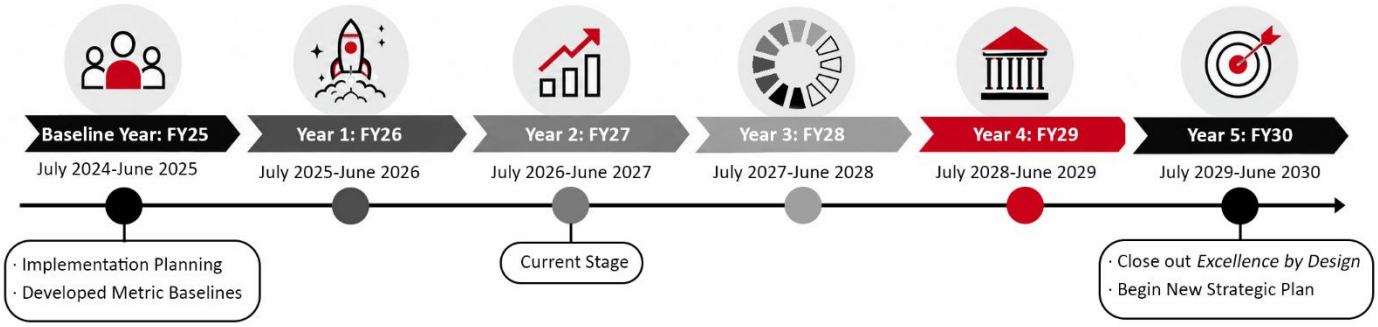
A message from President Tarhule

I am pleased to share a progress report on Illinois State University's strategic plan, *Excellence by Design: 2024-2030* (*EBD*). As we begin the second of the plan's implementation years, reviewing our progress is essential to ensure we are on track to meet our goals by 2030.



Excellence by Design advances our vision of becoming a national leader in student-focused education that connects teaching, research, innovation, and intercultural understanding. Its four strategic directions, supported by clear goals and objectives, position Illinois State University to remain strong amid external challenges in higher education.

Higher education is undergoing profound change, facing greater complexity, competition, and uncertainty than in years past. The enrollment cliff and a climate that may affect international enrollment present immediate challenges. Throughout this plan's implementation, I have urged the institution to think big and innovate in pursuit of *EBD's* ambitious goals. As we begin the second year of the plan's implementation, we are working hard to meet those goals—but important work remains.

The strategic plan continues to be our practical guide for every university unit as it plans and prioritizes resource allocation, while providing actionable ways to track progress toward our goals. This fiscal year, my leadership team is focused on advancing student success, operational excellence, and effective communication. To turn these priorities into progress, campus champions—experts in their respective fields—will help ensure we stay on track to meet our stated metrics.

This report surveys the four strategic directions, celebrating progress and identifying where attention is needed. Find the full metrics and progress details in Appendix A or the strategic plan website. I encourage the campus community to learn about our progress and help advance the University's success. As I said at the plan's launch, excellence at Illinois State University doesn't happen by chance—it is designed.

Sincerely,

Aondover Tarhule, Ph.D.
President, Illinois State University

Strategic Direction I: Cultivate a Culture of Success and Belonging

This strategic direction includes four goals: champion student success; nurture equity, diversity, access, and belonging; promote community of well-being; and bolster faculty and staff success.

Annual Progress

Student success measures improved, with first-year retention increasing from 81.4 percent to 81.9 percent, and the six-year graduation rate rising from 64.5 percent to 67.3 percent. Key fiscal year accomplishments included completing a student success workplan, expanding the winter session, removing the application requirement for first-semester major changes, and launching the Redbird Restart course for students on probation.

Student wellness engagement increased significantly from 6.4 percent to 10.6 percent, while well-being initiatives and policy review efforts continued to advance. Faculty and staff participation in learning and development initiatives also moved closer to the goal of a five percent increase.

Areas to Watch

The four-year graduation rate was the only metric to decline in year one, falling 1.5 percentage points and remaining about seven points below target. While the first-year retention rate increased in year one, the new rate (which will be available in the year two report) decreased to 81.4 percent. Retention of underrepresented students remains about 10 percentage points below target. That said, metrics including the four-and six-year graduation rate are trending positively in year two, and continued progress will require sustained attention. Efforts underway include the HighPoint degree planning rollout, transfer requirement audits, and initiatives at the course, program, and curriculum levels. Additional work focuses on reducing D, F, and withdrawal rates, removing barriers created by student holds, and applying best practices through a partnership with the National Institute for Student Success (NISS).

Faculty and staff retention is approximately five points below the six percent goal. Retention efforts include strengthening professional development, expanding career advancement opportunities, and enhancing employee benefits.

Strategic Direction II: Foster a Culture of Responsible Stewardship

The goals in this strategic direction illustrate the University's focus on serving as responsible stewards of resources, talent, and learners: improve efficiency on campus, advance strategic enrollment management, invest in campus infrastructure, and expand on the commitment to a culture of sustainability.

Annual Progress

More than half of the metrics supporting this strategic direction are on track to meet their goals. A balanced budget was achieved in fiscal year 2026, and development of a resource allocation model remains on schedule for completion by the end of fiscal year 2027. The implementation of a new financial planning and analysis tool is also underway and will play a key role in future budgeting processes.

Several planning initiatives are progressing as expected, including the Campus Master Plan (which is in the first phase of securing a firm), Safety and Security Plan, and Continuity Plans, with completion targeted for 2027. Sustainability metrics continue to show steady, incremental progress.

Areas to Watch

While graduate enrollment experienced a modest increase in year one, continued focus will be needed as the count dropped by approximately 30 students this fall (year two). International enrollment has declined from 2.8 percent to 2.4 percent and is trending away with recent fall 2026 data (2.0 percent) moving further from the targeted 10-percentage point increase, reflecting national trends.

A few areas have seen limited progress to date. Development of a comprehensive technology roadmap was paused, pending the arrival of the new Chief Information Officer, and is now moving forward under new leadership. Annual contributions to unrestricted and uncommitted reserves have not yet occurred and will be evaluated for feasibility this fall. In addition, progress toward the goal of raising $100 million to support students with demonstrated financial need remains below target and will require continued attention.

Strategic Direction III: Elevate Our Institutional Excellence

Illinois State University seeks to elevate institutional excellence through three goals: increasing the impact of scholarly and creative activities, consistently meeting the needs and aspirations of today's learners, and focusing on enhancing the University's institutional recognition.

Annual Progress

Scholarly and creative productivity remain notable strengths for the University, with faculty, staff, and students increasing their collective output while earning recognition through awards, honors, and professional service. In addition, the University continues to expand relevant academic program offerings, including non-credit and flexible-credit learning experiences, and strengthen its presence in major media markets and social media engagements, enhancing its national visibility and reputation.

Areas to Watch

While overall research output has grown, scholarly grant expenditures declined significantly, from our baseline of $17.3 million to $11.1 million in year one, due to a statewide grant that concluded. New initiatives in fiscal year 2027 are planned to provide incentives and support for proposal preparation.

For year one, Illinois State University saw a drop in the *U.S. News & World Report* "Top 100 Public Schools" rankings, moving from #119 to #122. It is important to note that it is derived from data generated in the previous year, and it was recently announced that the University will move up in the rankings to #116 in year two.

Non-traditional enrollment (part-time, age 25+, and online students) declined in year one from 1,597 to 1,566 students, underscoring the challenges of achieving the strategic goal of tripling the enrollment by 2030.

Strategic Direction IV: Expand Mutually Beneficial Partnerships

Illinois State University collaborates through coordinated internal engagement, enhancing the culture of philanthropy, and targeted external engagement.

Annual Progress

Illinois State University continues to demonstrate strong philanthropic performance. Private support has remained robust, growing from $44.7 million to $52.2 million in year one, keeping the University on pace to exceed its goal of averaging $40 million annually over the life of the strategic plan. The University's comprehensive campaign continues to make progress.

The goal of increasing the University's NSSE civic engagement module score remains an active area of focus, with the next administration of the survey scheduled for spring 2027. Although year one data are not yet available, the University continues to advance this objective by aligning programs with NSSE engagement indicators, expanding opportunities to address previously identified gaps, and strengthening voter engagement efforts through on- and off-campus partnerships.

Areas to Watch

Illinois State experienced a decline in the combined international and community college partnerships metric. Specifically, international partnerships moved from a baseline of 43 to 13 in year one, and community college partnerships decreased, moving from a baseline of 55 to 51. Efforts are underway to implement a proactive partnership renewal process, replacing agreements tied to sunset programs, and target high-volume feeder colleges without current agreements.

Appendix A: Metrics List

The metrics can also be found on the EBD Metrics Dashboard. Note: data in the "Target" column are calculated by applying the target figure in the metric to the baseline data (e.g. IIB.1: 20% increase to baseline (2,439) yields 2,927 target).

Metric	Baseline [FY25]	Year 1 [FY26]	Target
IA.1: Increase the FTIC retention rate to 85% by 2030	81.4%	81.9% **(+0.5%)**	85.0%
IA.2: Increase 4-year graduation rate to 60% by 2030	54.8%	53.3% **(-1.5%)**	60.0%
IA.3: Increase 6-year graduation rate to 70% by 2030	64.5%	67.3% **(+2.8%)**	70.0%
IB.1: Increase the retention rate of underrepresented students by 10% by 2030	74.3%	74.4% **(+0.01%)**	84.3%
IB.2: Increase the six-year graduation rate of underrepresented students by 10% by 2030	49.0%	55.1% **(+6.1%)**	59.0%
IB.3: Increase our belonging rating on the annual campus inclusion survey to 2% annually by 2030	77.0%	Data Available in Year 2	2% Annually
IC.1: Increase student engagement in activities, programs, or services that support the eight dimensions of wellness by 10% by 2030	6.4%	10.6% **(+4.2%)**	16.0%
IC.2: Audit and produce a comprehensive review of well-being policies and processes by 2030	1.0%	15.0% **(+14%)**	100.0%
IC.3: Integrate evidence-based well-being principles into at least 10 curricular or co-curricular initiative, campus environments, or institutional infrastructure by 2030	0	2 **(+2)**	10
ID.1: Increase faculty and staff learning and development participation by 5% through 2030	Data Not Available	1,421	--
ID.2: Enhance faculty and staff retention by reducing turnover by 5% by 2030	10.0%	11.0% **(-1.0%)**	6.0%
IIA.1: Enact a balanced budget annually by 2030	0%	100% **(+100%)**	100.0%
IIA.2: Develop and implement a resource allocation model by FY27	0%	50% **(+50%)**	100.0%
IIA.3: Develop and deliver a comprehensive master technology roadmap for the University by December 2027	0%	0% (no change)	100.0%
IIA.4: Deposit 4% annually into unrestricted/uncommitted reserves by FY27	0%	0% (no change)	4% Annually
IIB.1: Increase graduate enrollment by 20% by 2030	2,439	2,481 **(+1.7%)**	2,927
IIB.2: Increase international students to 10% of the total population by 2030	2.8%	2.4% **(-0.4%)**	10.0%
IIB.3: Raise $100 Million to assist in various costs (tuition, fees, etc.) for students who meet specific financial criteria by 2030	$8.6M	$6.5M **(-$2.1M)**	$100M
IIC.1: Develop and adopt a comprehensive Master Plan by 2027	0%	10% **(+10%)**	100.0%
IIC.2: Develop, adopt, and implement recommendations identified in the University Safety and Security Strategic Plan 2026	10%	75% **(+65%)**	100.0%
IIC.3: Develop and fully integrate 100% of University continuity plans for every campus department, school, center, and interdisciplinary studies unity by FY27	10%	60% **(+50%)**	100.0%
IID.1: Achieve AASHE Stars rating of "Gold" by 2030	Silver	Silver	Gold
IID.2: Increase the energy generated by on-site renewable systems by 10% by 2030	0%	0% (no change)	10.0%
IID.3: Increase the number of Green Workplace Certified Campus Offices/Units to 15 by 2030	8	9 **(+1)**	15
IID.4: Increase student participation in the Share Shop 15% by 2030	1,185	1,224 **(+3.3%)**	1,363
IIIA.1: Strengthen our ranking to be within the top 50% of R2 institutions by 2030	Under Review	Under Review	--
IIIA.2: Increase the number of research and scholarship related news stories by 25% by 2030	Under Review	Under Review	--
IIIA.3: Increase the number of scholars publishing/exhibiting each year to a minimum of 60% by 2030	53%	59% **(+6%)**	60%
IIIA.4: Increase the quantity of faculty scholarly and creative activity recognition, per faculty member, by 10% by 2030	14	15 **(+7.1%)**	10%
IIIA.5: Increase the amount of scholarly grant expenditures by 10% each year with a goal of $35 million by 2030	$17.3M	$11.1M **(-$6.2M)**	$35M
IIIB.1: Increase the number of graduate, online degree, certificate, and micro credentialed program offerings by 20% by 2030	37	40 **(+8.1%)**	44
IIIB.2: Increase the number of nontraditional enrollments by 300% by 2030	1,597	1,566 **(-1.9%)**	4,791
IIIB.3: Increase the number of non-credit and flexible credit experience offering by 50% by 2030	12	18 **(+50%)**	18
IIIC.1: Secure 20 Media placements annually in Chicago and other major national markets by 2030	1	6 **(+5)**	20
IIIC.2: Position our institution among the "Top 100 Public Schools" in the U.S. News & World Report's rankings by 2030	#119	#122 **(-3)**	<=100
IIIC.3: Increase the number of faculty and staff winning regional, national, and international awards and serving in prestigious organizations by 20% by 2030	8	13 **(+62.5%)**	16
IIIC.4: Increase flagship social media channel's audience and engagement by a combined 25% by 2030	3.2M	3.0M **(-6.3%)**	4.0M
IVA.1: Increase interdisciplinary or co-authored scholarly activities (publications, performances, inventions, etc.) by 20% by 2030	Under Review	Under Review	--
IVB.1: Launch, plan, and execute the University's next fundraising campaign	2%	25% **(+23%)**	100%
IVB.2: Increase the annual total of private support to an average of $40 million by 2030	$44.7M	$52.2M **(+$7.5M)**	$40M
IVC.1: Increase opportunities for coordinated campus engagement in the state and federal legislative process by 20% by 2030	Data Not Available	120	--
IVC.2: Increase the score on the NSSE civic engagement module by 10% by 2030	64.43	Data Available in Year 2	70.87
IVC.3: Increase the number of partnerships with community colleges and international institutions by 10% by 2030	98	64 **(-34.7%)**	108