

Good afternoon—

Welcome to Eastern Illinois University's annual State of the University Address. I am grateful you were able to take time out of your busy schedules to learn about our university's current operations, celebrate our many accomplishments, and to better understand our goals for campus throughout this academic year.

Before we get started, I'd like to welcome all our new faculty and staff who have joined us this year. We are exceedingly pleased and excited to welcome you into the EIU family. Your commitment to the university's educational mission and our "All-In" attitude will enhance our focus on student success in the classroom and beyond. Would all new faculty and staff please stand so you may be recognized? Thank you.

I would also like to welcome back our returning faculty and staff who were off during the summer. I hope your time away was productive and enjoyable with plenty of relaxation and rejuvenation.

And finally, I'd like to thank and share my appreciation for those staff and faculty who work throughout the summer. Your contributions toward bridging our operations between the Spring and Fall are extraordinary. You keep our business offices humming, beautify our campus grounds, facilitate our many summer camps and conferences, revitalize our residence halls, advance projects in other campus buildings, plan for the upcoming academic year, and teach summer classes so students can graduate on time. Thanks you for all that you do. Your efforts are genuinely appreciated.

We entered the Fall semester under lingering but lessened restrictions related to the COVID pandemic. And while we continue to learn more about how to mitigate the transmission of the Sars-Cov-2 virus, it remains a public health threat that we must work diligently to control for the health and safety of our EIU community and beyond. EIU will continue to monitor the virus's variants, and will let science guide our responses.

I've said it many times before, but it bears repeating: The best way to reduce viral transmission on campus and in our communities is to be fully vaccinated, and to receive booster vaccinations as they are recommended and become publicly available. Our COVID-19 Response Team, led by Emma Noble, Interim Director of EIU's Health Education Research Center, has done a tremendous job monitoring and coordinating our COVID testing and vaccination sites in response to the guidance of CDC, IDPH as well as the Governor's Executive Orders. The

Response Team's tireless efforts in ensuring our health and safety have allowed us to enjoy a Fall semester of traditional gatherings, activities, competitions and most importantly – in-person learning.

Myriad individuals across campus have made significant contributions to keeping the campus safe during the pandemic. To recognize every individual would be difficult, but I am extremely aware of the sacrifices and extra work that have gone into keeping our campus safe and our employees and students healthy. Thank you all so very, very much for your personal and professional commitments to EIU's enduring success.

Let me touch briefly on the past year before sharing updates on this year's enrollment numbers, finances, and institutional goals for the 2021-22 academic year.

We were just regaining our sea legs from the impacts of the historic Illinois Budget Impasse of 2015-2017 when the global COVID-19 pandemic prompted rolling stay-at-home orders and other restrictions from normal, daily life. The pandemic literally changed how we operated our entire enterprise during that time. Critical, face-to-face interactions with our students gave way to physical distancing and remote learning. Our entire admissions strategy had to be altered. Admissions counselors were prohibited from visiting high schools, which themselves had transitioned to remote learning. Similarly, we were not able to host prospective students on campus to learn about EIU and provide that physical, immersive experience. I believe we all know how important campus visits are to solidifying students' commitments to EIU.

Early mitigation measures coupled with the uncertainty surrounding the pandemic left many of us last year anxious, nervous, fatigued, frustrated, and probably even confused. If that describes you, trust that you are not alone. Those circumstances impacted many of our employees' and students' spirits and overall morale. Still, I am so incredibly proud of everyone on this campus. We adapted. We did what was necessary to keep our campus community safe, and we continued to fulfill our educational mission at the highest level possible. Now, with free and widely available vaccines and with the requirement that all on-campus employees and students be vaccinated or participate in a rigorous COVID testing program, we are finally equipped with the proper knowledge and tools to begin to return more closely to the Eastern experience we all know and prefer.

The students have already realized this, demonstrated by the incredible level of excitement displayed during this year's Welcome Week events. Our new freshman and transfer students were joined by sophomores, juniors, seniors and graduate students longing to reconnect with their fellow Panthers. Our returning sophomores—who were denied the Welcome Week

experience and their chance to participate in the annual tradition of spelling out “EIU” in O’Brien Stadium—are just as excited as our freshmen to be in-person – both inside and outside the classroom.

I hope all of you are as excited as I am to reclaim the spirit and morale stripped from us by this horrific pandemic. Don’t forget about the steady progress we accomplished together in our Pathway to Success plan before COVID hit. And above all, please remember what makes EIU so special—our shared love for this institution, a deep sense of community and devotion to each other, and the shared pride of our success in educating our future leaders in small classes where we know our students by name.

Despite the challenges of the pandemic, our institution, faculty, staff and students celebrated countless accomplishments this past year. A quick list includes the awarding of external grants and contracts totaling more than \$4.2 million to our faculty and staff -- up from \$3.9 million the year before; an increase of 43% in University spending with minority businesses thanks to the great work of Danielle Green and her procurement team; and an 88% placement rate for EIU’s Class of 2020—with 33% of the students being accepted into graduate programs. Additionally, with strong advocacy from our LGBTQA+ students, we initiated the first gender-inclusive residential community in EIU’s history.

Several individuals on campus were involved in EIU being recognized as a First-Gen Forward Institution which is a recognition of institutions that go above and beyond to support First Generation students. As a part of this effort, we moved virtually all of our student academic support services to a central hub at McAfee and the Gregg Technology Center, where the Student Success Center brings together student advising, TRIO, Gateway, Student Disability, the Testing Center and soon, tutoring for general education courses to the middle of campus. This reimagining and rearranging of services gives students an accessible one-stop-shop for the supports they may need to ensure success.

The long-awaited architectural design phase of our new \$118 million science building was initiated, with meetings now taking place biweekly. And the Gail and Richard Lumpkin School of Nursing opened its doors last Fall to the first cohort of students entering our traditional Bachelor’s of Nursing Degree program. Both of these two exciting projects will be transformational for EIU’s future success.

Congratulations go out to our Accounting faculty whose program was granted re-affirmation of accreditation by the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB). Similarly,

we extend compliments to our colleagues in Education who received their re-accreditation from the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (CATE).

Jody Stone, along with Drs. Heidi Larson and Mona Davenport, led the design and implementation of our Freshman Connection program. The program was an incredible asset to the 105 at-risk students and 30 mentors who participated. The value of the program was demonstrated clearly by its first year cohort, who achieved persistence rates above the university average. This is one program that we hope will significantly assist EIU in reducing achievement gaps for students of color, low-income and first-generation students, consistent with a primary goal of the new IBHE Strategic Plan.

Our Residential Life operations not only met the pandemic's challenges, but thrived in delivering services in new and unique ways. The annual Spring satisfaction survey indicated that 90% of Residence Hall students identified positively with their living in the Residence Halls. I will also add that it was our Residence Life staff that successfully took on the responsibilities of managing and coordinating all of our on-campus COVID-related quarantine and isolation moves. That included our Panther Catering staff preparing and delivering 7,271 meals and 1,457 snacks to students in quarantine or isolation. They also laundered 700 loads of linens, and went so far as to provide special celebrations for more than 15 students who were in quarantine or isolation over their birthdays. It needs to also be mentioned that our campus building service workers did a tremendous job cleaning and disinfecting our campus isolation/quarantine spaces as well as our entire array of campus buildings.

EIU faculty were extremely productive in their scholarship, producing 85 peer-reviewed research articles, 14 conference-proceedings papers, 22 published book chapters, and 7 published books. Almost 25,000 viewers were able to enjoy exciting virtual performances at the Doudna, while the Tarble Arts Center served over 1,500 patrons with online and outdoor programs.

Our student-athletes excelled in their sporting events and in the classroom. Our men's Cross-Country team won the OVC Championship as did our Men's Outdoor Track team. Trey Sweeney was named OVC Baseball Player of the Year and was drafted in the first round as the number 20th pick and joins the New York Yankees ball club. And in the classroom, EIU student-athletes received the most academic honor awards in the Ohio Valley Conference, complete with an average GPA for all teams of 3.48 in Fall 2020 and 3.44 in Spring 2021. Our women's basketball team had the sixth-highest GPA average of all NCAA Division 1 women's basketball programs in the nation. Our student-athletes demonstrate year after year that with hard work and perseverance one can achieve success in both sport and the classroom.

Despite the difficulties presented by COVID, our staff in EIU's Advancement Office was able to achieve greater engagement by our EIU donor and alumni community this year than in the previous year. Our donors increased by 3% and the number of new donors increased by more than 15%. These funds often go directly to student scholarships and our academic programs. We're always grateful for the wonderful support of our alumni, friends, and advocates.

Additional accomplishments include the dedication of the We Are EIU Flagpole celebrating cultural heritage and diversity, receiving a \$1 million Illinois Innovation Network grant to expand EIU's CENCERE building, being recognized as a Voter Friendly Campus and a Tree Campus by the Arbor Day Foundation, and once again an EIU education alum was named Illinois Teacher of the Year.

I could go on and on about last year's accomplishments and all of the deserved recognitions of our incredible faculty, staff, and students, but due to time constraints let's move our focus to this year and our future.

We knew from the onset it would be a very difficult year to recruit new students to EIU, being unable to meet prospective students and their families in person. Despite the uncertainties and restrictions - every academic department, the Graduate School and our Admissions and Enrollment Management offices did everything possible to recruit and retain our student body. I am so very thankful for their effort and actions.

So how did we fare in our enrollments? From a topline view, we did as well or better than we had hoped. Our enrollment has stayed stable at 8,608, with a negligible decline of only 18 students. However, when you look deeper into the data, there emerges one area of concern and other areas of surprising success. This Fall we enrolled a smaller class of new freshman (777) than we did the previous year (900), breaking our three-year trend of successive increases of new freshman year over year. There is no doubt in my mind that the smaller class is directly related to the pandemic and if we all pledge to work together, we will rebound in our new freshman enrollments next year. Nevertheless, the smaller class will have an impact on our university's finances for four years as these students move through their class ranks to graduation.

Fortunately, we are able to balance the lower enrollment in our freshman class with strong retention rates and success in our graduate and international student enrollments. This Fall we enrolled 1,661 graduate and post-baccalaureate students, representing the largest number of graduate students EIU has seen since 2007. And as it relates to international students, in every State of the University Address over the last four years you have heard me express

disappointment with the federal government's strict limitations on international students. I am pleased that the current administration has changed course on this issue, allowing more access for international college students seeking an American education. Over 230 new international students have enrolled at EIU this Fall, giving EIU a current total of 399 international students representing 51 countries. This is the second-largest number of international students EIU has ever enrolled at one time, and I believe we have the potential of hitting the goal I set in 2015 for EIU to reach and maintain a population of 500 international students year over year.

Now is the time for all of us in the EIU family to regroup and work in concert with our admissions and enrollment management offices to be All-In towards recruiting our Fall class of 2022. If there's one thing I could emphasize, it's that everyone can contribute and has a responsibility towards our recruitment and retention efforts. We've successfully navigated through an historic budget impasse, and are approaching the meaningful end of the global pandemic. We've worked hard to overcome unprecedented institutional challenges and continue to make progress toward achieving our long-term enrollment and retention goals. I am confident we can do so if we continue to work collaboratively, strategically, and energetically with committed focus.

I wish to share that our financial position for FY22 is stable. Not wealthy, but in a solid position. We have clearly demonstrated each year for the past four years that our expenses could be matched by the level of revenues we generated along with those appropriated by the State. For purposes of transparency, I'd like to delve deeper into our budget with you. There are two main fund groups that we separate for specific revenue sources and the specific expenses made from the funds. These funds create two distinct budgets. The budgets are categorized as either the Income Fund or the Local Fund. The Income Fund is generated primarily from student tuition and our state appropriations, which cover the basic operations and salaries of our academic enterprise and several support areas across campus.

The Local Fund is derived from fees that students pay for room and board, student life, student recreation, campus improvement, parking, textbook rental, student union, among others. The Local Funds are highly restricted for use only in those areas from which those specific fees were collected. State appropriations do not support the Local Fund activities.

Often when we discuss the "budget" in various meetings such as CUPB or with the external community, we are talking about the Income Fund budget – the revenues from tuition and state appropriations. These funds have the most flexibility regarding use for university initiatives, non-housing/dining supplies and equipment, academic program development, most campus salaries and salary adjustments, faculty travel and development, library resources, and many other expense areas.

To that end, we are extremely grateful to the Illinois General Assembly and Governor Pritzker for holding higher education in high regard, helping us avoid any reduction in our appropriation for FY22. We feared that the high costs of the pandemic and lower tax revenues collected by the State due to the pandemic, might negatively impact how higher education would fare in the State budget. I am very pleased that our State truly understands the value and importance that colleges and universities bring to the health and future of Illinois.

Our FY22 operating appropriation is level with last year's at approximately \$41.4 million. We also received reappropriations for various building maintenance projects and our new science building, which has already moved to the "program needs assessment" stage. This allows our architectural firm to learn how many offices, labs, classrooms, conference rooms, innovation spaces and student study spaces are needed by our Department of Biological Sciences and Department of Chemistry and Biochemistry.

Finally, we are grateful to State Senator Doris Turner who was responsible for EIU's College of Education receiving a line-item appropriation of \$500,000 to develop a Grow-Your-Own teacher cohort in Decatur. We are honored to be selected for overseeing this project and it serves as testimony to our institution's brand of excellence as a superior provider of teacher education in the State. Congratulations to Dean Laretta Henderson and Project Director Brian Reid for leading our Grow-Your-Own Teacher programming.

While our State appropriations provide a significant subsidy toward our educational costs, the primary source of revenue for the Income Fund is the tuition paid by enrolled students. However, not all student groups have the same tuition structure. For example, there are different tuition rates for undergraduate students, graduate students, international students, and our dual-credit high school students. It is important for our university community to know that our dual-credit tuition covers all operational and salary costs of the learning, but does not provide any significant net income to the university. This does not diminish the importance or strategy of the university engaging in dual-credit offerings. Dual-credit allows EIU to create meaningful relationships with high school students leading to an efficient onramp for recruiting new or future transfer enrollments. It also helps us to grow brand awareness of our exceptional programs in the Chicago suburbs and other regional markets.

Our tuition income estimate for FY22 is projected at \$51.4 million. This amount could vary depending on our Fall-to-Spring retention rate and the level of new Spring enrollments. Taken together with our state appropriation and negatively adjusted by \$10.4 million for tuition waivers, provides us with an FY22 Income Fund budget of about \$82.5 million – almost identical to that of last year. We do have additional expenses this year related to contractual

agreements and prevailing wage salary increases of approximately \$1.4 million and that does not factor in any potential inflationary costs that may occur in our procurement of supplies or services. So you can see that we still need to be very conservative in our spending this year to continue our strength in balancing our budget year over year. I have no doubt we will be successful in accomplishing this goal, but I'll emphasize again that we will need to increase our retention rate and enrollments to stay ahead of our increasing expenses, or look for other measures to reduce spending in the future.

A number of employees have asked me about the federal and state resources that have been provided to the university as COVID-relief funding and how those funds have been used. You may have heard terms such as CARES Funding, Geer Funding, HEERF I and HEERF II funding. Each of these Federal packages make funds available to EIU and some of them making funds available directly to students.

It is important to note that each of these different COVID-relief packages are bound by strict usage parameters. They are not flexible in how the university can use them. And, they cannot be used for building projects, deferred maintenance, ordinary operations or general salary increases. The CARES and HEERF funding can be used for purchasing supplies for mitigating viral transmission, hiring temporary employees to assist in keeping our campus safe, offsetting lost revenues attributed to COVID, offsetting refunds in Housing and Dining provided to students who needed to leave campus for remote learning, testing for COVID, and other specific COVID-related expenses. GEER funding is restricted solely for initiatives focused on the recruitment and retention of minority, low-income and first-generation students.

To date, EIU has become eligible for approximately \$14 million that can be used for verifiable COVID-related expenses. An additional \$14 million has been made available to assist EIU students who have been impacted by the pandemic. Approximately \$11 million of the institutional \$14 million in aid has already been spent, encumbered or requested. And while we've made notable progress, the pandemic possesses the potential to continue for some time. Accountability of the proper use of our COVID aid will be assessed by the Office of the Illinois Auditor General.

We are incredibly fortunate to have had these federal and state dollars made available to us. As you can see, the cost of protecting our institution against fallout from the pandemic has been enormous, and we are grateful to our federal and state governments recognizing that with this aid.

This year marks the beginning of my seventh year as president of our great university. It is also the last year of my current contract, which ends May 31, 2022. As expected, there has been rumor and speculation about my future plans. Some rumors had me gone last year. Obviously, I better get out of the office more so you all know I'm still around. But to clear up any misconceptions and to keep the rumor mill from hitting overdrive, I want to share my plans directly with the EIU community. I am announcing my plan today to accept a new contract for one year if our Board of Trustees so desires. To be clear, the new contract would extend my presidency at EIU through June of 2023. At that time, I will retire from the presidency with a current plan to return to the faculty as professor of anthropology. This timeline will provide the Board of Trustees and our various campus constituencies maximum time to conduct a timely and thorough search for EIU's next president. The Board of Trustees would be able to vet executive search firms during their annual retreat in June 2022, with the search process beginning in earnest in August or September of that year.

But until then, we have plenty of critical work to do together before any leadership change will take place...so allow me to outline our university goals for the current year.

First, we must continue to allow our strategic Vitalization Plan to meticulously guide our decision making. The Plan, in place since 2016, has led EIU to enrollment growth, annually balanced budgets, new academic programming, sustained academic excellence, and an increased ability to provide our students with a positive living and learning environment. Provost Gatrell and I agree that the planning process for developing a new university five-year strategic plan is warranted and we are hoping to initiate the process this Spring. However, without knowing the landscape of the pandemic as it relates to the surging delta variant and subsequent new variants that may emerge, we may decide to delay initiating the university-wide strategic planning exercise until Fall 2022.

Second, with the assistance of State infrastructure appropriations and our campus improvement funds, we will focus on improving the aesthetic and functional appeal of our campus. This is a long-term project and limited by available funds, but nevertheless we must begin to make progress and tackle some of our biggest issues.

Here are a few examples of projects we have lined up for this year. Work has already begun at the Life Sciences building to upgrade and rebuild the HVAC system and other mechanicals in the building. This \$6.7 million project is being paid for by state funds.

Recently you may have noticed the fencing that has surrounded the eastern side of McAfee. This is another state-funded project that will repair the historic façade on the building's architecture that features the large iconic clock.

Booth Library has had a number of issues needing attention. Currently, we are doing some roof and mortar repairs and soon—with joint funding by the State and our EIU campus improvement funds—we will repair and replace the outside north staircases.

This Fall, funded completely by donor contributions, we will be converting the seldom-used gun range in Lantz – yes, we really do have a gun range in Lantz – into a new women's basketball team locker room. We are also developing solutions for water infiltration into the gymnasiums of the Student Recreation Center, also located in Lantz.

The \$1 million addition to the CENCERE building adjacent to the Renewable Energy Center, paid through an Illinois Innovation Network grant, will soon enter the construction phase.

We also hope to begin some maintenance work on our parking lots in the Spring or next summer to repair some areas of cement degradation and repaint what have become, over time, long-forgotten parking lines.

Our exceptional grounds crew helps define our campus's beauty, which influences critical first- and lasting impressions of our institution. It is imperative that our campus grounds look excellent all year round, and in particular during the late Spring and Summer months when EIU opens its doors to hundreds upon hundreds of visitors during our season of on-campus conferences, open houses for admitted students and their families, orientation days, and the annual IHSA high school track meets. To ensure our grounds are fully maintained during this time period, we will invest in additional temporary part-time help to assist in managing weed control and other aspects of grounds beautification.

Third, we must continue our All-In focus on student success from the time each student enters Eastern Illinois University through to the day they walk across the stage to accept their diploma. This will involve putting more resources, including those provided by GEER funds, in developing new and effective supports for our students. I am pleased to share that the GPAs of our entering freshman cohorts have increased consecutively over the last three years. There is no doubt all of our students can be successful and attain their college degrees, but student supports – academic, social, mental, financial, and inclusiveness – are essential in helping them

get to the finish line. As an institution of higher learning, retention is just as critically important to our mission and sustainability as student recruitment.

The 10-year strategic plan just passed by the Illinois Board of Higher Education focuses on colleges and universities across Illinois closing retention and graduation gaps that exist between genders and racial groups. Eastern, whose student body comprises more than 30 percent of self-identified minority students, should strive to be the State leader in closing these gaps. Let's do all we can to meet this challenge.

Fourth, maintain a precise, well-orchestrated focus on student recruitment. The fundamental goal of the 2016 Vitalization strategic plan was to return our enrollment to a level that would best support our core values of student-centeredness and academic excellence, and move our university toward achieving a sustainable financial position that allows us to support these ongoing endeavors. After the state budgetary impasse, our university's faculty and staff shared impassioned efforts to help rebuild our entire recruitment enterprise. Armed with a new brand position and a significant investment in marketing, we grew our enrollments and our freshman class year over year for three consecutive years. Together...and I truly mean together, we made it happen! The enthusiastic spirit and creative focus behind our growth was amazing, and we were all proud to see the fruits of our collaborative efforts.

Then COVID hit us, leaving in its wake additional stress, increased anxiety, and even more work to be done. The pandemic undoubtedly affected our ability to achieve our enrollment goals for new freshman this Fall. And while we persevered...AGAIN...morale has certainly decreased for many in our EIU Family. But, just like with the impasse, we know the pandemic will eventually be behind us. With the recent arrival of effective and safe vaccines, it appears we will soon be able to co-exist safely with Sars CoV-2 virus in the natural environment.

For the success of our beloved university and its students, we must now come back together again with the same passion and positive focus we demonstrated following the budget impasse, and return our attention and actions to recruiting students to EIU and continuing our enrollment growth momentum. Every employee at EIU has a role they can play in recruiting students either through working in collaboration with our Admissions and Enrollment Management offices, welcoming visitors to our campus with a friendly greeting and polite conversation, academic departments communicating with prospective students once they have been admitted, ensuring our grounds and buildings are clean and appealing, and promoting EIU to our friends and acquaintances. In a world where higher education institutions are competing for an increasingly shrinking pool of high school graduates, student recruitment MUST...be a top priority for everyone. Thank you all for your help in this regard.

My fifth goal for this year is to challenge the entire EIU community to do more than acknowledge the importance of diversity, equity and inclusion, but to actually demonstrate our commitment to these shared values by our actions and behaviors. Our students of color continue to alert me to situations in which they do not feel equally valued at Eastern—either through overt, direct actions, or through microaggressions that may not be intentional. These situations appear to be occurring inside and outside our classrooms on campus, as well as in our neighborhoods off campus. Racism, xenophobia, and bigotry must never be given safe harbor at EIU. Period.

To that end, please attend our RISE conference next week and other events that promote diversity, equity and inclusion, participate in our EIU Reads program, reconsider the learning resources you use in the classroom to make sure they depict diversity, and consciously consider that not all of our students have had similar cultural experiences, educational backgrounds, family lives, or other life situations as some others might have had. Eastern is dedicated and committed to being All In for our students and that includes ALL students regardless of race, ethnicity, nationality, gender, religion, sexual orientation, disability or any other form of physical or neurodiversity. We are here to do all we can to educate our students, have them graduate on their journey to fulfilling their personal and professional dreams, and provide a welcoming, supportive, equitable environment at Eastern Illinois University.

Finally, my sixth and last goal for this year is to encourage everyone on our campus to have some fun. COVID has taken its toll on us all – socially, physically, and mentally -- and I hope we can break its hold on us and our collective morale. Take pride in all we have accomplished. The students are ecstatic about being on campus in person. Let their excitement brighten your day. Submit a shout-out of thanks in the Campus Newsletter for a deserving colleague. Take time to come to Blue-B-Que, bring your kids to Homecoming and watch the parade. Join us at the President's Spring Employee Appreciation picnic, support our EIU student-athletes as they compete for individual and team success. Enjoy lunch at the annual staff luncheon. Take in a concert or a play at the Doudna, or watch the events during the always-exciting Greek Week. Whatever form of enjoyment fits your interests, EIU is sure to have it...and I hope you will take every opportunity this year to enjoy them.

At today's State of the University Address, I am instituting an updated version of the Presidential Distinguished Service Award – to recognize extraordinary service by members of Eastern's faculty and staff. All full-time employees are eligible to receive this recognition. Recipients will personify the EIU brand of All In and all things that make EIU such a special place. In the future, there will be a one-page nomination form accessible on the web. Nominations will be reviewed by members of the President's Council and recommendations will be provided to the president. Up to five awards will be given and announced each year at

the annual President's State of the University Address. Recipients will each receive a special plaque commemorating the recognition.

This year the selection was made from nominations submitted by each of the four vice presidents. Next year and in subsequent years, as mentioned, the process will follow campus-wide nominations. I am extremely pleased to announce this year's 2021 Presidential Distinguished Service Award recipients.

First, from the area of Information Technology Services we recognize Jerry Rankin, IT Technical Associate, who has played a crucial role in keeping critical infrastructure available throughout EIU's Covid response, working many nights and weekends so that these systems are available to campus users during normal business hours. Jerry, please stand and be recognized.

Next, I would like to recognize Emma Noble, Interim Director of EIU's Health Education Resource Center. Emma unselfishly gave up much of her normal work responsibilities last year and this year to coordinate and oversee EIU's Covid testing program. Her service to the university has been extraordinary. Emma, will you please stand up and be recognized.

The third 2021 Presidential Distinguished Service Award goes to Rhonda Bence, Cashier III in the Bursar's Office. Rhonda continually personifies All-In customer service in her interactions with EIU students when paying on their accounts and with campus departments making their depositing. She is but one outstanding member of the entire Bursar's Office and is a wonderful role model for us all. Rhonda, please stand and be recognized.

Fourth, it is my pleasure to recognize Dr. Catherine Polydore, Assistant Dean of the Honors College and professor in the Department of Counseling and Higher Education. Dr. Polydore is a highly visible campus leader and effective advocate of EIU's diversity, equity and inclusion efforts, including launching the annual RISE conference and recent collaborations with colleagues on the HLC Quality Initiative. Her outstanding service and dedication to the student experience is most deserving of recognition. Catherine, please stand and be recognized.

Our last recipient of the class of 2021 Presidential Distinguished Service awardees is Carla Nelson, Space Administrator II in the Office of the Registrar. Carla has served the University for over 25 years and is known for being a kind, caring, helpful, and dedicated colleague always going the extra mile with every task or request. Carla played a pivotal role in navigating multiple University-wide course schedule re-configurations affecting hundreds of course sections necessary for our successes in navigating the pandemic. Carla, please stand and be recognized.

Let's give all these outstanding members of our EIU community another round of applause.

It is my greatest honor and privilege to lead our extraordinary university. I appreciate all that you do and all of the support you have shown me. You are all remarkable -- individually and collectively. I'd like to add a special shout out of thanks to Judy Gorrell who single handedly keeps the president's office running efficiently and effectively, always with a smile and an exceptional level of professionalism.

Although the positive momentum of our Pathway to Success may have briefly waned during the pandemic, we are nevertheless moving forward and our efforts will be most impactful if we are all working in concert. Our resilience in keeping our university strong, competitive, award winning and successful is immeasurable. We have both the desire and talent to manage the pandemic and whatever challenges we encounter in the future. Together, we have demonstrated that over and over again.

As we move forward this year, let's celebrate our successes and accomplishments, support one another, and continue to be All In for our students. We all are EIU.

I wish everyone a productive and enjoyable academic year. Thank you for attending today and listening to our State of the University.