



State of the University Address 2006
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I am pleased—as well as proud and encouraged—to offer my first report on the state of the University of Nebraska. I welcome this opportunity to share some perspective on the events of the past year, celebrate a sampling of the University’s accomplishments, and offer a look to the year ahead.

A core theme I wanted to reinforce when I took office as president was that *public universities were created by each state to serve the people of the state*. This fundamental principle underlying public education is as important in the 21st century as it was in the 19th.

The University of Nebraska was one of the early land grant universities, founded in 1869, just seven years after President Lincoln signed the Morrill Act into law. This is of more than historical interest; it helps define our institution, and reflects the values we still hold dear.

The Morrill Act was a uniquely American phenomenon, and may have been the single most important education policy initiative in our country’s history. It signaled that higher education and the opportunity that it promises are not reserved to the wealthy and privileged.

Today, our ability to enjoy a high quality of life depends on education more than ever before. That’s why I have always believed that the first priority of any public university—and the University of Nebraska in particular—is to provide citizens of the state affordable access to education. This is a tall order in an era in which competition for limited state funds is becoming more and more intense, financial aid covers a diminishing share of the cost of education, and the demographic make-up of the state is changing dramatically.

Affordable access is the first priority in the university’s new strategic framework, the development of which has been led over the past year by the Board of Regents, the chancellors and me. The framework is a university-wide and, I hope, statewide, effort to guide planning, establish priorities, and measure progress. It is the result of many discussions with Nebraskans – including faculty, staff and students – about their university.

It consists of six overarching goals addressing:

Access and affordability

High quality academic programs

Excellence in research and scholarship

Nebraska’s workforce and economic development

Our commitment to engagement with the state; and

Accountability to the people of Nebraska

Affordable access

Our commitment to giving Nebraskans a better quality of life through access to education is easy to articulate ... but difficult to achieve. We must overcome financial challenges, increase the college-going rate – especially among underrepresented ethnic, racial and income groups – and create opportunities for non-traditional students and those with limited access to education.

There are three primary requirements to ensuring affordable access at public universities: a stable base of state support; reasonable, predictable tuition increases; and adequate need-based aid. I am pleased to report that we have made significant progress in each of these areas.

In 2005, after several very difficult budget years, the Legislature approved a budget that provided the largest increase for the university in years. This demonstration of support, which reflects the historic dedication of Nebraskans to higher education, allowed us to meet some significant objectives.

For example, competitive salaries are essential in attracting and keeping the best faculty and staff, and this year we were able to provide much-needed salary increases.

And, after four years of double-digit tuition increases, we were able to hold this year's increase to the lowest level in eight years. The Legislature also increased the amount of need-based aid available to university and other college students, which is important as the relative value of Pell Grants – the primary tool of need-based financial aid – continues to decline.

These actions were critical in providing access to quality education.

Increasing the college-going rate

Nebraska needs more educated citizens, and the university must play a central role in increasing the number of people who hold college degrees.

We began to see some encouraging trends last fall, when enrollment increased about 1 percent university-wide, and enrollment of first-time freshmen was up more than 6 percent.

There is still much work to be done. We have set a goal to increase enrollment by 1.5 percent in each of the next three years. This is an ambitious target, but a number of steps have already been taken to achieve it.

One approach was to change the way we allocate the budget, with a new incentive for enrollment growth. We're experimenting with a new tuition policy that allows some flexibility in setting tuition rates to address different market conditions and opportunities.

We are stepping up efforts to recruit students, both from within the state and from out of state, and will continue to explore new strategies.

Efforts to increase the college-going rate must target students early in school, as well as their families. To that end, we're working with our colleagues in state government, in business and in other education sectors, and have formally created and funded a P-16 initiative. For the first time, we have established a senior position in the president's office to coordinate this statewide effort, and our partners are sharing the cost. I look forward to new initiatives emerging over the next year from these important efforts.

Diversity initiatives

Nebraska is changing in many ways, not the least of which is in the diversity of our school-age population. If we are to sustain our level of educational attainment, let alone increase it as we hope, we must increase the participation rates of underrepresented minorities.

To illustrate: in last year's Nebraska high school graduating class less than 5 percent of the graduates were Latino; by the time today's kindergartners graduate from high school in 2018,

it is projected that the class will be virtually the same size, but more than 20 percent Latino. This four-fold increase in the percentage of Latino students creates new challenges, as well as new opportunities, but we have to prepare for them adequately.

We *are* making progress. This year's incoming freshman class at the university represents an increasingly diverse student body, with a significant increase of Latino students on our undergraduate campuses. University-wide, total enrollment of ethnic minority students grew by more than 7 percent in 2005.

Programs like UNL's Rising Stars banquet for high school students of color in the Panhandle area, UNK's ongoing work with Latino students in central Nebraska, UNMC's health career days, and UNO's multicultural student recruitment day – which drew three times as many participants in 2005 as it did in 2004 – are evidence of our commitment to reaching our goals.

Our diversity efforts go well beyond student recruitment and will be increasingly important as Nebraska's demographics change. Vice Chancellor Rubens Pamies of the Medical Center is chairing the search for a senior position in the president's office to lead these initiatives.

Distance education

Another aspect of access is to ensure that we're meeting the needs of non-traditional students, adult learners and individuals whose location may limit their options. New technologies allow us to do that more effectively, and to expand and increase learning opportunities. Today, we offer 50 undergraduate and graduate degrees, endorsements and certificate programs through our distance education divisions, with nearly 700 on-line classes and flexible course offerings.

I am convinced, however, that we can do more to increase our penetration in Nebraska and around the world through more effective positioning and marketing that leverages our reputation for quality. This will be an area of focus over the next year.

High quality academic programs

We have taken important steps to build on our strengths, and I am proud of the accomplishments of our faculty and students. Their work is reflected in a growing reputation for excellence.

Despite a difficult fiscal environment in recent years, I believe that today the university may be stronger academically than at any time in its history. This is due in part to the identification of priorities and the strategic investment in programs.

Through campus-led efforts to identify priority programs several years ago, the university focused on building quality in a number of key areas. University-wide Programs of Excellence funding has strengthened initiatives such as the Water Center at UNL, which is addressing one of the most important issues in Nebraska today; teacher education and information technology programs at UNO; cancer prevention, genetics and rural health at UNMC; and undergraduate research at UNK.

Our faculty are more competitive nationally for research grants, and we are attracting more top students. Last fall, the entering classes at UNK, UNO, and UNL each had the highest average ACT score in history. And competition for seats at UNMC was the strongest ever.

We will continue to make strategic allocation of resources that I am convinced will add to the value of a University of Nebraska degree and to our ability to contribute to the state.

Facilities

The university now manages over 70 percent of the state facilities, and some are well past beginning to show their age. To do 21st century teaching, research and outreach, we need modern classroom and labs. In 1998, the Legislature passed LB 1100, a major partnership between the university and the state, which renovated 14 buildings at a cost of \$80 million.

This has been one of the most important and successful initiatives at the university. Now, we have proposed a successor, Legislative Bill 605.

Because of its importance to our efforts in student recruiting, faculty recruiting and retention and proper stewardship of our facilities, this is our highest legislative priority for 2006.

With the help of many individuals and organizations, inside and outside of the university, I believe we're making a compelling case for this initiative.

Private support

A critical component of supporting strong programs and state-of-the-art facilities has been the support of private citizens and businesses, who, through their gifts to the University of Nebraska Foundation, have leveraged the state's support of the university dramatically.

The Foundation just completed one of its most successful years ever, raising about \$78 million and transferring the same amount—a record—for endowed chairs, scholarships, and programs and facilities.

This year we celebrated the largest-ever charitable gifts to both the University of Nebraska at Kearney and the Nebraska College of Technical Agriculture at Curtis. We received gifts and bequests of more than \$11 million from Johnny Carson, and renamed the Department of Theatre Arts at UNL in his honor.

The Durham Foundation's leadership gift for the new \$30 million endowment for the Durham School of Architectural Engineering and Construction in Omaha will position us to offer the premier program in this field. And at the Medical Center, private support will make possible a new \$53 million Center for Health Sciences Education that will rival the best medical teaching facilities in the country.

My colleagues at other universities express surprise and envy at the success of our fundraising. The private endowment at the University of Nebraska ranks 18th in size among all public universities. That's remarkable for an institution of our size located in a state with a population that ranks 38th. We are enormously grateful for the private support the university receives and for the excellent work of our partners at the Foundation.

Faculty excellence

Of course, the most important factor in our ability to offer quality educational programs is our faculty. In recent years, faculty on all four campuses have faced many challenges, including budget cuts and deteriorating facilities. They have weathered these difficult times and risen above them, and in doing so have strengthened this university.

Professors like Bill McLaughlin at UNL, who received one of the two university-wide teaching awards this year, exemplify excellence in the classroom. Bill is pioneering the use of interactive technologies in his chemistry classes – creating a learning environment that is helping students succeed in a difficult, but critical, subject.

Kenya Taylor, who teaches audiology and speech language pathology at UNK, was the other award recipient in 2005. Her success in the classroom has translated into a 92 percent first-

time pass rate for her students who take the national accreditation exam after graduation – well above the national average.

UNO's School of Social Work, which received the departmental teaching award, emphasizes service learning and community involvement to give students practical experience and bring another dimension to their education.

I've been talking to groups across the state about the importance of teaching and research in, among other areas, agriculture, medicine, the physical sciences, math and engineering, and I will continue to do so because of their value to the state and the nation. But those are by no means the only important disciplines. I received a degree in English from the university, and I believe that arts and the humanities are in some ways the very soul of a great university. That's why it gave me such pleasure to provide a new and special recognition to a member of our faculty.

Through the support of private donors, we created the first university-wide endowed professorship—the Presidential Professor—and selected Ted Kooser as the inaugural recipient. Ted was named – and then re-named – U.S. Poet Laureate, won the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry, and has served as an exceptional ambassador for the university and the state.

I'm delighted that he agreed to share his unique talents and insights with people all across Nebraska as presidential professor. He is one of the many bright stars on our faculty.

Research and scholarly activity

An emphasis on recruiting and retaining excellent faculty and sustaining leading academic programs has led to new achievement in research and scholarly activity. The university has made great strides—and must continue to if we are to serve Nebraska well.

University research and technology development have demonstrated their economic value to regions throughout the country, and they have in Nebraska as well. In the last fiscal year, we set a record for research funding, with more than \$176 million in sponsored awards.

This represents growth of nearly 200 percent over a 10-year period, and puts the University of Nebraska – for the first time – in the top 35 in R&D expenditures among public universities, and in the top 50 of all universities.

These grants include funding that has significant potential for commercial development and enormous implications for the health and well-being of people throughout the world.

Some examples include:

- A \$7.4 million USDA grant to the Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources for drought research that will help agricultural producers and others worldwide monitor the impact of drought and manage its risks.
- A \$10.6 million NIH grant to the Center for Virology—a collaborative effort of UNL, UNMC and Creighton—to study infectious diseases including AIDS, SARS and the West Nile virus.
- And, a \$10.6 million NIH grant to UNMC to study heart failure, as well as other multi-million dollar grants in the areas of pancreatic cancer, lymphomas and aortic aneurysms.

Of course, scholarly work is not limited to the sciences. UNO received a \$1.1 million Department of Education grant to assist first-generation college students, and a \$1.7 million grant to UNK will help 150 early childhood teachers complete their degrees.

Our success in technology development is encouraging, and we've seen some exciting results, including a collaborative project between Dmitry Oleynikov at UNMC and Shane

Farritor at UNL. The robotics technology they've developed and patented has tremendous potential for minimally invasive surgery.

I'm convinced that interdisciplinary and intercampus collaboration offers huge potential, and we've provided new incentives with Nebraska Research Initiative funding criteria and other programs to encourage these efforts. I invite ideas for how we might further encourage additional collaborations.

A number of other projects hold promise, and we recognize the need to be more aggressive in developing technology and moving it to the marketplace. Our ongoing research in areas such as pancreatic cancer, hemophilia, plant genetics and food processing has huge potential, and we're working with some national experts on how to strengthen our capacity to develop technology and attract more private funding.

I believe a key ingredient for success is a culture that supports innovation and entrepreneurship that starts at the top. And the Board of Regents, the chancellors and I strongly support the efforts of our faculty to extend the value of their research in new ways.

We have taken steps in Board and administrative policies to streamline approvals and encourage partnership with the private sector, and we will do more to recognize faculty success.

Outreach and engagement

Teaching and research are at the heart of any public university, but there is a third component –engagement and outreach – that's especially important in a land-grant and public university, and to our citizens. Over the past year, we have seen the University of Nebraska's outreach efforts expand, particularly the contribution we make to economic competitiveness and workforce development.

Working in a partnership with the state, private sector and other educational institutions, I believe we can play an important leadership role in Nebraska's economic future.

This goal may be among the most challenging. Nebraska has a significant "brain drain"—not by sending our high school graduates off to college in other states, but by sending too many of our college-educated citizens in search of opportunities elsewhere.

A legislative task force identified the reversal of this trend as a top priority for the state. We agree. Turning Nebraska into a "brain gain" state requires partnership with the private sector. We've had success with expanded internship programs that acquaint students with the benefits of and opportunities for living and working in Nebraska, but we need to do more.

We plan to help communities and businesses throughout Nebraska attract and work with university students so that we can begin early on to build relationships and help students understand that unique and rewarding employment opportunities exist in our state.

The Peter Kiewit Institute's internship programs in McCook and Cambridge are good models, as is the J.D. Edwards program that helps businesses throughout the state solve technology programs.

Ideas such as the "Bring the Talent Back Home" Task Force, initiated by central Nebraska business leaders, are also promising. We will look for ways to replicate these across the state.

I believe that Nebraskans have long recognized the value of the university to all areas of the state, based in part on the success of cooperative extension.

Today, it is more important than ever that the university extend its programs and resources beyond our principal campuses, to help address problems in rural development, health, and building economic strength in regions across the state.

Last summer, I restructured our organization to provide leadership in engagement, and hired Nebraska businessman and civic leader Pete Kotsiopoulos as vice president. Pete's experience, along with his connections with business, education and government leaders across the state, brings a new dimension to our economic development efforts.

In all of our outreach, the importance and value of public-private partnerships is clear. The more we can build and promote those partnerships, the more competitive Nebraska will become in the global economy. A few examples stand out.

In September, a new organization called BioNebraska was formed to expand life sciences activity in the state, with significant leadership provided by the university. This is an area in which many states, including some of our neighbors, are making significant, multi-million dollar, investments.

BioNebraska will support research in the life sciences, development of technology, and policies that promote technology-based economic development.

Another partnership – the collaboration with the Ak-Sar-Ben Future Trust project – will transform central Omaha and UNO. This project began with a vision developed after visiting and studying other similar projects. This captured people's imaginations; they saw what could be and they wanted to be a part of it. I look forward to the development of more ambitious ideas that result when partners across sectors collaborate.

One such ambitious idea, which will require the active involvement of the private sector, government and the university—is the development of the I-80 corridor. We have a significant opportunity here that we cannot afford to miss.

While outreach and engagement have always been part of a public university's mission, they have not always been perceived on par with teaching and research. Our recognition of what we value should begin with some of the university's most important symbols.

For years we've recognized the best faculty research, creative activity and teaching through our ORCA and OTICA awards. But we have not similarly recognized outreach and engagement. This year we will initiate an Outstanding Engagement and Outreach Award, which will be the analog of the ORCA and OTICA awards, and will be awarded annually at the ceremony with these other prestigious university-wide honors.

Accountability

All of our work in research and teaching and outreach is directed toward serving the public – and because of the public trust placed and the investment made in the university, it is imperative that the University of Nebraska be cost effective and accountable to the citizens of the state. We must demonstrate fiscal responsibility, create and report on our performance and allocate our resources wisely.

Reflections

One year ago, I traveled across Nebraska for two days, participating in a series of events to commemorate my installation as president of the university. These events – some ceremonial, others educational, a few largely social – involved thousands of Nebraskans who came to Scottsbluff, Kearney, Omaha and Lincoln.

The installation offered an opportunity to pause and reflect on this great university – its history and its future. It was an occasion in which we shared pride in the university's heritage and optimism for its future.

Throughout the past year, I have continued my travels – speaking to civic organizations about the university, working with my colleagues in higher education and the public schools, and participating in the huge array of events that are part of a major university. I have been reminded over and over of the great strides we have made and encouraged that the future is a bright one.

We have built some relationships with a number of groups this year that have been very important to the university's success.

And, I believe we've broken new ground in the work of the Board of Regents, which is driven by a commitment to this university and the citizens of Nebraska. Our four chancellors are providing strong leadership on their campuses and it has been my privilege to work with them and their colleagues.

As I look back over the past year, a number of events are particularly memorable.

Last fall, when the University of Nebraska became one of the first in the country to open its doors to those displaced by Hurricane Katrina, I was touched by the outpouring of support – from students offering dorm rooms and tutoring assistance to faculty offering to share research space and take on additional teaching loads.

Our early decision to offer in-state tuition and to enroll students and accept visiting faculty immediately helped ease a stressful and difficult situation. The Foundation stepped forward as well, quickly creating a special scholarship fund for displaced students with Nebraska ties. And, as the academic year has progressed, many of our students and faculty have traveled to the Gulf Coast, spending their fall and winter breaks providing hands-on assistance to the devastated communities there.

We've received some important national recognition this year. In March, Dr. Julie Gerberding, the director of the Centers for Disease Control, was on hand for the opening of the Biocontainment Unit at UNMC – the first of its kind in the nation. She commended the collaboration between the university and state government, and said that Nebraska is “leading the way in bioterrorism preparedness.”

A few weeks ago, I was invited to join a select group of university presidents at a summit convened by the U.S. Secretaries of State and Education. First Lady Laura Bush participated, delivering a speech in which she singled out UNO for its program that helps prepare Afghan women teachers. And His Excellency Hamid Karzai, president of Afghanistan, accepted an honorary degree at a ceremony at UNO in May.

Some of the most memorable events of the past year revolved around our students. In October, I sat in the audience at the Lied Center and listened to business students ask insightful and well-informed questions of Bill Gates and Warren Buffett. I was proud of our students and the faculty who guide them so successfully.

And of all the students I've met, perhaps none were more impressive than a group of Latino students at UNK – all the first in their family to attend college – whose enthusiasm and commitment to earning a college degree are inspiring. These students have a brighter future – in part, because of the University of Nebraska.

As I reflect on where we are, where we've been, and where we're going, I am more excited today than I was year ago about the future of the University of Nebraska. I have found that the “Love of Place” that brought me back to Nebraska in 2004 is stronger than ever – and that it's shared by people throughout the university and in every community in the state.

I am honored to serve as president of this great university.

Thank you.