



NIU Alumni Association Advocacy Program Engagement Toolkit

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OVERVIEW OF THE NIU ADVOCACY PROGRAM

WHY IS ADVOCACY IMPORTANT?

Advocacy helps bring awareness to the return on investment and economic development provided by higher education, and more specifically, the education provided by Northern Illinois University. Each year, Illinois lawmakers craft a budget containing operating and capital funds for public universities, and it is up to the universities and their network of supporters to help lawmakers understand the importance of appropriating adequate levels of investment to institutions of public higher education. These funds are important to NIU in many ways and impact daily operations, student financial aid, maintenance and renovations. Advocacy educates or reminds legislators of the value of higher education and encourages sustainable allocation of funding. No story is better told than the success story of an NIU alumnus/a whose life has been forever positively impacted by their NIU experience or friend of NIU who believes in the mission of NIU.

HOW CAN YOU SUPPORT NIU ADVOCACY?

The day-to-day efforts of NIU faculty and staff are vital to NIU's sustainability. However, the voices of our alumni and friends, who epitomize these efforts, have proven invaluable to promoting NIU in their communities.

You can strengthen NIU's voice in your community and keep NIU at the forefront of important conversations by joining the NIU grassroots advocacy program. Volunteer advocates determine their level of involvement and can help in a variety of ways outlined throughout this document.

The following is a guide for advocates as they prepare to build relationships with their State of Illinois legislators.

PURPOSE

The general purpose of connecting with your elected officials throughout the year is to engage as a constituent first, while also educating and advocating for NIU. The goal is to build relationships with members of the General Assembly and establish a comprehensive grassroots network over time. This can be done through multiple channels both online and in-person. Use this toolkit to guide your interactions with your elected officials.

If you have questions, please contact Katie Davison, NIU Director of State Relations, at kdavison@niu.edu or 815-753-1271 or Liz McKee '14, M.S. Ed., Director of Alumni Volunteer Engagement, at Lmckee1@niu.edu or 815-753-7400.



DIGITAL ENGAGEMENT

Digital engagement is a great way to start getting to know your elected officials. Consistent ways to connect with your representatives and senators include the following:

Engage through Social Media

Follow your representative and senator on social media (Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, etc.). Feel free to take opportunities to engage with their professional and/or personal posts, which might add a layer of genuine, non-advocacy to the relationship you are establishing. If you are not comfortable engaging, use this social media connection as a way to simply follow along as one of their constituents, and get to know them better through the process.

- a. "Liking" or adding your legislator on social media might also keep you informed about community events your legislator is hosting in your area. You might come across a great opportunity to engage with your senator or representative in person. (See page 4, "In-Person Engagement").
- b. Remember, it is a two-way street. The more you post about the great things happening at NIU, the more likely they are to see and learn more about NIU. To get exciting and interesting news and updates sent directly to you, [join NIUniverse](#). This is our social media ambassador program. Ambassadors receive updates from NIU to share with their networks, as they choose, throughout the week.

Visit their Website and Subscribe to their Newsletter

Visit your representative and senator's website to learn more about their policy platforms and personal biographies. Then, sign up to receive their newsletter and other communications. These updates might include notice of community events, information on bills they have filed or passed in Springfield, or any array of information that will continue to keep you informed on their legislative activities.

Stay Updated and Join the NIU Advocacy Platform

Participate in e-mail campaigns crafted by NIU staff and send policy or advocacy-specific emails to your senator, representative or a targeted group of specific legislators. For more information, visit www.myniu.com/advocate.html.

E-mail Exciting NIU Updates

Send the legislator updates or exciting news about NIU and/or the NIU Alumni Association (Athletic teams' success, new scholarship programs, etc.). This information can be communicated via email or through any social media platforms on which you have connected. To have updates sent directly to you, [sign up for NIUniverse](#), our social media ambassador program.



IN-PERSON ENGAGEMENT OVERVIEW

Engaging senators and representatives in-person can help state officials develop a stronger connection with NIU. It leaves a lasting impression that our alumni and friends are passionate enough to reach out to legislators to talk about NIU.

Attending Community Events

Keep an eye out for coffee events and/or townhalls your senator or representative is hosting in your community. Attending these events will allow you to introduce yourself in person and engage in a less formal group setting.

Schedule a One-on-One In-Person Meeting in District

Meeting with your representative one-on-one in their office will allow you to get to know them as a constituent, find local commonalities that connect you, and build a relationship that ultimately leads to effective grassroots advocacy for Northern Illinois University and its state policy priorities. Please see pages 5-10 of this document for a step-by-step guide to setting up and conducting an in-person meeting with your legislator in their district office.

Attend NIU Advocacy Day in Springfield

Come together with NIU alumni, faculty, staff, students, and friends to engage in a full day of advocacy at the State Capitol Building in Springfield, followed by a reception. On this day, you will be trained to share NIU's legislative priorities and discuss why NIU is important to you with legislators. This event occurs annually in the spring while the legislature is in regular session in Springfield.



IN-PERSON MEETING OVERVIEW

The specific purpose of an initial, in-district meeting is to meet your specific representative and/or senator, get to know and learn about their priorities as an elected official and share information about NIU.

Before you schedule a meeting with your elected official, be sure to learn more about them by following the steps for digital engagement above.

Envisioned Meeting Plan

- **Meeting One (November - February):** Volunteer advocates should meet with their representative and senator in their respective district office by Feb. 15 each year for an initial “Get to Know You” meeting.
 - Learn about the elected official and their legislative priorities and interests.
 - Provide information about NIU’s impact on the legislative district, as well as positive updates about the University, which are communicated through the online NIU Advocacy Platform.
- **Meeting Two (NIU Advocacy Day):** Visit the legislator’s office while at the Capitol Building in Springfield for NIU’s Day of Advocacy. (This date will be released in late November/Early December annually.)
 - Recall the in-district meeting you recently had together sometime over the last few months.
 - Share NIU’s legislative priorities, why NIU is important to you and additional positive updates about the University.



IN-PERSON MEETING GUIDE

Step 1: Identify Your Legislator(s)

If you are unsure who represents you in Springfield, there are two resources available to confirm in which legislative districts (House and Senate) you reside, as well as determine which members of the General Assembly are currently elected to those seats:

1. IL State Board of Elections:
<https://www.elections.il.gov/ElectionOperations/DistrictLocator/AddressFinder.aspx>
2. NIU Advocacy Platform:
<https://www.myniu.com/advocate.html>

Please note, many NIU alumni share state legislative districts. Each Illinois senate district contains two representative districts, resulting in three total legislators per senate district. Advocates who share a state senate district may reside in different house districts.

Step 2: Scheduling the Meeting

Once you determine which legislators represent you in Springfield, the next step is finding the contact information for their respective district offices. Advocates can find this contact information in one of two ways:

1. Illinois General Assembly Website: www.ilga.gov
 - a. On the homepage, under "House," click on [Members] to locate your representative in the list. Click on their name to find the telephone number and address for their district office.
 - b. On the homepage, under "Senate," click on [Members] to locate your senator in the list. Click on their name to find their telephone number and address for their district office.
2. NIU Advocacy Platform: <https://www.myniu.com/advocate.html>
 - a. On the homepage, scroll down to the "NIU Advocacy Program Platform" and click "Directory"
 - b. Input your home address to identify your legislators. Click on the legislator with whom you wish to connect. You will find their contact information on this page.

The best way to schedule a meeting is by calling the district office directly during business hours Monday through Friday. Specific office hours will vary for each legislator's office.

When calling, it is important to identify yourself as a constituent as well as any other volunteer leadership roles you hold at NIU. It is very unlikely that legislators themselves will be taking the phone call. Let office staff know that you would like to schedule a time to meet with the legislator to discuss Northern Illinois University and the importance of higher education. ***Please note you are not speaking on behalf of NIU, rather in support of the University's initiatives and the State's support of public higher education.***



Scheduling Tip: Have a date and range of time in mind prior to calling the office, in order to have a “starting-off” point when making your request. Example: “Is the representative/senator available on Monday, Sept. 23 for about 30 minutes sometime between 10 a.m. and noon?”

Timing of Meeting

Prior to calling a district office to request a meeting on a specific date, be sure to consult the Legislative Session calendar to determine if a legislator will be in-district or in Springfield. The General Assembly Veto Session and Session calendars can be found at the following link: <http://ilga.gov/house/schedules/default.asp>.

Please note the Session calendar for any given Spring Session is not typically released until November or December. As a general rule of thumb, use the following guidelines:

- **Jan. 1 – May 31:** The General Assembly is in regular session during this time of year. Members are less accessible in their district offices for meetings. However, the time is right to make specific “asks.” NIU’s current legislative agenda and funding priorities for the coming fiscal year should serve as a focal point of any meetings during this time, whether in-district or in Springfield.
- **June 1 – Dec. 31:** The General Assembly is no longer in regular session during this time of year. Members are more accessible in their district offices for meetings. Campus updates, including follow-up comments on positive or negative impact(s) of legislative action(s) taken during the prior regular session, may serve as a focal point of any in-district meetings during this time.
- **November:** The General Assembly may be back in Springfield for two weeks of Veto Session. These dates are typically scheduled after May 31 and available as a reference on the ILGA “Schedules” webpage referenced above.

Step 3: Conduct the Meeting

Your meeting has multiple purposes, including making a personal connection with the representative or senator who represents you in Springfield, as well as educating and advocating for NIU.

First, thank the member for taking time to meet with you and make an in-district connection that strengthens your presence as a constituent. Examples include discussing where you reside in their district, local groups and/or events you both may be a part of, local commonalities that spark genuine, personal communication.

Second, tell your personal NIU story and transition into advocating for NIU and the state’s support of public higher education. Telling your NIU story makes the meeting genuine and increases the impact of conversation.

Let them know that you are an alumnus/a or friend of NIU and if you serve as a volunteer leader in any other role for NIU. They may ask and you may state that this is an NIU Alumni Association-initiated effort. **You are not there on behalf of NIU or at the behest of the University.**

Provide the member with the NIU legislative district footprint document, a one-page document that provides an overview of NIU’s footprint in their respective district. (See more information below.) This document shows



a representative or senator that even if they do not represent the DeKalb campus, their district still has a connection to NIU.

(Legislative District Footprint Documents can be found on the NIU Advocacy Platform website at the following link: <https://www.myniu.com/advocate.html>)

Handout: NIU Legislative District Footprint Documents

Each year, the University will update and create a document specific to each of the 175 legislative districts in Illinois. Along with general talking points about NIU, each page includes specific data points for each district including the following:

- The number of NIU students who reside in the district.
- The number of NIU students in the district who receive Pell (federal) and MAP (state) grants. Both are need-based programs.
- The number of NIU alumni who reside in the district.
- The number of NIU employees who reside in the district.
- The number of vendors/businesses located in the district with which NIU procures business.
- The number of applications received from their constituents the prior year, followed by how many applicants were accepted and of the number accepted, how many chose to enroll.

(Legislative District Footprint Documents can be found on the NIU Advocacy Platform website at the following link: <https://www.myniu.com/advocate.html>)

Please be sure to note which year is reflected in the Legislative District Footprint Documents you are using. These documents are updated annually in the fall/winter. Generally, from August-November, it is okay to tell legislators that the document they're looking at is from the prior year, and an updated district-specific sheet is in the process of being finalized.

ADDITIONAL TALKING POINTS

After going through NIU's footprint in the legislator's district, the following talking points might be used to continue discussion:

- Fall 2020 enrollment saw increases in freshman and law school classes. This is on track with NIU's Strategic Enrollment Management plan that was put in place under President Freeman's direction in early 2019.
- More than 90% of NIU students are from Illinois.
- NIU has 240,000 living alumni of record with more than 155,000 living in Illinois.
- 65% of NIU graduates stay in Illinois for work.
 - 85% of graduates from the College of Engineering and Engineering Technology stay and work in the Northern Illinois region, including Chicago.
- 88% of graduates report being gainfully employed in full-time jobs within one year of their graduation.



- According to the latest alumni survey, the median starting salary of an NIU graduate is \$45,000 with a baccalaureate degree and \$65,000 with a master's degree.
- The most recent economic impact study conducted shows NIU's impact on its region is \$583 million annually, which is seven times the University's state appropriations.
- NIU is recognized by the Brookings Institution as the top-ranked Illinois public university in terms of upward mobility outcomes coupled with high research opportunity.
- Affordability is a priority of NIU and its alumni:
 - The University's administration has held tuition flat for the past six academic years, including 2020-2021.
- In FY20, generous NIU alumni and donors provided \$15.1M in donations. That number includes:
 - More than \$3M in scholarships and more than \$209K raised for a Student Emergency Fund to support students affected by the COVID-19 crisis.
 - In the past 10 years, NIU donors have provide approximately \$26M in scholarships.
 - These scholarships have a profound effect on student success. In fact, 9 out of 10 NIU Foundation scholarship recipients graduate.

WRAPPING UP THE MEETING

As the conversation is wrapping up, be sure to share your contact information with the legislator and inquire about the best way to contact them, as well as their preferred email address. Thank them for their time and willingness to meet with you to discuss your alma mater and support for higher education in Springfield.

If, during your meeting, there are any questions you cannot answer or the legislator asks who they can talk to at NIU about something, direct them to Katie Davison, the University's Director of State Relations. Jenna can be reached at 815-753-1271 or kdavison@niu.edu. Legislators are also welcome to call and speak directly to the University President, Dr. Lisa C. Freeman.

Step 6: Follow-Up

Following your meeting, please send a thank you note to the legislator using the preferred email address provided by the legislator. Thank them for their time and feel free to mention that you hope to be in Springfield during the Spring Session for NIU's second annual advocacy day and hope to connect again.

In addition to sending a thank you, please provide a brief summary of the meeting via the [Legislator Contact Report Form](#) so that we can record the communication and add it to our advocacy data file. Information to provide in the summary includes the following:

- When was the meeting and who was in attendance?
- What were the highlights of conversation? Did the legislator take interest in any specific data or talking points discussed?
- Were there any questions asked that require staff follow-up?
- Did you make a personal connection and/or identify any significant commonalities with the legislator?
- Were there any other takeaways worth noting/recording.