


2015

## State of the University Address

UNO Office of the Chancellor  
*University of Nebraska at Omaha*

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Chancellor John E. Christensen  
State of the University Address  
University of Nebraska at Omaha  
November 9, 2015

Good afternoon, and welcome to the 2015 State of the University Address.

On August 26, 2015, the Omaha World-Herald published an editorial titled: "Mavs move to the big time." The region's largest newspaper said this of our university:

"There's something deeper brewing, a sense of Maverick pride."

If you walk around UNO today, in very little time, you will feel the pride and the momentum thriving in this place we call home. The spirit among students, faculty, and staff is unlike anything I have witnessed – or felt – in my forty years as a Maverick.

As I approach my 10<sup>th</sup> year as Chancellor of this very special

university, I went back and read all of my previous State of the University addresses. It was an emotional experience as I read with wonder about the dreaming and planning that took place in the early days of working with all of you. Having the privilege of serving in this role and summarizing what you have accomplished each year because you rolled up your sleeves and worked hard ... was and is truly inspiring.

Here's how I closed the 2006 Address:

"This is our moment in UNO's distinguished history to make a difference, to set a course and to determine its future. Thank you for joining me on this journey."

And what a journey it has been.

For me, this is a moment where it is obvious and undeniable that “something deeper is brewing.”

So, who are we?

We are independent thinkers. Explorers. Risk takers. We are willing to go against the grain; ask the hard questions; and look at challenges in a different way. We collaborate. We serve. We represent. We grow. We are doing things that people said would never happen. We are loud. We are proud. We are Mavericks!

Likewise, our relationships with the community have continued to grow dramatically—and in very positive ways. UNO’s commitment to enhancing the quality of life in Omaha is recognized, appreciated, and growing.

We believe our campus has no borders. Omaha is our campus. And, we are a national leader in how to integrate the university with our city.

So, let me say: I am pleased. No, I am very pleased.

As a famous Omaha businessman Peter Kiewit often said, “I am

pleased, but not satisfied.”

Perhaps it’s in my DNA, but—like many of you—I can never be satisfied as long as opportunities and challenges continue for Omaha. There is no neutral in life, my friends—either we are moving forward or we are losing ground.

The Maverick family is on the move—and that momentum is about our students and community. We are only in the early rounds of fighting to create a bright future for ALL.

This morning, UNO received some incredible news that I will share with you. The Military Times has once again ranked UNO the #1 military friendly university or college in the United States. Our military and veterans fight for us, and the faculty and staff of UNO will fight for their success. Always.

When I think about this recognition and all of the other remarkable accomplishments, please know this last decade has been the absolute pleasure of my life’s work. But, I’m not satisfied and I know, neither are you.

As I reflect on all the amazing

work that has taken place at our university and in Omaha, I want to offer heartfelt thanks to the faculty, staff, students, alumni and community partners, leaders, and friends.

To my faculty colleagues... I say thank you for your dedication to our strategic goals of being student centered, academically excellent, and community engaged. You are building that bright future for the next generation of Maverick minds and spirits, while at the same time impacting Omaha and all citizens by teaming for a better metropolitan tomorrow. Today's remarkable momentum is the result of your innovative and interdisciplinary approaches to teaching/learning, research, creative activity, and engagement. Thank you for being the ENGINE propelling this journey!!

I'm equally proud and grateful of the contributions provided by our UNO staff and the staffs of the University of Nebraska Foundation and UNO Alumni Association. Whether it is your commitment to leadership, recruitment/retention,

wellness/safety, sustainability, or your work to create and maintain quality places for teaching/learning, research, and campus life. Or perhaps your work is directed at fundraising, connecting with Alums, technical support, advising, or engagement.

Whatever the case, you have enhanced campus spirit and student life, which is critical to our success. And, let's not forget the wonderful investment of time being made in our communications and branding that tells our story loudly, clearly, and in meaningful ways. Thank you all for being the FUEL for our journey's engine!!

The support and trust of our community has given us the opportunity to become a leading metropolitan university and the wherewithal to serve our students and Omaha in ways never before possible in our 108-year history.

Through collaboration, philanthropy, and unique public/private partnerships, this community has given our journey incredible trajectory. Thanks to all who have supported UNO's

dreams, and please know those dreams are coming true.

Lastly and perhaps most importantly, I want to thank all of our students for choosing to join the Maverick family. I'm so proud of your hard work in the classroom, your involvement in campus life and community service, your support of fellow students, and your commitment to success now and in the future. You are the heart of this campus and the reason for our journey.

And, with our new University of Nebraska President, Dr. Hank Bounds, and his deep commitment to serving students, communities, and the state in forward thinking and innovative ways, the future for our campus and system is very bright.

During the past year, there have been many significant accomplishments.

Let me just share a few of them with you:

- The most visible is the Baxter Arena—a truly transformational space for UNO, Maverick

Athletics, Ak-sar-ben Village, Mid-Town and the entire metropolitan area. This beautiful facility became a reality because of University, donor, and city support. The Baxter Arena provides a home for UNO athletics and adds to campus and community life. Simply said, the Baxter Arena embodies the tremendously meaningful integration of UNO's Division One athletic programs into our campus and the community at large.

- UNO's 4-year transition to Division I is complete thanks to the efforts of our athletic leadership team and a campus wide committee. I am pleased to see the terrific performance of our teams in the new division, and I want you to know how proud I am of the student-athletes who last year had an all student-athlete GPA in the top 10 of Division I

institutions nationally.

- Our focus on students led to the complete renovation of UNO's Student Union. The construction is well underway and albeit somewhat challenging until completion, but the outcome will add tremendous value to the campus. This facility will help to maximize student support services and provide state-of-the-art, gathering and meeting places.
- While they are important, buildings aren't the only way the campus has improved.

Recently, UNO received tremendous support to expand the Glacier Creek property, which will continue to enhance our ecosystems learning and research opportunities for faculty and students. Additionally, this will allow for expansion of STEM related experiences for K-

12 student involvement, which has considerable demand. We will continue to work with the community to identify additional opportunities for natural learning and research places in the metropolitan area.

- And, our research and scholarly engagement is flourishing throughout the campus, with considerable work being interdisciplinary across programs, colleges, and campuses. External funding has reached a level of approximately \$20 million dollars, with my 2020 goal being \$25 million. Student research has also grown dramatically in the past few years thanks to faculty leadership and mentoring as well as support of the Office of Research and Creative Activity, which has provided over \$480,000 in seed funding for student projects during

2014/15.

- In October, the University of Nebraska Board of Regents approved a new joint venture between UNO and the University of Nebraska Medical Center. The UNeTech Institute will bring together the campuses' faculty/staff to create a vibrant interdisciplinary collaboration in Biomedical Research, Innovation, and Entrepreneurship. Only a few operations like this exist and are located on the East and West coasts with one in Texas, but this is the first in the Midwest and it's happening here in our city.
- Another clear example of how UNO's Maverick identity is evolving can be seen through our student housing. UNO's new housing on the Pacific Campus is getting underway next to Scott Hall and will provide over 400 beds and satellite student services. The Scott Conference Center

will expand to provide additional meeting spaces and dining opportunities for students, faculty, and staff in response to the new housing coming online.

- We do not travel this journey alone. I'm very grateful for the wonderful partnership we have formed with the Omaha Archdiocese. As a result of UNO's commitment to serving all students in the best ways possible, a St. John Paul II Newman Center is being constructed west of FDR and although it will be on Archdiocese property it will provide housing and a gathering place for UNO Catholic students and any of our students who may wish to be in this wonderful facility.
- Speaking of meaningful partnerships, our collaboration with our Metropolitan Community College and community

organizations such as Avenue Scholars, College Possible, and the AKSARBEN Foundation has reached a point where we are working toward building a formal compact to enhance our collective impact on education and career success for all students. Together, we can grow tomorrow's workforce pipeline for Omaha and Nebraska, and exemplify and model University, Community College, and community organization collaboration.

- The Barbara Weitz Community Engagement Center continues to gain prominence as the national model for engagement. This past year, 291 community-based organizations used the CEC space and almost 7,000 people attended events hosted in the facility. The Service Learning Academy for the first time in Academy history supported the delivery of more than 200

service-learning courses with 86 of those courses incorporating K-12 students in a variety of service-learning projects. Also, the CEC Office of Civic and Social Responsibility assisted the campus in partnerships with approximately 250 community organizations providing over 400,000 hours of service in the metropolitan area.

- Remarkable work is being done each day in our Academic Priorities including Early Childhood and STEM Education, Sustainability, and Globalization; with research having been previously mentioned. Our interdisciplinary teams are making notable progress in P-16 support and pipeline development, scholarly engagement, and creating partnerships across the state, country, and internationally.
- I'm sure you know, but we have "world class"



academic and student affairs personnel on campus. They have now implemented our Enrollment Management Plan and innovative strategies to grow our campus and help every student in the Maverick family succeed.

- Let me share just a few facts:

-This past year UNO welcomed the largest incoming class in UNO history with over a 10% increase in graduate students, about an 8 ½ % increase in first year students, and slightly more than an 8% increase in transfer students. Over the past 10 years, enrollment has continued to grow and I believe this trend will be sustained.

-Currently 25% of our student body is racially and ethnically diverse, 44% are first generation, and more than 10% are military and their

dependents.

-The Adult and non-traditional student population has grown and currently represents 36 ½% of our student profile, while our international student population from 117 countries has also grown to approximately 7% of today's student body.

I am proud of this growth, particularly in these populations, because it is critical to provide student opportunity for advancement. It's that simple, that is why we are seeking to grow.

As you know, student retention from the first to second year in college is a significant indicator of student success and graduation. I'm pleased to report that our retention rate is currently at 77.1% and has a growth trend of 5% over the past 10 years, which is a remarkable gain in the

retention world.

Obviously related, this past year UNO celebrated the largest graduating class in our history as we had the privilege of giving diplomas to 3,311 students.

In addition to thanking Academic and Student Affairs, I want to thank the work being done by each of our Colleges, our Athletic and Military Centers, our learning communities, and educational support services for their strong commitment to student access and success.

- Those attending the Coalition of Urban and Metropolitan Universities national conference hosted by UNO last month here in Omaha were genuinely amazed by what is taking place on our campus and in the community, and I predict as we host next year's National Engagement Scholarship

Consortium the impact will be similar. Hosting these national conferences is a clear statement of UNO's advancement as an Urban Metropolitan University, and it also provides us the opportunity to learn from others about how and where to continue on our journey. A big thanks to all of the UNO volunteers and sponsors who helped make the CUMU conference a great success, and I know we can count on you to help with next year's conference too!

- This past year, we launched the "Know the O" campaign, inviting our students, alumni, friends, and supporters to learn more about our university. We asked them to proudly display their Maverick pride. And the response has been tremendous! All over Omaha, you can see the UNO brand—a clear indication that we are telling our story and it is being heard and shared.

Please know time has limited my opportunity to touch on only a few of the great things happening on campus since the last address, so I would ask that you each give yourself a pat on the back for all that has been done but not directly cited today.

I close today considering what we are and contemplating our future. I know some of our thoughts will change as the world changes; but we will adjust with the times. And as we prepare for the future, your ideas and input will help us create the vision for tomorrow's UNO.

I'm going to send a brief survey to all on campus asking for your thoughts regarding the future as they relate to any or all of our three strategic goals and/or infrastructure and personnel needs. We will hold one campus forum where faculty, staff, and students may also offer input, and this information will be shared with our Strategic Planning Committee as well as being a part of our discussion during the annual University/Community Strategic Forum in the spring. Finally, the 2016 State of the

University Address will focus on our journey into the next decade.

We are a public institution and those we serve depend on us each and every day to contribute to improving the quality of life in our community and beyond.

Our students and our community need us to keep planning, keep implementing, and keep dreaming on their behalf. We must persist and pay it forward as our students will serve the next generation of students, communities, our country, and the world. They will continue UNO's journey to places we can't even imagine.

My final comment is this: no one may leave today until you sign up for this:

[Show the license plate on screen]

I'm just kidding.

Well, ok, I won't keep you here but as I said last year, it's time. It's time for us to show our university pride everywhere we possibly can. I hope you consider joining me in getting a new license plate for your car so we have 500+ mini billboards on the streets, roads

and highways of the Midwest.

Again, thank you for all you do for  
UNO.

I'll end with my two favorite  
words:

GO MAVS!