

State of the University Address

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Eastern Illinois University

September 14, 2017

Good afternoon.

Before I begin my remarks, I would like to welcome and recognize our new provost and vice president for academic affairs, Dr. Jay Gatrell. Dr. Gatrell joined the EIU family on June 19th and has been meeting regularly with the academic deans to learn about our academic programs and units, their needs, and our campus culture. I am confident the academic affairs division will be well served by his experience, higher education acumen, thoughtfulness and transparency as the leader of our core and largest division.

Well---

The state of Illinois has finally enacted a budget. And for the first time in three years, (and for my first time as president of our university), EIU has a budget that is not made up of fictitious placeholders and guestimates about what the state might appropriate. This is great news and I am so damned glad to share it with you, I'll say it again. We have a budget!

But it did not come easily. We waited 736 days while a budgetary impasse in Springfield resulted in no comprehensive state budget being enacted in FY16 and FY17. It was not until July 6, 2017, and by the very slimmest of margins in both chambers, that a supermajority override vote was cast in favor of state spending and revenue bills, ending the impasse and giving Illinois an enacted FY18 state budget.

I would like to personally thank everyone who advocated to end the state's impasse and support the funding of EIU and public higher education. Thank you to the EIU faculty, staff, and students who organized rallies, marches, visits to Springfield and letter campaigns. Thank you to our alums for their letter and calling campaigns to our state legislators and governor. Thank you to the mayors of Charleston, Mattoon and Effingham (all alums by the way) who participated in our EIU Economic Development Press Conference alongside Cindy White, Director of the Charleston Chamber of Commerce and EIU Faculty Senator and UPI spokesperson Dr. Kai Hung. Thank you to the many friends of EIU who live in Charleston, Mattoon, East-Central Illinois and across the state who provided support by placing signs in their businesses and yards.

And finally, I want to publically and formally thank Senator Dale Righter and Representative Reggie Phillips for their resolve and support in voting to override the governor's veto of the budget bills, even against their own political interests. We have all heard the saying "every vote counts". On these crucial bills a single vote really did make the difference between enactment and failure. Senator Righter and Representative Phillips voted on behalf of their

district, their constituents, and on behalf of EIU. Had they not, the impasse would have continued, and access to high quality public higher education for Illinoisans would likely have diminished to devastating depths.

How does the approved state spending bill impact EIU? For FY17, the university was appropriated an additional \$11 million for the second half of FY17 operations and 100% reimbursement for MAP money awarded to students. For FY18, EIU was appropriated \$38.6 million (or approximately 90 percent of what was appropriated to EIU in the last enacted state budget in FY15) and full MAP reimbursement. We were also re-appropriated \$4.8 million to assist in HVAC repairs in the biological sciences building and other smaller maintenance projects.

But in sharing what was provided by the state's most recent budget, it's equally important to share what it did not provide. There was no additional appropriation for FY16, a year in which EIU received only \$12.5 million, or approximately 30 percent, of our expected State appropriation. It is clear to us now, that the \$27 million hole left in FY16, which we covered by using the entirety of our restricted and non-restricted reserve accounts, will not be replenished by the state.

There are other intricacies, some positive and others challenging, within the new state budget that will impact EIU in both the short and long term. They are important for us to know. First, the approved budget allows gubernatorial latitude to reduce appropriations by five percent without legislative approval. For EIU, this could translate to an additional \$2 million reduction at any time during this fiscal year.

Second, the legislation mandates a new employee cost-shift. That is, for all new employees hired on or after July 1, 2017, the university (rather than the state) will be responsible for paying their retirement benefit. Additionally, the legislation shifts a portion of the pension costs for high salary earners, both current and future, from the State to the university. These cost-shifts for the State are expenses for EIU and will place a significant and growing financial burden on the university going forward.

Third, and finally, the budget package included long-sought procurement reforms that will streamline university purchasing regulations. This will have a positive effect for EIU in our purchasing processing, saving staff many hours and the university a modest amount of dollars over time. Our outstanding procurement staff are already reviewing the reforms and making the appropriate adjustments.

With the passing of the state budget, the financial position of the university has indeed improved. But, the most positive thing about it, is that we are back in control of our own financial planning, ensuring we have the information to operate in a manner that will keep the university going strong.

Nevertheless, the budgetary impasse has left us with damage to our beloved university that we must now begin to repair. Most notably, it has depleted our reserve funds and was partially attributable to a substantial loss in EIU revenue through enrollment declines over the past two years. Even so, the strength, perseverance, and sacrifice of our faculty and staff, along

with a closely monitored and conservative operating philosophy, allowed us to end FY17 in a better financial position. This was no easy task and I am so proud of our entire campus community for working together to manage our costs, while still providing the high level of academic excellence and student life experience that is expected by the top-rated public regional university in Illinois.

You have entrusted me to be honest and transparent in my campus updates, and I will continue to do so today throughout my remarks. Recovery from the impasse will take time, and we must be highly strategic in our decision making over the next few years. This is especially true since we don't know what challenges will exist for our lawmakers in developing and enacting a state budget for FY19. (It certainly wasn't easy for them in the past three years). I ask that you continue to work with me in cooperation and support, allowing us to move forward together on our Pathway to Success.

Over the summer, our administration created a balanced budget plan for the current year. It calls for the continuation of a highly conservative, prudent and careful philosophy on expenditure decisions. The good news is that departmental budgets will be somewhat loosened from last year. A limited amount of professional travel will also be restored, and effective immediately P-card use will be reactivated for fiscal managers. However, there is a caveat. We cannot operate under the pretense of "business as usual" because these are still not usual times. Spending must follow the very conservative parameters outlined by the administration for purchases to be limited to high operational needs and with approval from the deans and vice presidents.

The budget also provides for approving a modest number of faculty searches (Unit A and Unit B) and other critical operational staff positions. Finally, it provides strategic investment funding for the university's marketing plan for student recruitment.

The speed of our financial recovery is intricately tied to our efforts and success in growing our enrollments. Across campus, faculty and staff have been working diligently to enhance EIU's student recruitment efforts. Our admissions office is fully staffed with a dedicated leadership team led by Josh Norman and Kelly Miller. I can assure you our admissions operations are running on all cylinders.

EIU's tenth-day student headcount for Fall 2017 is 7,030 students. And although this is less than our Fall 2016 headcount, it exceeded our expectations and is the lowest decline in Fall to Fall enrollments in the last six years. Our incoming class of new first-time, full-time freshman and transfer students is 1095, representing a drop of 5.1 percent from the entering undergraduate class last year. New graduate enrollments increased by four percent over last year.

Our graduate enrollment (and subsequently EIU's total enrollment) would have been much larger had all of our admitted international students been able to obtain their visas to enter the United States. Unfortunately, many of them, particularly from India and Bangladesh, had difficulties. Our Office of International Students and Scholars is attempting to learn why the U.S. immigration service is delaying or disallowing their entry and what we can do to assist

these students. Currently there are 128 international graduate students who were admitted for this fall that have contacted the Graduate School requesting a delay in their admission to Spring 2018 in hopes they can secure their visas by that time. We certainly hope these students will join us soon.

Overall, and especially against the backdrop of the state's budgetary impasse and its impact on the ability of public regional universities' to recruit students, we are pleased with our Fall 2017 class.

Our incoming students are extremely excited to be here and represent a high quality, diverse group of learners who demonstrate many talents and unmatched enthusiasm. And for choosing EIU, they will receive a world-class education from a world-class faculty. Opportunities will abound for their academic, social, leadership and humanistic growth. And their living environment will be supportive, aesthetic and safe.

You make that happen. We make that happen. And that's what makes EIU such a distinguished institution.

Last year was an amazing year for EIU accomplishments despite the state's financial debacle and our subsequent need to restrict spending levels. Never an institution to shy away from performance funding discussions, Eastern continues to have the highest freshman retention rate and the highest graduation rate among our regional peer institutions in the state. In addition, our career services office reported that 94 percent of Eastern's 2016 graduates were employed within their chosen field, enrolled in graduate school, or committed to military or volunteer service within six months of graduation. This is a significant increase from the prior year's exceptional rate of 90 percent. For the record, the national rate is 83.7 percent. There is no doubt that EIU students are successful in career and in life, a defining core attribute of the strength of our university.

We can all be proud that EIU was once again named the top-ranked public regional university in Illinois according to U.S. News and World Report. The Washington Monthly named EIU in the top 10 (of more than 300 colleges) in their "Best Bang for the Buck" report for the Midwest. The Business Insider ranked Charleston as the 2nd most affordable college town in America and the Safewise organization ranked Charleston as the 2nd safest college town in America for the second straight year.

Every unit and every department across our campus could rightfully boast about their accomplishments. However due to time constraints, I've selected just a few to highlight, knowing that there are myriad others deserving of public recognition. Please consider this a small sample of the great work taking place across our campus in all divisions.

Faculty scholarship is a highly valued activity at EIU and reflects the strength and quality of our academics. This past year our faculty demonstrated excellent productivity in their scholarship, which is even more impressive given the very limited funds the university was able to provide to internal research grants and faculty conference travel. I know the importance and value of supporting faculty scholarship and the benefits it provides to professional growth, student opportunity, and university prestige. I am committed to restoring the internal funding

of faculty scholarship to past levels and beyond just as soon as fiscally possible. Faculty, you may be assured it is a high priority.

Over the past year, faculty published more than 106 professional books, peer-reviewed journal articles and book chapters. Among our book authors, Dr. Gail Richard, Professor Emeritus and Interim Director of our Autism Center, published three new editions of three of her previously published books, one co-authored by her colleague and EIU faculty member Dr. Jill Fahy. I'd say three books in one year is an awfully productive accomplishment.

In the fine and performing arts, our faculty were engaged in an astonishing number of exhibitions, recitals and performances. We are honored by having such a talented fine arts faculty at EIU and also proud to boast of having perhaps the best facilities and venue in the state. It has been my pleasure to attend numerous music recitals, art exhibitions and theatrical performances on campus this past year and they have all been stellar. I hope all of you will go to as many events as possible in our beautiful Doudna Fine Arts Center.

Dr. Chesnut in the Office of Research and Sponsored Projects reported a total of 43 external grant and contract proposals were submitted last year by faculty and staff. Thirty-five proposals, some of which were submitted the prior year, were awarded during the same time period.

The academic department that had the most grants funded was Biological Sciences, and the department that brought in the most research dollars was Chemistry. The largest single Public Service Grant was received by the Department of Family and Consumer Sciences in the amount of \$728,400.

The positive aspects of receiving extramural funding by way of grants and contracts cannot be understated for the university and those who receive them. They are major drivers for continuing expensive faculty research programs, generating unique opportunities for student learning, and maintaining educational outreach programs as provided by WEIU-TV, the Health Education Resource Center, and EIU's Child Care Resource and Referral program.

There is no question that receiving a Fulbright Award is truly an outstanding accomplishment. Further, it is a tangible testament to the high quality and academic excellence of an institution's faculty. Last year, our College of Arts and Humanities had both a faculty member and a student earn prestigious Fulbright awards.

Dr. David Gracon, associate professor of communication studies, received a Fulbright to teach media studies at Precarpathian University in Ukraine; and student, Alison Stangel, who will graduate EIU this semester with a BA in Foreign Languages with a Spanish concentration *and* a minor in French as well as a BA in music with a minor in Jazz Studies will travel to Argentina as a Fulbright Scholar and assist teaching English for 8 months. Ms. Stangel is just the second EIU student -- and the first EIU undergrad in university history -- to receive a prestigious Fulbright grant. Congratulations to both Dr. Gracon and Ms. Stangel.

Since arriving at EIU, I've challenged the campus to become entrepreneurial in identifying new pathways to assist the university with finances and student recruitment. Two

excellent examples emerged this past year and demonstrate how thinking outside the box can make a positive difference. Here is the first example.

Among the responsibilities and activities of the School of Continuing Education is providing contracted services for a variety of off-campus organizations. Through his association with Illinois Realtors, Paul Brown, a faculty member in our School of Business, made a referral to Peggy Brown, a staff member in our continuing education office. They realized that EIU's D2L learning management platform could be used to streamline Illinois Realtors' non-credit courses and webinars in a secure online environment. The result was a fee-for-service-contract that improves Illinois Realtors' services to its constituents and generates revenue for EIU. Along with Continuing Education, ITS and CATS are instrumental in providing the technical and logistical support needed to make the program successful. It's a win-win for all involved. Great thinking Peggy and Paul.

In the next example, Dr. Rebecca Throneburg, professor of communications disorders and sciences, and Dr. Karla Sanders, executive director of the Center for Academic Support, were troubled by students being disadvantaged in rural high schools, where teachers aren't often qualified to offer dual credit courses under the auspices of a community college. Together, they developed an idea where EIU could provide dual credit classes to these students by teaching them online.

To make it financially feasible, however, the model would need students from several small rural high schools to enroll in the classes at the same time. Dr. Throneburg and Dr. Sanders began contacting high school superintendents and principals to see if interest existed, and sure enough it did. A pilot of the dual-credit model was conducted last spring for 19 students from two rural high schools. Dr. Richard Jones from the Department of Communications was drafted to teach his Introduction to Speech Communication course.

The model proved to be a great success and interest has grown almost exponentially. This semester we have 146 students from ten rural high schools taking courses in communications, history and English for EIU credit. We are very hopeful these and future students will appreciate EIU's flexibility and great professors, and EIU will become their first-choice option in selecting a university to attend.

The point of highlighting these two examples is that our campus is filled with creative and innovative thinkers, highly capable of generating wonderful ideas to assist our university on its Pathway to Success. If anyone finds themselves with such an idea, please share it with your supervisor, dean or vice president.

Another exciting accomplishment involving dual credit occurred unintentionally, but when the opportunity arose, a number of our department chairs, faculty, and admissions staff quickly collaborated to seize it. Late last spring, our school of technology was exploring with High School District 214 the possibility of EIU providing specialized classes for their technology career-track students.

After learning more about Eastern, along with our excellent student performance outcomes and high quality and supportive faculty, D214 administrators asked us if we would become educational partners in their delivery of dual credit general education courses – but only if we were prepared to partner this fall.

D214, located in the northwest suburbs of Chicago, is the second largest high school district in the state, serving about 12,000 students of very high academic quality. You can imagine the enthusiasm our admissions staff was feeling toward this potential partnership. But the key would lie first, in the interest of our academic department chairs and faculty for such a partnership; and second, in our ability to rapidly prepare ourselves for all the necessary adaptations in academic affairs, the business office, registrar's office and admissions office to make it happen.

Well, with abundant EIU spirit and collaboration, we now have about 400 students this semester being taught dual credit courses by D214 qualified teachers, in partnership with our academic departments. Each of these students is building an EIU transcript and they, along with their families, are developing an affinity with EIU as a leader in university education. We look forward to a long productive partnership with our D214 colleagues.

A direct measure of the quality of an academic program is its ability to be accredited by a national accrediting organization. For anyone who has been through the process, they know it is both arduous and extremely time-consuming.

We can be proud that EIU demonstrates an excellent record of high-standard accreditations. Last year, we received positive reaccreditation letters for programs in Chemistry, Dietetics, Elementary Education, Kinesiology, Sport Studies with Teacher Licensure, and our Master of Science program in Communication Disorders and Sciences. The Tarble Art Center also received its reaccreditation from the American Alliance of Museums. Congratulations to the department chairs and faculty of these reaccredited departments.

Eastern's Office of Civic Engagement and Volunteerism was once again hard at work contributing to our communities. This past year, EIU students volunteered more than 130,000 hours of service to agency partners throughout the region. The economic impact on our communities is estimated to be more than \$3 million, but the impact of teaching servant leadership to our students who will go on to be pillars of their communities, has much greater value.

But let's not stop with just acknowledging student service. Eastern's faculty and staff provide a tremendous amount of outreach and community service throughout our entire region. We are active participants in improving the lives of others and strengthening communities here at home and in the world we share.

As an example, I'd like to recognize someone who was recently honored for her work with the Special Olympics. Dr. Kathlene Shank, Chair of the department of Special Education, was awarded the Midge McDowell Lifetime Service Award from Special Olympics Illinois. This lifetime service award recognizes Dr. Shank for her long-term commitment and dedication to Special Olympics and the selfless and unconditional donation of her time to ensure that Special

Olympics participants enjoy a fantastic experience. Congratulations to Dr. Shank and I thank all of you who freely give your time in pursuit of servant leadership activities.

A few years back, the State of Illinois challenged its universities to have 20 percent of the food products used in dining services to be grown locally by 2020. This past year, Eastern's Dining Services, under the leadership of Mark Hudson, reached 22.85 percent, more than three years ahead of schedule. Many of us who know Mark, are aware of his dedication, commitment and tireless pursuit to provide the most positive experience for our students in their housing and dining service.

It is no wonder than that Mr. Hudson was honored with the Hallenbeck Lifetime Service Award presented by the National Association of College and University Residence Halls. A truly wonderful achievement. While EIU may not have the newest residence or dining halls, we give them the most heart and attention for our students.

EIU's intercollegiate athletic program also had a great year and finished in fourth place for the Ohio Valley Conference's Commissioner's Cup -- which is awarded annually to the university demonstrating the greatest overall athletic excellence in Conference-sponsored championships. We won championships in men's indoor track and field and women's indoor and outdoor track and field competitions.

In the classroom our student-athletes excelled. During the Fall 2016 semester, Eastern's student-athletes posted an overall GPA of 3.15, with 16 of our sports teams posting team GPAs over 3.0. Sixty-eight of our student-athletes earned a perfect 4.0. These students are truly amazing.

And the accomplishments go on and on.

But undoubtedly, the most collaborative accomplishment of last year was the initiation of our campus-wide Vitalization Project. After a difficult year in FY16 when the university was forced to operationally react to the unprecedented events of the state budgetary impasse, we began FY17 with a new determination, one that was much more positive. We made the purposeful decision to ambitiously work on those things which were under our control, things that would improve our university, and position Eastern to be more competitive in recruiting students when the impasse would finally end.

The Vitalization Project involved our entire campus and I want to thank the entire campus community for your participation. The work is not over, far from it, but the positive impacts from this campus-wide initiative are already resonating.

The Vitalization Project has strengthened our university and has provided strategic measures to guide our planning for the upcoming year and beyond. All of the Workgroups' recommendations are posted on the Vitalization Project webpage and updates on several of the recommendations have been added.

Here are a few Vitalization outcomes and the framework of our plan for moving forward this year.

A priority was placed on improving the outward look of campus for our EIU community and visitors. With scarce resources available, the administration chose projects that would have the greatest positive impact.

We began with our grounds. Additional grounds keepers were reintroduced to ensure our acreage is mowed, weeds are removed, and our flower beds look healthy and beautiful. I remember a day in which Paul McCann mentioned that EIU had received about 12,000 plants that were ready to fill our plant and flower beds. I was startled by the sheer number, but it does give a good perspective on the enormity of our manicured acreage. Our grounds keepers deserve much credit for their hard work in restoring the beauty of our campus.

To improve our academic learning spaces, we completed small projects in Coleman Hall, Biological Sciences, Lumpkin Hall, and Physical Sciences. More work is required and we will continue additional projects throughout this year.

Only one major project was initiated last year with the \$1.4 million addition to our beautiful Tarble Arts Center. The project, funded completely by a very generous gift from Jan Tarble, will be completed in November, 2017. The addition will include a classroom and additional exhibit space for this wonderful resource. Ms. Tarble deserves abundant thanks from EIU for creating and helping to sustain this treasure on our campus.

This summer we renovated the lobbies of Taylor and Stevenson Halls. Our research tells us that prospective students are sensitive to the aesthetic environment of residence halls in making their choice of university. Although EIU's residence halls are not new constructions, we continue to make strategic improvements to meet prospective student expectations.

The Vitalization Project allowed the university to develop a broader understanding of our academic programs and departments. We reaffirmed that all of our major undergraduate and graduate programs were of high quality and served the mission of our university. We reaffirmed our philosophy that not all programs and departments can, or should be, profitable and that subsidizing non-profitable departments and/or programs by those departments that are, is what allows a comprehensive institution of higher education to exist and fulfil its mission.

We learned that some of our academic departments may be able to become more efficient through strategic scheduling of classes, adjusting CU assignments, increasing enrollments through developing new or revised programs, or moving graduate programs to online formats.

We identified a few programs that have very small numbers of majors. And although the delivery of a curriculum in these disciplines was never disputed as being important to the general education of our students, nor was the commitment of the university to continue providing exposure to these disciplines by our faculty experts, we debated the need to continue offering the full major. Discussions between the administration and the effected academic departments and college deans, along with recommendations by the Faculty Senate, CAA and the APERC, informed decisions of compromises, program format changes, setting enrollment parameters, or program elimination.

This fall, we look forward to discussions on the recommendations of our two academic visioning Workgroups. I asked the Council of Chairs to review the recommendations over the summer and I encourage all of our faculty to do so as well. With the large number of recommendations, and noting their diversity, we will need to create a process early this semester for faculty and administration to vet the recommendations collaboratively and to determine appropriate plans of action.

The Vitalization Project has further stimulated and encouraged the continuation of programmatic development by our academic departments.

New undergraduate programs added this past year and this Fall include a BA in Criminology and Criminal Justice and BS degrees in Computer Science (revised degree), Biochemistry, Health Communication (Interdisciplinary), Sport Management, and Exercise Science.

New graduate programs include Master of Science degrees in Cybersecurity and Talent Development

Three current graduate programs have launched online versions: the online MA in History for teachers, the MS ED in Special Education, and the MS Ed in Curriculum and Instruction. Our Graduate School Office reports that our recent moves to online graduate programs have had a tremendous positive impact on our graduate enrollments. Thank you to all the faculty who have worked on program development. Your efforts are significant to our future success.

The administration supports the recommendation of Workgroup 3 to centralize our various technology units on campus under the leadership of a Chief Information Officer. We hope to bring CATS and ITS together in a single location to maximize the intellectual resources and synergy that would come from having these professionals in physical proximity. We plan to make progress toward centralization during the year, but recognize that it will take a longer period of time and more resources to complete the process.

The Workgroup on intercollegiate athletics questioned the number of sports teams the university can adequately support. Numerous discussions have taken place on this topic over the past year among and between the administration, CUPB, the athletic director and Board of Trustees. The issue is one of complexity and competing interests. I'll try to explain it as fully and succinctly as possible.

EIU supports a total of 21 men's and women's Division 1 athletic teams, seven more than what is required by the NCAA and the Ohio Valley Conference. We have more sports teams than any other university in the OVC, where other schools average 17. Reducing the number of sports teams would not jeopardize our standing in the NCAA or the OVC. The EIU Board of Trustees affirmed that we will continue as a Division 1 university, similar to our peer institutions.

While the funding of our intercollegiate athletic department has several sources, two major sources have been reduced dramatically in recent years. The amount of appropriated dollars provided to intercollegiate athletics has been reduced through budgetary decisions by the administration, and the funds for scholarships, which are tied to university enrollments, have also decreased.

Fundamentally, EIU is committed to providing an excellent Division 1 experience for all of its student-athletes. Given the reduced athletic budget, the Workgroup has questioned whether the university has the ability to continue providing that level of experience for all 21 teams. They suggested that a reduction in the number of sports teams will better ensure an excellent Division 1 experience for the student-athletes in those teams that remain.

There are, however, important conflicting interests in this scenario needing consideration. In enhancing our student-athlete experience by supporting fewer teams, the interests of those students who came to EIU for the purpose of playing a sport that was eliminated would certainly be jeopardized and we could expect several would transfer from the university and not receive an EIU degree. The disappointment of these students would be palpable.

Equally important, is what a reduction in the number of sports teams would mean for the university's general fund. For the vast majority of our sports teams, the number of scholarships they receive support less than one-half of those who participate. Student-athletes who do not have athletic scholarships or only partial scholarships must pay EIU tuition and fees similar to any other student. Eliminating one or more of these teams will have a negative impact on our general fund, which is central to university operations, faculty and staff salaries, faculty development, and instructional equipment and supplies.

The teams with the greatest percentage of its student-athletes receiving scholarships, those that would produce the greatest savings to the athletic department budget if any were to be eliminated, are men's and women's basketball, football and volleyball. The Board of Trustees have indicated their desire to retain these four sports teams and they will not be considered for elimination.

Addressing how we move forward on the question of how many sports teams EIU should support is certainly a challenge, and one that requires further deliberation by the administration. The Board has requested the administration to provide a recommendation on this issue by the end of this semester.

A major conclusion of the Workgroup on University Branding and Marketing was the necessity for EIU to engage with a professional marketing firm to assist us with defining our institutional brand, developing creative messaging that supports our brand, and outlining a competitive advertising strategy to promote interest in EIU to prospective students and their families.

The administration approved the recommendation last spring and selected the Thorburn Group out of Minneapolis to partner with EIU. For the past six months, the Thorburn

Group has been working collaboratively with our internal marketing team to deliver a comprehensive marketing plan.

I hope many of you had the opportunity to attend one of the four Town Halls we held a few weeks ago with The Thorburn Group. We are extremely close to rolling out a fresh marketing campaign with advertising on tv, radio, billboards, online, social media, Spotify, Pandora and other digital or user-heavy outlets.

During this marketing development phase, we learned that bringing our brand to life will require the support and dedication of every single EIU employee. This is not a job we can complete in isolation; it requires a deep cultural change for our campus community – one in which each of us lives, breathes, and advocates for the EIU brand in every moment and through every interaction with others.

Once the brand development phase is complete, our marketing and creative services staff led by Stacia Lynch will provide the campus community with information on how to most strategically and effectively use EIU's brand language and messaging to support our marketing initiative.

On a recommendation of Workgroup 1 to improve information flow of student services, the university is exploring better ways to communicate its announcements of lectures, athletic events, concerts, student organization meetings and the plethora of other activities that take place on campus each week. To facilitate this effort, the Student Affairs division is making available a new powerful, yet user-friendly App. The App, PANTHER LIFE, can be downloaded for free from the Apple App Store or Google Play Store. Meetings, sponsored by student affairs, will be held for departments and groups on how to post events and programs as well as the many other uses of the App. Please contact student affairs if you would like more information.

Finally, our campus-wide focus on enrollment management will continue vigorously. Workgroup 3 provided no less than 45 specific recommendations to be considered by the administration. The admissions office and its ancillary support units of financial aid, marketing and the registrar's office have been working non-stop assessing their operations and implementing scores of changes and improvements, some recommended by the Workgroup, that they believe will immediately affect the interest of prospective students, the ease with which they can apply, and the number that decide to enroll at Eastern.

I have been particularly impressed with Mr. Norman's outreach to faculty and department chairs on recruitment matters, including the enrollment management newsletter he sends to all interested faculty and others. Mr. Norman knows that a positive faculty interaction with a prospective student is often cited as the major reason why a student selects a particular university.

So with all this activity in enrollment management taking place, how is it looking so far for Fall 2018? Although I must always be cautious at this early time in the recruitment cycle, I can say that we have had an incredible start. As of yesterday, the number of prospective freshman students who have asked for more information about EIU is up by 2,015 inquiries compared to last year at this time and up by 647 inquiries from prospective transfer students.

Our summer open house attracted over 50 more students than the previous summer. The total attendance was 171 students and 102 of them applied on-site to EIU that day.

And talking about applications, we are up by 90 percent on freshman applications and 53 percent on transfer applications over this time last year. I will also add, that not only have the application numbers increased, the quality of applications has increased significantly as well.

There is no doubt that the state of the university is strong and gaining in strength as we continue to vitalize our essential and mission-driven operations. This has not come without great sacrifice and perseverance by our faculty and staff whose dedication and commitment has demonstrated extraordinary effort beyond their traditional workload.

We are not yet there, and it may take a few more years of caution and budgetary conservatism, but the light of sustainable strength for our institution and its community of faculty and staff is in sight. I hope you will continue to work with me on this course as we move forward. I am committed to leading the university to success and to recognizing and rewarding the sacrifices and perseverance of our employees when we emerge with increasing enrollments.

Our university plan for this year is straight forward and guided by our Vitalization Project. We will concentrate our efforts and limited investment resources on every measure that will promote an increase in interest and enrollment at Eastern by qualified undergraduate and graduate students.

We will ensure through the resourcing of our instructional activities that our current students will continue to receive an outstanding education that prepares them for a fulfilled life and career success.

We will extend our targeted investments beyond enrolling students, to include retention as well. Any student we accept at Eastern should have the support they need to stay here and graduate. As the university has become increasingly more diverse, we need to expand the ways in which we support our students' academic success. I will be asking faculty leaders to come together this year in a Task Force to develop strategies and a plan for EIU to raise its retention rate back over 80 percent.

Our campus grounds will be maintained aesthetically to showcase the beauty of our campus.

Our student services will continue to meet and exceed the needs of our students.

Our unsung heroes behind the scenes, the dedicated staff all across campus embedded in every department and division including clerks, accountants, HR staff, building support workers, trades, budgeteers, institutional researchers, police officers, academic support professionals, administrative support specialists, programmers, hall directors, financial aid specialists, and all the many other staff positions, will continue to do their highly valued work of keeping the infrastructural operations of this large and complex institution running smoothly.

And finally, we will continue our commitment to respect one another as members of the EIU community and embrace the richness that comes with a diverse student body and colleagues with different experiences and backgrounds.

Each year as we conduct searches for academic and professional positions we have been striving to cast a wide net both regionally and nationally in order to attract a talented and diverse pool of candidates. During FY17, we had 13 successful searches for faculty and administrative positions and I am pleased to report that almost 40 percent of our new colleagues are members of underrepresented groups, and over 60 percent are women. We welcome these new colleagues to campus, and look forward to their valuable contributions.

Our plan for this year positions us well to move forward on our Pathway to Success. Together we can do this and undoubtedly we will succeed. Why am I so sure? Well, economists will tell you that value equals quality divided by cost. And good value can drive growth. Let's never lose sight that Eastern offers its students an outstanding individualized, premiere education, in a safe, nurturing and inclusive environment, at a highly affordable cost. Our performance outcomes are outstanding amongst our peers and we continue to strive for improvement. By all measures, EIU is an incredible value for students.

But growth won't appear just because there is great value if you are the best hidden secret or a hidden jewel. It comes with the tireless efforts of hard work, time and creating awareness that the value exists. We are "all in" – to use a phrase by our marketing partner in describing our uniqueness in campus culture. And that spirit of "all in", from our faculty, staff, students, alumni and community friends and supporters, will be the calling card of our successful future.

I am thankful to all of you. And I want you to know what a privilege and honor it is for me to lead --with you, this great university. We've been through a lot together these past two years with the incomprehensible activities that took place in Springfield, but the promise of improved times is already upon us.

The state of our university is not only strong, it is also an exciting and promising time in our history. We have much to be thankful for, and much to look forward to, in the next few years as we continue to vitalize our campus and create an enduring model of continued success for the upcoming decades.

I wish everyone a wonderful and productive semester. Thank you.