresh cycles. These efforts will drive operational efficiency, optimize costs and sustainability and strengthen the University's overall IT security posture.

Tactic 3: Re-envision student union, centers, student wellness, and student engagement spaces across campuses.

Re-envision and modernize student union, cultural centers, and wellness-related engagement spaces across NEIU campus locations — including the Main Campus, El Centro, and the Carruthers Center for Inner City Studies — to foster a stronger sense of belonging, well-being, and community.

This initiative will reimagine and modify student engagement spaces so that every NEIU student has a place they can call "home away from home." It will integrate student health, counseling, wellness, and safety supports into redesigned spaces that promote holistic student development and engagement. The project will incorporate inclusive design principles, technology-enhanced collaboration tools, and flexible layouts that support student services, student organizations, cultural programming, leadership development, and cross-divisional engagement.

The enhanced environments will serve as vibrant, welcoming hubs that connect wellness, engagement, and belonging—creating spaces that celebrate NEIU's diversity, strengthen student success, and reflect the university's commitment to a sustainable, accessible, and student-centered campus culture.

Tactic 4: Modernize classrooms, laboratory spaces, art studios, and performance spaces across campuses.

Modernize classroom, laboratory spaces, art studios and performance spaces across NEIU campus locations — including the Main Campus, El Centro, and the Carruthers Center for Inner City Studies — to provide access for our students to dynamic educational environments.

These enhanced environments will provide access to modern technology, equipment, and resources and provide inviting spaces for learning, research, creative activities, and educational exploration. Spaces may be redesigned, renovated or updated as needed.

GOAL 4: ELEVATE NEIU'S IDENTITY AS AN URBAN UNIVERSITY WITH REGIONAL IMPACT

Position Northeastern Illinois University as a premier urban-serving university in the Chicago region by elevating the positive perception of NEIU as an affordable, academically excellent, accessible, and workforce-aligned institution. NEIU will strengthen its reputation for delivering high-value education through hands-on learning, experiential opportunities, and career-ready outcomes. This goal focuses on increasing recognition of NEIU's programs and community impact, and positive perception among traditional undergraduate, transfer, graduate, and adult learners at all three university locations.

Tactic 1: Measure brand perception
NEIU will implement a brand perception and competitiveness study to measure positive perception across key stakeholder groups—to inform marketing strategy directly.

Tactic 2: Improve the University brand and messaging system
NEIU will create a brand messaging platform that establishes universal language, tone, visual standards, and best practices for marketing, website, and social media communications for use across all colleges and units.

Tactic 3: Improve digital and AI visibility

NEIU will adopt the latest digital marketing technologies by optimizing its website, content architecture, and academic program pages for both Google search and emerging AI-driven search platforms—ensuring top-tier visibility for priority academic programs and key enrollment pathways.

Tactic 4: Improve culturally responsive outreach to Latinx markets

NEIU will expand culturally responsive marketing by translating high-impact enrollment materials into Spanish to strengthen engagement and enrollment of Latinx students across the Chicago region.

Tactic 5: Improve academic program visibility

NEIU will promote new academic programs in partnership with the Office of the Provost through coordinated marketing campaigns, refreshed program-marketing materials, and integrated digital outreach.

Tactic 6: Highlight signature events and institutional visibility

NEIU marketing and communications will identify signature NEIU events and elevate their visibility through comprehensive promotion strategies to strengthen campus pride, community connection, and regional brand recognition.

Tactic 7: Improve strategic storytelling and reputation building

NEIU will expand internal and external storytelling efforts to elevate its reputation by consistently distributing high-impact narratives featuring students, faculty, alumni, community partnerships, and institutional achievements across paid and earned media.

Tactic 8: Strengthen political and stakeholder relationships

Using the Strategic Plan as the foundation to advance NEIU's identity as an urban-serving institution by cultivating and strengthening relationships with city, county, state, and federal policymakers, as well as community and civic leaders. Through proactive engagement, coalition leadership, and clear communication of NEIU's economic and social value, the university will position itself as a trusted regional partner and essential contributor to public policy, workforce development, and community advancement. This approach emphasizes building long-term, transformational relationships that connect academic expertise with community priorities — creating shared value and systemic change that advances both educational attainment and community well-being.

GOAL 5: ADVANCE FISCAL STABILITY AND GROWTH

Diversify revenue streams, build strategic partnerships, and support enrollment growth to ensure long-term financial sustainability. This goal will secure the resources needed to invest in students, faculty, staff, and the future of the university.

This goal is focused on building a resilient and forward-looking financial framework that aligns resource stewardship, revenue innovation, and philanthropic engagement. By integrating enrollment-informed financial planning, strategic partnerships, and diversified funding strategies, this work will support both near-term stability and long-term growth. Together, these efforts will position NEIU to respond proactively to changing economic conditions while advancing institutional priorities.

Collectively, these strategies will create a sustainable financial ecosystem for NEIU—one that balances fiscal responsibility with strategic investment. By strengthening revenue diversity, and fostering external partnerships, NEIU will ensure its capacity to fulfill its mission and support student success for generations to come.

Tactic 1: Strengthen Long-Term Financial Performance and Returns

Develop and implement a coordinated, state-compliant investment strategy that strengthens NEIU's long-term financial performance and overall return on investment. This tactic emphasizes prudent diversification, peer-aligned practices, and disciplined oversight—using enhanced investment tools as a support mechanism to balance risk, liquidity, and growth. The approach prioritizes compliance, transparency, and sustainability while creating additional revenue capacity beyond tuition and state appropriations.

Tactic 2: Optimize University Properties to Support Strategic Use and Increase Rental Revenue

This tactic focuses on two complementary approaches that can be explored to enhance the value of university-owned properties and increase rental income where feasible: strategically planning for the long-term use of vacant Bryn Mawr and El Centro properties and optimizing the university's centralized reservation system to maximize external space rentals. For the vacant properties, the emphasis is on envisioning potential uses—academic, community, or revenue-generating—engaging stakeholders, and integrating concepts into the University Master Plan for long-term consideration. For the reservation system, the focus is on ensuring all available spaces are fully loaded, promoting adoption across units, and maximizing revenue from external users while preserving academic and student priorities.

Tactic 2.1: Evaluate long-term opportunities for vacant Bryn Mawr and El Centro properties

Develop long-term strategies for the vacant Bryn Mawr and El Centro properties, recognizing their current poor condition, to inform capital planning, community engagement, and future university priorities. This work will focus on envisioning potential uses, gaining stakeholder input, and ensuring any concepts are incorporated into the University Master Plan for future consideration.

Tactic 2.2: Optimize space rental through the centralized reservation system to increase rental revenue

Maximize the use of university space and increase external rental revenue by ensuring all academic and non-academic spaces are fully identified, loaded, and available in the centralized reservation system. While prioritizing academic instruction and student activities, this work will improve transparency and utilization, and increases potential revenue generation.

Tactic 3: Advance a fundraising campaign for strategic priorities and grow annual baseline fundraising outcomes

Diversify revenue streams by cultivating donor relationships with alumni, corporate and private foundation partners, and individual and community stakeholders. This will be achieved through two complementary strategies: (1) executing a fundraising campaign focused on strategic priorities, and (2) strengthening baseline annual fundraising outcomes to build a sustainable foundation of donor support.

The fundraising campaign will focus on strategic plan priorities organized within broad categories to be determined through comprehensive planning and donor engagement. Each category will include specific initiatives aligned with campaign goals. The campaign structure will allow responsive alignment with donor interests while advancing institutional goals. Campaign parameters will be determined through a comprehensive planning study. Concurrently, baseline fundraising metrics including donor retention, participation rates, gift progression, and annual fund performance, will be strengthened to build sustainable support independent of campaign cycles.

Next Steps

Development of Institutional Dashboard

Institutional Investment

Reporting

Draft Dashboard

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GOAL 1: STRENGTHEN STUDENT SUCCESS AND RETENTION
Year One

Sample Midyear Snapshot

Goal One: Strengthen Student Success and Retention	Tactic 1: Improve first-year student retention and persistence				
	Action 1.1	**Assigned**	**Status**	**Completion (%)**	**Description**
	Develop a Predictive Analytics tool	Director, Institutional Research (OIR)	Still in Progress	_____%	Create a predictive analytics tool that helps determine actionable items (on-time support) based on student persistence level
	Reach 62% retention rate	AVP, Student Success/ Retention	Requires Attention	_____%	Reach 62% retention rates for Fall 2026
	Tactic 2: Advance equity-driven retention and graduation for African-American and Hispanic students				
	Action 2.1	**Assigned**	**Status**	**Completion (%)**	**Description**
	Focus groups for first-year African American students	Director, Project Success, Student; AVP, Student Success/ Retention	On-track	_____%	Use qualitative focus groups for first-year students before attrition begins. Participation rate of 45%-80%
	Focus groups for first-year Hispanic students	Director, Proyecto Pa'Lante; AVP, Student Success/Retention	On-track	_____%	Use qualitative focus groups for first-year students before attrition begins. Participation rate of 45%-80%
	Create financial incentives	AVP, Student Success/ Retention, Finance/ Administration	Completed	_____%	Student financial incentives for focus group participation