

State of the University Address  
Thursday, September 10 (Recorded Sept. 8)  
YouTube

Thank you, Senator Kalter.

Students, faculty and staff members, alumni, retirees, and Redbird friends—good day and welcome. I appreciate your taking the time to join me for this year’s State of the University Address—and I thank the many ISU staff members who made the production and distribution of this message possible.

I want to give a special thank you to our Board of Trustees, local and state legislative leaders, shared governance leaders, Foundation and Alumni leaders, and our thousands of benefactors.

And, I am most thankful to my partner and the First Lady of the University, Marlene Dietz, for her affection, guidance, and for her ability to always know where the clean face-coverings are. To that point, I am properly physically distanced to offer this address with my face covering removed—but it is always at the ready.

This is my 7<sup>th</sup> State of the University Address—when I offered my 6<sup>th</sup> message last year, none of us, in our most imaginative nightmares, could have predicted where we would be today, and why.

For the record, I am standing at a make-shift set in the University's 4<sup>th</sup> floor, Hovey Hall conference room. If you can understand how often I am called upon each year to offer remarks at University and community gatherings, you may understand that a quasi-permanent backdrop makes delivering remarks via Zoom, YouTube, and other video platforms a bit more convenient.

I want to begin this year's message by specifically addressing the Illinois State University students who are living in on-campus and off-campus housing this semester.

I believe that most of you are doing the right things to address the COVID-19 pandemic—wearing face-coverings, physical distancing—washing hands— all the things necessary to keep you and others safe and healthy.

Still, it is true that the activity of some has contributed to the significant rise in coronavirus cases in our community. Some of you have been called upon to answer for your actions and face more stringent penalties if cavalier behavior continues—penalties that could jeopardize your academic standing at ISU.

Those actions include the poor decisions made to attend a gathering of so-called YouTube “celebrities.” Crowds gathered at several off-campus locations in the early morning hours, before the Normal Police arrived, and the crowd dispersed.

Most in the crowd were not distancing and not wearing face-coverings. It gives me no joy to convey my great disappointment in the actions of those who gathered.

Hundreds of faculty and staff members at the University have been working non-stop to ensure that your education can continue in a safe and healthy environment. The actions of some were an insult to them, to the Town where you are a citizen, and to your families who support you being here.

Again, most of you act as good citizens. You pay for your housing, utilities, food, and clothing, and you purchase local products, and local services —just like every resident of McLean County. You contribute thousands of hours of volunteer time to the people of this community.

You teach the young and old to read. You help the hearing impaired to hear better, and the verbally impaired to speak better.

You worship, you vote, you invent, and you inspire with art, music, and dance. You heal those who are sick and comfort those who are lonely.

You keep small businesses in business. You grow crops. You shop for groceries for those who are too ill or too injured to shop for themselves, and you donate food that you could have kept for yourselves.

You babysit, walk pets, mow lawns, shovel driveways, and build homes for those who can't afford to build their own.

You drive patients to doctor's appointments and help them rehabilitate their bodies—cheering at their every new accomplishment.

The majority of you are the citizens that make Illinois State University proud. But some of you can and must do better or risk your association with this institution.

As I have included in my COVID-19 updates so many times, and would be negligent if I didn't say it each time—thank you—from the bottom of my heart—to the hundreds of staff and faculty members, who have worked themselves literally to exhaustion in trying to fashion a substantive University experience, while keeping the health, safety, and well-being of our campus and greater communities as their highest calling.

I am beyond grateful for their selfless service, and whether or not you agree with the constantly evolving COVID-19 plans—their efforts demand our respect and recognition.

Regrettably, there has been some news media reporting suggesting that Illinois State compares poorly to the other Illinois public universities in the impacts of the coronavirus outbreak and the University's response.

The truth is—many state universities don't test nearly as much as Illinois State, and don't transparently report positive cases as does ISU.

Other universities test so often that their positivity rates skew lower through simple division. The ultimate fact is the coronavirus impacts Illinois universities in a similar fashion—the more students—the more likely the incidence of coronavirus—and creative counting and reporting doesn't alter that fact.

Throughout the world, from New York to California, in Illinois, and right in our own community, the COVID-19 pandemic has, at times, brought out the best of us and the worst of us—and like you—I have witnessed both.

So often, I have wished that the occasional high level of rancor shouldn't have to be that way. But even though I am a card-carrying optimist—I understand that sometimes it does.

Maybe when pressures reach their peak and emotions are at their rawest—our feelings can spill over into an unchecked flood of blaming

and shaming. While this may be true, I also believe that a crisis produces heroes who emerge from the most unlikely of places.

It is these stories of kindness, resilience, and hope that keep me optimistic, and my greatest wish is that it does the same for you.

One tremendous source of optimism for the Illinois State community is our fall 2020 enrollment. In the midst of this horrific circumstance—when our world’s greatest certainty is uncertainty—the people of Illinois and beyond still voted with their feet—and they voted for Illinois State University.

Our total fall 2020 enrollment stands at 20,720—that is less than one-percent lower than last year’s total enrollment, and larger than the total enrollments for both 2015 and 2016—making it the second highest total in the last four years.

20,720—it is simply an amazing number given our circumstances—and it clearly demonstrates that despite a predictable avalanche of derisive social media—students and their families still believe in quality, and still choose Illinois State University.

While quantity is important, there is no stronger testament to the quality of our faculty and staff, and the incredible talent of our recruitment and retention teams, than evidenced by our 2020 ISU student body.

Although our new freshman student count predictably dropped about 10 percent—that is a miniscule figure given our world’s circumstances, and of course, the total numbers are bolstered by last year’s record enrollment.

Meanwhile, our total number of African-American students is up 5 percent and our total number of LatinX students remains virtually unchanged. Graduate student enrollment exceeded expectations by jumping 4 percent.

Despite the cataclysmic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, Illinois State University’s brand remains strong, its reputation remains solid, and its future remains bright.



Turning to the fiscal year '21 budget, Illinois State begins this academic year in stable condition. Our strong enrollment is complemented by a full, fiscal year state operating budget appropriation of \$69.6 million.

Certainly, the University will make a significant investment in keeping the campus safe—it is an endeavor of the highest calling. We are only three months into the new fiscal year, but it is projected that the University's investment in managing COVID-19 in fiscal year '21 will come close to and possibly exceed the fiscal year '20 investment of \$28 million.

To date, equipment and supplies for cleaning and PPE, technology hardware and software for virtual learning and operations, facility adaptations, and fall COVID-19 student testing plans, total almost \$8 million.

Coupled with foregone revenues due to adapted programs and activities, and fewer students living and eating in the University residence halls, the fall financial impact escalates another \$12 million for a total of approximately \$20 million—and all of this in just the second week of September.

Meanwhile, the Federal CARES Act resulted in a grant to Illinois State of approximately \$8 million to be passed along to students as aid. The intention is to offset student expenses directly related to the disruption of campus activities due to COVID-19. The Financial Aid Office is administering those emergency grants based on applications submitted through an online process.

In addition, thanks to the generous donations of alumni, faculty, staff, and friends, the University has also used the COVID-19 Redbirds Response Fund to provide emergency assistance to students.

To date almost 7,000 students have claimed CARES Act funds and 160 students have received support from the COVID-19 Redbirds Response Fund.

The administrative portion of the CARES grant to Illinois State, also \$8 million, will help offset the \$28 million fiscal impact resulting from COVID-19 in fiscal year '20, and will be applied as appropriate to continuing investments in fiscal year '21.

As a subset of CARES, the University has also received a \$1.9 million Governor's Emergency Education Relief grant from the State of Illinois to address the digital equity gap due to the COVID-19 crisis. The bulk of this funding is being utilized to purchase laptops to loan out to students with demonstrated financial need. The laptops will be distributed now through September 2021 and additional funding will be utilized for future technology solutions.

The University also continues to utilize internal funds in our efforts to make affordability and student accessibility a priority. For fiscal year '21, expected financial aid to be invested from University general revenue funds is almost \$38 million. To put that in perspective, that amount is over half of our state appropriation total.

Additionally, the State of Illinois AIM High program has been in place for two years. Over 1,700 students have benefitted from the program, receiving an additional \$4.5 million in external state funds.

The generosity of donors further contributes to the reduced net cost for students and helps make enrolling and progressing in college possible for many students who would otherwise not be able to achieve their higher education goals.

Meanwhile, as you may know, Illinois State concluded its largest fundraising campaign on June 30, raising nearly \$181 million for the Redbirds Rising campaign and smashing our original goal by more than \$30 million.

When Redbirds Rising began, we knew our goal was ambitious.

Over the course of the campaign, thousands of alumni and friends stepped up, making Redbirds Rising the University's most successful fundraising campaign to date. I'm humbled by our shared success and grateful for the vote of confidence cast in the Illinois State experience.

Of the 56,143 supporters who participated in the campaign, more than 27,000 were first-time donors and more than 30,500 were alumni.

I know that many of you watching today have given and continue to give of your time, talents, and treasures to Illinois State—and for that, you have my unyielding gratitude.

In addition to completing Redbirds Rising, our faculty, staff, and students accomplished a great deal during the late spring and summer weeks. Although the sound of the good news was perhaps muted by unrelenting COVID-19 headlines— here’s a snapshot of some summer success stories.

Illinois State welcomed Dr. Aondove Tarhule as the vice president for Academic Affairs and provost. Dr. Tarhule came to ISU from Binghamton University, part of the state universities of New York.

While at Binghamton, he served as vice provost and dean of the Graduate School; he facilitated the creation of new degree programs; developed new international partnerships; and implemented several major innovations to data and workflow software.

He also served with distinction in faculty and administrative roles at the University of Oklahoma. Although Dr. Tarhule's official starting date was July 1, he has been engaged in ISU's COVID-19 efforts for several months—so I hope you will soon have the opportunity to welcome him to campus in-person.

Just last week, *Washington Monthly* ranked Illinois State 62<sup>nd</sup> among all national universities, and ISU jumped 5 spots in the Midwest Best Bang for the Buck rankings—moving up to number 10.

Meanwhile, Illinois State ranked 7<sup>th</sup> overall on *Best's Review's* Survey of Leading College Insurance and Risk Management Programs. The survey determined where insurance companies look for their new talent and what schools are best preparing students for a career in the industry.

Also on the good news front—The U.S. Department of Education announced that Illinois State will receive a federal Student Support Services grant of more than \$1.5 million to help students succeed in, and graduate from college.

This federal TRIO program serves college students who are low income, first generation, or have a disability. Illinois State has received these grant funds since the early 1980s and the program is funded to serve 232 students.

The U.S. Department of Energy awarded a \$13 million grant for a nationwide project aimed to genetically strengthen a plant for use in sustainable energy efforts. Professor of Genetics John Sedbrook will head up the project that is aimed to genetically strengthen a plant for use in sustainable energy efforts. This project is a collaboration involving top scientists from universities and labs around the country and the world.

Associate Professor of Organic Chemistry, Andy Mitchell, was awarded a \$231,000 National Science Foundation grant to provide insights for chemists. His research involves looking for new reactions and little nuances about current reactions that will assist the broader scientific community.

This is the second three-year NSF grant for Mitchell's lab.

The National Center for Urban Education is partnering with our Center for Community Engagement and Service Learning on its Civic Engagement and Responsibility Minor Curriculum Committee. The Center is reviewing curriculum, asking for suggestions for new courses, and soliciting ideas to enhance existing courses.

This summer, 27 students received the new Undergraduate Research Support Program grant provided by our Office of Student Research. This is a grant program that encourages undergraduate student researchers to propose a research project under the supervision of a faculty mentor.

The fall semester welcomes a new registered student organization—the Black Student Psychology Association. The purpose of the association is to create networking opportunities, aid in professional development, and connect students to different resources on and off campus.



On Monday, August 24, I attended the vigil of the Black Girl Code as my first non-virtual event of the new academic year. Black Girl Code is a registered student organization that empowers, connects, and supports African-American women at Illinois State.

The march, peaceful protest, and vigil focused on black women who have fallen victim to police brutality. One day prior to the march, Jacob Blake was cut down in a hail of gunfire in Kenosha, Wisconsin—yet another mind-numbing example of injustice run amok in our country.

Later, on Friday, September 4<sup>th</sup>, I attended the Athletics March for Black Voices near Redbird Arena.

As Illinois State's president, I understand part of my role includes speaking out—then walking the talk— about diversity, equity, and inclusion. I would add to that by saying it is the role of every one of us to speak out and act out.

Equity is not an easy road. It pushes against a centuries-old narrative that things are supposed to be a certain way. It means admitting that our history, and the systems established throughout that history, can be flawed, can be brutal, and can be perpetuated in how we see the world today.

Leaders in higher education are trained to find solutions, fix problems, serve as good stewards of the public trust, and care for students, faculty, and staff. It can be difficult for us to hear of a student's pain and not want to act.

But we are learning that when it comes to addressing disparities in race, economics, ability—we must first listen and understand before we attempt to assuage the pain.

We as leaders, as teachers, as guides, must listen and learn if we are to truly hear the students voicing their frustration, trauma, and pain. Our institutional motto, "Gladly We Learn and Teach," is for every one of us.

In October of last year, students stood on our Quad with voices raised, calling for change. They continue with a steadfast voice that I respect and admire. Members of the University leadership met with students to discuss anti-Black sentiment on campus and across the nation. We are continuing that work and continuing to meet.

Among those meeting with students is Dr. Doris Houston, who I appointed as Interim Assistant to the President for Diversity and Inclusion. Her years as a statewide leader in social work and adoption services provides patience, passion, fortitude, and wisdom to help guide us all.

This summer, Illinois State removed the names of 10 U.S. secretaries of state who signified the floors of Watterson Towers. I am grateful to our staff from University Housing Services who submitted the change recommendation to the University Naming Committee—and I approved the recommendations immediately.

Since then, some have accused me of erasing history. But the action is not an erasure; it is waking up from that centuries-old narrative that echoes only one voice, and that has been the voice of the majority of our population.

The University continues its awakening by forming a process of analyzing named places across campus—so there may be more discussions to come.

Moving forward means working together, and there are so many dedicated people advancing equity and celebrating diversity. In response to the call of our Campus Climate Task Force to diversify the curriculum, Dr. Yojanna Cuenca-Carlino led a team to create professional development initiatives for instructors. The Framework for Inclusive Teaching Excellence is being integrated throughout our colleges with help of the GROWTH Change Team.

I anxiously await consideration and approval from the Academic Senate for the Inclusion, Diversity, Equity, and Access in U.S. Society graduation requirement that was sent to them last year. My thanks to the task force members who dedicated time and effort to that document.

I also want to recognize Criminal Justice Sciences faculty members Dr. Miltonette Craig and Dr. Charles Bell. Dr. Craig was nationally recognized as a 2020 Emerging Scholar by Diverse Issues in Higher Education. And Dr. Charles Bell won the inaugural Illinois State African American Studies Summer Research Initiative.

Part of our goal to physically reflect our value of Diversity and Inclusion is the University's Multicultural Center. The \$5.5 million project renovates ISU's former Instructional Technology and Development Center building located on South Main Street into a new Multicultural Center. The facility will provide opportunities for research and scholarship, support of faculty and staff affinity groups, along with alumni engagement.

Current plans are to start the main project construction this month, with a planned completion date of July 2021 and occupancy at the end of July 2021.

Some other projects of note—The Wonsook Kim College of Fine Arts Rehabilitation Project is now approved at a new total cost of \$61.9 million. The project was initially developed at a cost of \$54.3 million—prior to the budget impasse years. We have now restarted planning efforts for the project, which will take approximately 5 years to complete.

Meanwhile, there are several current interconnected construction and renovation projects at the Bone Student Center. Construction was completed on the \$32.9 million addition and renovation project this past April. Separate food venue construction projects within the facility footprint for Starbucks and Qdoba were completed and opened a year earlier. The Star Ginger restaurant is currently under construction and on track to be completed by January 2021.

The \$6.75 million Cyber Security project at Julian Hall encloses the first-floor parking area under Julian to construct 3 classrooms and 2 collaboration rooms for Cyber Security; construct a new entrance vestibule link along the west face of the building; and enclose the remaining 17,000 square feet of “shell space” for future academic purposes. After starting construction in the fall of 2019, the COVID-19 pandemic forced a temporary work shut down. Construction resumed this past July and is now scheduled to be completed in the spring of 2021.

Finally, Illinois State has hired Cannon Architects and their educational specialty sub-consultants to help the University plan the implementation of a new Engineering Degree Program. The scope of this work includes educational planning, curriculum, space design, engineering building site recommendation, implementation plan, and estimated project costs. Work started in April and is scheduled to be completed late this year. Implementation will begin in 2021.

Moving on to Athletics, the 2019-20 year was certainly one that will be remembered for a long time. The fall season started off great, with both the football and volleyball programs advancing to the NCAA

Tournament and football advancing to the quarterfinals before falling to eventual national champion North Dakota State. The Redbird football program ended the year with a No. 7 national ranking.

Senior soccer standout Kate Del Fava also put together one of the best individual years in program history.

Del Fava was named the MVC Player of the Year and Scholar-Athlete of the Year, and later went on to be selected as a Senior CLASS Award All-American, a United Soccer Coaches Scholar All-American, and the 2019 Academic All-America Women's Soccer Team Member of the Year. A Bone Scholar, Del Fava became the highest drafted Missouri Valley Conference women's soccer player ever and the second Redbird to be drafted in the National Women's Soccer League.



As the calendar turned to winter, the women's indoor track team continued its dominance by winning its third-straight Missouri Valley Conference indoor title, breaking an MVC record for points scored.

In addition, women's basketball newcomer JuJu Redmond was named both the Missouri Valley Conference Newcomer of the Year and Sixth Player of the Year as she helped lead the Redbirds to a 19-win season and the No. 4 seed in the MVC Tournament.

Despite the challenges of having seasons cancelled due to the COVID-19 pandemic and classes moving online after spring break, Redbird student-athletes set a new semester departmental grade-point average record of 3.61 during the Spring 2020 semester, topping the previous mark of 3.31 set during the Spring 2019 semester.

Finally today, I close this message in the same manner that I have for the past 6 years—with a simple and humble thank you for the support you have afforded me and Marlene since we assumed our roles six-and-a-half years ago.

Although we are in the midst of the most chaotic crisis in our lifetimes—  
my mind and my heart are filled with the pleasure, privilege, and honor  
of serving you.

Thank you for your time and kind attention, and thank you for all you do  
to make Illinois State University—Illinois' first and finest public  
University.

And, of course, GO YOU REDBIRDS!

