


2008

Convocation Address: "UNO 100: Central To Our City, Fulfilling The Promise"

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Recommended Citation

Office of the Chancellor, UNO, "Convocation Address: "UNO 100: Central To Our City, Fulfilling The Promise"" (2008). *Chancellor's Speeches*. 3.
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**UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA AT OMAHA
2008 CONVOCATION ADDRESS
CHANCELLOR JOHN E. CHRISTENSEN**

**“UNO 100: CENTRAL TO OUR CITY, FULFILLING THE PROMISE”
OCTOBER 8, 2008**

Good morning, welcome to you all. Many thanks to Sally Ganem and all of our Centennial Hosts, our congressional delegation, Mayor Fahey, Regent Schroeder and members of the Board of Regents, President Milliken, International guests and all of our colleagues from throughout the University of Nebraska system for joining us on this very special day.



One year ago tomorrow, during my installation ceremony, a quote from the Danish philosopher Soren Kirkegaard provided a context for my remarks when he wrote, "Life can only be understood backwards; but it must be lived forward."

UNO's centennial offers us a time to celebrate its rich history, and all that has made this institution what it is today. But ours has always been a university with its eye on the horizon, and a place where the accomplishments of the next 100 years will be built on the foundations we lay today. Consider if you will, how dramatically UNO has changed since 1908, and imagine the possibilities for the future.

One hundred years ago today, UNO's founders were signing Articles of Incorporation, creating "a University for the promotion of sound learning and education" and whose very existence was predicated on its ability to study and respond to the "social and civic problems," afforded by our urban location. Omaha University's purpose was to help local students realize their higher education aspirations, to be a partner in Omaha's continuing development and a catalyst for research, collaboration, cultural enhancement and growth. It was, and is, a partnership based largely on hopes and dreams, but grounded in a mutual desire to create a better life for all citizens.

And so, today and throughout the coming year, we celebrate not only what this institution has achieved, but also the community which is as much a part of UNO's history and success as it is our home, extended classroom, laboratory, and partner. In the heartland of America, our city is a modern, vibrant, ethnically and economically diverse community, with a deep concern for its citizens' quality of life. The largest city in the state and the 42nd largest in the nation, Omaha is a community on the move. Public education, economic strength, housing affordability, and job opportunity are frequently cited as community assets and perhaps Money Magazine's rating of Omaha as seventh on its list of "10 Best Big Cities" affirms the positive course our community leaders have charted. As residents, we know first-hand that this is a great place to live, work, play, and raise our families. It is also true, that like many other cities; we face significant

challenges; however, we trust that a dynamic university/community partnership will provide a formula for solutions.

No matter where they are located, cities, according to Doug Henton, president of Collaborative Economics, are blessed or cursed with "unchanging inherited assets - geography, climate, and population. "Created assets," on the other hand, he says, can be nurtured to become resources for prosperity. Such assets include having a proactive university, research centers, talented people, an entrepreneurial culture, an engaged network of community services, and a vibrant business core.

In Henton's view, this new century will be a highly competitive one, where communities willing to combine their strategic, sustained, civic efforts, with those of highly engaged universities will be the eventual victors. Or, as he says, "it's at the intersection of disciplines and interests, where the sparks really fly." Metropolitan communities and their universities would be well served to consider the PriceWaterHouseCoopers "Cities of the Future" report, highlighting "mega trends" and capital assets likely to play a significant role in future success. Trends such as globalization, new paradigms for public/private partnerships, technological influence in our daily and professional lives will be influential. Critical assets such as intellectual, cultural, and financial, will also require attention and nurturing.

Likewise, metropolitan universities will need to be well prepared to partner with their communities as new and existing challenges must be addressed for the greater good of all. These challenges will include:

- Migration and immigration of both people and knowledge
- Social cohesion and equality;
- Sustainable economic growth
- Environmental stewardship;
- Accessible social and health services
- Crime and Safety
- Poverty
- And, an educated & involved citizenry to mention a few

The American Association of State Colleges and Universities examined the current and future roles of universities, particularly those in urban settings and said: "Everyday, the nation's state colleges and universities demonstrate, in ways large and small, the linkages with their communities and the world at large. This 'public engagement' is essential - embracing outreach, applied research, service learning and more. These linkages reflect a constant challenge for institutions to serve as 'stewards of place,' to function as learners, as well as teachers, in tackling issues facing our communities and regions."

As Andrew Young, the former mayor of Atlanta predicted "great cities of the future will be where great universities reside."

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UNO's evolution from a small private to today's premier public metropolitan university reflects a transforming experience. Quite simply, as Omaha has grown and demanded more from its university, we have responded and risen to the challenge, improving the quality of our academic core, expanding the research enterprise, partnering more broadly, and preparing students for not only existing, but emerging fields.

So what is this place called UNO? UNO is the strategically minded home to a highly talented and dedicated community of faculty, staff, and students. It is a place of outstanding teaching, research and public service, where students are provided an education that will enable them, as our motto says, "to earn a living, and live a cultured life, not as two processes, but as one."

We are a place that is inextricably linked to our city, its successes, opportunities, and challenges. This is a place where dreams become reality and lives are changed forever. A place that owes a deep debt of gratitude to visionary leaders like Daniel Jenkins, Milo Bail, Ron Roskens, Del Weber, and generations of faculty and staff who dedicated their professional lives to advancing our campus, grounded in the belief that this institution could and would serve the greater good of the Omaha and beyond. We are a place that didn't go it alone; rather we enjoy the benefit of enormous community support which can only be repaid by applying our collective expertise to create a better tomorrow. We are Omaha's university; we are UNO!!

Moreover, we are a place:

- where 18,000 individuals make up our family, 15,000 of whom are students with more than 90% being Nebraskans and of those 80% are from the metropolitan area
- where the quality of the students choosing UNO is the highest in the history of the campus, and for almost all of them we were their first or second choice
- where graduation rates are at an institutional high, and 95% of our seniors tell us faculty provide prompt feedback on their academic performance and the institution provides support for student success
- where we have the most diverse student body in campus history, and more than half of the student population is comprised of 1st generation college attendees

We are a place-where 91% of seniors say they are satisfied with the knowledge and skills required to earn a degree and 94% say they would recommend UNO to other family members and friends

- where the honors program and student leadership opportunities flourish
- where students spent 300,000 hours extending their learning in the community as part of practica, internships, service learning, and active citizenship during just the last year
- where UNO ranked first nationally in the "value-added" education,

We are a place-where faculty are more satisfied, then peers, with the institutional value placed on quality teaching, opportunities for scholarly pursuits, professional and social relationships with their campus colleagues and administration, partnerships with the community, and student quality

- where results of a study with Economic Modeling Specialists Inc. tell us that UNO's degree programs today are aligned with and preparing students for approximately 90% of the community's newly created jobs through 2012
- where our highly talented student athletes have a new home in the Mid-America Intercollegiate Athletic Association renewing an important aspect of campus life and identity

We are a place-where the campus is adding much needed capacity including the construction of a new home for Business Administration, renovated and expanded homes for the College of Public Affairs and Community Service and the University Library, new student housing , a new parking structure, a remodeled Student Union and Durham Plaza, as well as the beginnings of renovation and expansion for Health, Physical Education, and Recreation, and the completion of Phase I of the Center Street University Life Complex, with the design of Phase II approved and in process.

We are the Mavericks' and yes my friends; this is a campus on the move. Our vision for the future is to remain faithful to the early goals of our founders and the core belief that our campus must be student-centered, committed to excellence, and engaged in the community. Together our university/community partnership will ensure a bright future.

We have an incredibly talented faculty and staff and they will need the freedom and support to create and innovate on campus and in the community. New and better ways to engage our students and the community will be a product of eliminating barriers and bureaucracy, and empowering the faculty.

The UNO of tomorrow must be prepared to adapt to an ever changing landscape. Although our core mission will remain stable, our tactics and strategies will require flexibility. Students, both traditional and nontraditional, will bring a variety of skills, needs, and experiences to the academy and our policies and practices, pedagogies, and programs need to be readily available to change.

More than ever, we will need to creative and flexible in providing quality learning experiences for students in place and at a distance, life-long learners or those seeking professional development, minorities, 1st generation, transfers, and international students as well as those transitioning from our high schools. Our academic delivery methods will necessarily change, utilization of our human and physical resources must be maximized, course scheduling must accommodate student need and demand, and we must expand opportunities for valued added student engagement in the community.

Tomorrows UNO will need to be relevant. Faculty must be supported to remain current in their respective disciplines and knowledgeable of the community in which they practice.

Academic programs need to align with tomorrow's talent demands while providing for a broad liberal arts foundation supporting the development of discipline expertise and critical thinking skills for a knowledge based world. The research and development, and community engagement agendas should parallel the educational, social, cultural, environmental and economic challenges and opportunities facing cities today and in the future.

We will need to continue to build people, place, and program capacity for the future. Mammel Hall creates significant capacity for the College of Business, but it also triggers opportunities across campus. Roskens' Hall will be retrofitted to house the College of Education adding much needed capacity, and Kayser Hall is being considered as a Community Engagement Center, including additional learning and meeting spaces. Longer term capacity building will require strategic consideration regarding the build out of Pacific and Center properties, needs for core science lab and performing arts space, and new locations for Radio/TV, child care, Student Services and Buildings and Grounds.

People and program capacity which will be critical for the future will include significantly expanding support for student assistantships and fellowships, need and merit based aid, new faculty and staff positions to parallel growth, professorships and chairs to attract and retain the best and brightest, and excellence funding to provide start up support for new initiatives, and programs of promise.

For the past 100 years UNO has been evolving into what we now call a metropolitan university. We have struggled, persevered, and took hard times in stride, with the spirit of progress always prevailing. It is an institution that has been resource poor, people rich, and community nurtured. We have learned, listened, and experienced institutional and life lessons. The time is now to accept the responsibility and opportunity of being a national leader among metropolitan universities. As JFK once said, "we do these things not because they are easy, but because they are hard". I know our best is yet to come, and so I ask each of you all to join us in realizing that dream.

This is a time of gratitude for all that has been given us, for the generosity of our community and the tenacity of our founders whose vision lives on in each of us.

- A time of pride – of our students, faculty, staff, alumni and community - and for the privilege of doing what we love, every day
- A time of celebration and joy, for having come so far

We are Central to our City, and we will keep the Promise! Please join me in wishing UNO a Happy Anniversary. Thank you and now a special announcement.