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The University of Nebraska does not discriminate based on race, color, ethnicity, national origin, sex, pregnancy, sexual orientation, gender identity, religion, disability, age, genetic information, veteran status, marital status, and/or political affiliation in its programs, activities, or employment.
We’ve had a very productive year in the School of Communication. Faculty spent the good part of the year reimagining our curriculum to ensure that students are prepared for the next stage of their lives. As a result of our hard work and dedication to student success, we are introducing our new curriculum Fall 2023. For both the Communication Studies (CMST) and Journalism and Media Communication (JMC) programs this includes a new set of core courses. These courses serve as building blocks for learning incorporating pre-requisites allowing students to add to the knowledge gained in previous classes. We also built in a lot more flexibility, permitting students to work with their academic advisor to more thoughtfully select classes that are of interest and will benefit them most.

One example of remaining current in the field resides in our JMC curriculum. We contended with the issue that journalists now need to know how to shoot and edit video. Likewise, videographers need to demonstrate journalistic skills such as researching, interviewing, understanding intentions, etc. As a solution to this conundrum, we merged the journalism and creative media concentrations into the emerging media concentration. Additionally, we worked with the Aviation Department to include one of their classes in our program allowing JMC students to earn their drone certification. We also purchased a drone with a camera to allow our certified students to operate it, contributing to their drone certification. We also purchased a drone with a camera to allow our certified students to operate it, contributing to their drone certification. We also purchased a drone with a camera to allow our certified students to operate it, contributing to their drone certification. We also purchased a drone with a camera to allow our certified students to operate it, contributing to their drone certification. We also purchased a drone with a camera to allow our certified students to operate it, contributing to their drone certification.

As you can tell, faculty have exerted a lot of effort revising the curriculum but that did not impede them from their classroom teaching. In past years, we’ve shared stories from our alumni working around the world. This year, we shine the spotlight on Mavericks who continue to call Omaha home.

The cover design, created by Tristen Menichetti, MaverickPR creative director, depicts historic landmarks and local businesses, including the Rose Theater, Henry Doorly Zoo’s Desert Dome, Union Pacific and more. Arts and Science Hall sits the middle of the layout, symbolizing the University’s longstanding ties to the community.

In sharing some of these exciting changes in our department, I also have some bittersweet news. Dr. Chris Allen, Dr. Ana Cruz, Ms. Robyn Blakeman, and Mr. Gary Repair retired to devote more time to their families and interests beyond UNO. We express our gratitude to their contributions to student learning and the School of Communication’s success. They have certainly made an indelible mark on our history. To partially fill this void, we welcome two new colleagues this fall. Dr. Chad Owsley and Ms. Robyn Blakeman are bringing a wealth of knowledge and expertise to our JMC program. After years of teaching in China and working as a photojournalist, Dr. Owsley joins us from the University of Missouri where he recently earned his PhD. Ms. Blakeman has over 20 years of university teaching experience and has published dozens of textbooks and scholarly articles. She will be teaching primarily in the PR/Ad concentration.

Throughout this issue, alumni share their stories about working in Omaha, and reflect on how their time in the School of Communication prepared them to enter their careers. You will also read about students in the School of Communication who find opportunities to build their skillsets and work with businesses and nonprofits in Omaha.

“Local” embodies the midwestern pride and big-city feel Omaha is known for. Omaha neighborhoods burst with entertainment, cuisine, art and a strong sense of community. Our students and alumni have embraced Omaha’s culture while continuing to build its landscape. We hope you enjoy this issue of CommUNO.
When E. Beth Hemphill began work as a content strategist at Gallup, she admits she had less experience than the job listing. “I met almost none of the qualifications for my job at Gallup,” Hemphill says. “I’m pretty sure they asked for five years of experience, I’ve been writing for five years in school and other positions, what’s the worst thing that’s going to happen: they say no?”

Her advice for job seekers: “Apply for every job that you want, it might not be a one that you’re qualified for, but every job that you want, just literally do it.”

Hemphill, who majored in communication studies in the School of Communication at the University of Nebraska at Omaha, graduated in 2019.

Before Hemphill joined Gallup, she worked as a reporter/copy editor intern for the Omaha World-Herald, soon moving up to a freelance position. She wrote articles in special section in the Sunday paper, and pieces for other magazines. The experience fueled her enthusiasm for journalistic writing.

Hemphill recalls a conversation with her father about the career path that led her to communication. “I remember talking to my dad and telling him, I know what I’m good at, but I don’t know what I want to do,” Hemphill says. “I think that’s probably the biggest question and the hardest question for most people in college, especially in communication.”

Hemphill started her college career as an elementary education major but soon changed when she realized her deep passion for communication.

“Writing is equally strategic and creative and coming out of that first job at Gallup, as a copywriter, I felt very prepared to say that I’ve been doing a lot of writing,” Hemphill says. “School was always at a fast pace, so I could hop into that. The hardest transition from school to the corporate world was how do I know how I’m doing besides just standard feedback.”

After working at Gallup for four years, Hemphill now serves as communication and content coordinator for Coram Deo Church. In this position, she uses CliftonStrengths coaching to help people find their top strengths.

Hemphill works for a mission that she loves and will continue a career working toward helping and uplifting others.

“We think from a career perspective, I want to have a lot of ownership over what I’m doing, especially when it comes to my time. That’s like something really cool about a communication major is the freedom,” Hemphill says. “I want to be continuing to help people in this setting, I love the mission of my church and hope to still be there in some capacity. I think that’s what we all want, right? We want a job that allows us to do either more of what we love outside of our job or give more time to the people we love.”

by Jordan Speckmann

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Kimberly Bailey, a 2016 graduate, enjoys finding solutions to obstacles she faces while working for startups. BAILEY creates a career as a storyteller for start-up businesses.

By Lexy Schulte

As a former student-athlete at the University of Nebraska at Omaha, Kimberly Bailey found a passion for building programs from the ground up. During her time on the volleyball team at UNO, Bailey helped the team transition from Division II to Division I.

“I learned what I really like to do is build, and I like to be at the beginning of things,” Bailey says.

Bailey graduated from UNO in 2015 with a Bachelor of Sciences in communication. Though Bailey says she initially wanted to work at an international PR firm, she found her fit working in startups. Following graduation, she worked at Flywheel, an early start-up in Omaha.

Bailey started as a marketing intern at Flywheel, but later transitioned to full-time, leading creative production for the company.

“I got to experience a lot of really interesting things as a first-time professional,” Bailey says. “I worked with an amazing team in a really great work culture and environment.”

Bailey enjoys navigating the challenges that come with starting a business. She says the community inspires her to dream big and execute her goals.

Bailey attributes most of her success to the skills she built as a student-athlete. Bailey says her time in the School of Communication prepared her for working in the communication field. She says her public relations classes grew her passion as a storyteller.

“I got to hone in on my skills and understanding of how to tell a good story,” Bailey says. “I got to work with really great professors that allowed me to expand and grow and have autonomy to try different things.”

Bailey wasn’t just involved in the classroom. She also served as the firm director for MaverickPR and the historian for UNO’s PRSSA chapter.

“That was a really great way for me to get experience on my resume,” Bailey says. “I got real-life experience working with different accounts, telling stories and working with other team members.”

Being involved in many organizations, Bailey says time management was her best friend.

“I took pride in hitting deadlines, and I took pride in giving it my best on the volleyball court,” Bailey says. “There were certainly some late nights and early mornings.”

After leaving Flywheel in March 2022, Bailey reconnected with her love of volleyball as a freelance photographer for Athlete’s Unlimited, one of the first women’s professional volleyball leagues in the U.S.

As she began expanding her freelance clients, she knew she was interested in working with the league.

“I knew through the grapevine about this woman, Emily Ehman, who is an up-and-coming sportscaster,” Bailey says. “I sent her a Twitter DM saying, ‘Hey, I know you worked with Athlete’s Unlimited last year, do you have a connection to make an intro for me?’ And she responded right away saying she would reach out to the head photographer.”

The online connection allowed Bailey to secure a contractor spot with Athletes Unlimited for its second season. She spent five weeks in Dallas shooting matches for the league.

“I was a kid in a candy store,” Bailey says. “I got to capture tons of Olympians and former and current professional volleyball players. I got to capture the last professional volleyball match of Sheilla Castro, who’s one of the best volleyball players to walk the earth.”

Bailey says she’s excited to see more avenues such as Athletes Unlimited for athletes to pursue after college. Many female athletes have to travel overseas for professional opportunities. Leagues such as Athletes Unlimited allow women to play closer to home.

“The progression of women’s pro sports is something I’m really passionate about,” Bailey says. “Moving that needle for not only professional athletes but also younger women through imagery and other avenues of inspiration is big.”

A few months after returning from Dallas, Bailey took on a new role as the head of marketing for Alpaca, a startup created to give parents a modern way to support their children’s teachers.

Bailey says she acts as the chief storyteller of the company’s mission and product. As a team of four, Bailey wears many hats, working on paid ads, social media, website optimization and photography.

“It puts all my different skills to the test,” Bailey says. “I think about really high-level strategy like ‘where are we going?’ and ‘how do we get there?’ It’s great to be at the beginning of building this awesome company that’s making it easier to support teachers. It makes it easy to get up in the morning and make an impact.”

“Learning by doing is a big thing for me. I’ve learned a lot through trial and error.”

While she helps companies grow from the ground up, Bailey says she also has opportunities to grow her professional skills.

“Learning by doing is a big thing for me,” Bailey says. “I’ve learned a lot through trial and error. But with teamwork and collaboration, we get where we want to go by learning as quickly as we can, but also intentionally.”

Working at a startup comes with many obstacles, but Bailey says she enjoys the challenges of setting the tone.

“You never get a second chance to make a great first impression,” Bailey says. “There can be a lot of weight to that, but I like the pressure that comes with being the one who puts in the work to make the first impression come to life.”
When Randy Grosse was 16 years old, his high school English teacher complimented a piece of his writing — a protest of the school’s dress code.

The positive feedback prompted his decision to choose high school journalism over physics and continue studying the subject in college. Grosse’s dress code protest in that English class fueled a passion for journalism and column writing that followed him through a 44-year newspaper and corporate communication career.

“I think anyone who knows me knows that I have an opinion about most things, and I like to share it,” Grosse says, “but I’m also a storyteller by nature in terms of writing.”

After retiring in 2017, Grosse published a book in August 2022 titled “600 Words … More or Less,” a collection of columns written during his tenure as editor and general manager of the Catholic Voice, the Archdiocese of Omaha newspaper, as well as work for other Nebraska newspapers.

As a freelancer, 600 words became Grosse’s general guide for the length of his columns, which continued during his time at the Catholic Voice. Evident in his book, column writing always played a meaningful role in Grosse’s life.

After Grosse earned his bachelor’s degree in journalism at the University of Nebraska at Omaha in 1973, he wrote his first column as editor of the weekly Neligh News and Leader, his first job after college.

About 11 years into his early journalism career in rural Nebraska, Grosse moved from the city of Fairbury back to Omaha, where he shifted his focus to a career move from newspaper work to corporate communication.

Despite leaving journalism, he continued to write columns for a few Nebraska newspapers. His time in corporate communication lasted 17 years, but Grosse never disengaged from the media.

“I don’t think in my heart I ever left journalism,” Grosse says.

Grosse continued freelancing even as he returned to newspaper work — this time in the Catholic press. Newspaper work didn’t pay nearly as well as corporate PR work, which was a major hit to his family finances, but Grosse says it was something he and his wife agreed they could do.

“I probably learned one lesson over the years, and it took a while for me to learn it,” Grosse says. “It’s not about the money you earn. It’s about if you’re happy doing what you’re doing, and if you’re lucky, you’ll get paid well enough to survive on it.”

His columns for The Catholic Voice are not easily categorized, he says. His work revolved around a variety of topics — sometimes in a very serious way, sometimes tongue-in-cheek, sometimes with a tear in his eye.

Grosse says he hopes readers experience a similar range of emotions, perhaps being moved to tears or a smile, or even a belly laugh. People may learn something new or consider something old in a different way.

“As a columnist, you don’t want people to hate you,” Grosse says. “You don’t necessarily want people to love you. You want to display some weight and maybe touch an emotional chord in some way, whether it’s joy or sadness or anger or agreement.”

Now retired, Grosse says he greatly values his UNO education for carrying his passion for journalism even further. While he previously attended the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, he says the move to UNO gave him opportunities beyond print journalism — a taste of radio, TV, newswriting, advertising, and public relations. In 1989, he also earned his master’s degree in communication.

“When I began working at my small-town newspaper, I felt so well prepared because I’d done a little bit of everything,” Grosse says. “Even if your first interest is print, all those other things are going to help you at some point in time.”

With the publication of “600 Words … More or Less,” Grosse passes on his columns to his four children and 19 grandchildren, but there is one message he especially wants them to understand: words are impactful.

“Words have meaning, and words have consequences,” he says. “How do we use them, what we say with them, for what reason, for what purpose; that’s all important.”

Especially in today’s say-almost-anything world of social media, Grosse wants this collection of columns to carry that message in some way.

“I’m not a woodworker,” Grosse says. “I’m not an artist, a sculptor, or a musician. I can’t give my family members coffee tables or bookcases, pieces of art or recordings of my music — but I can give them words.”
by Sara Meadows

As a 12-year-old girl, Joanna LeFlore-Ejike recalls taking part in an African dance workshop at the Malcolm X Memorial Foundation. Little did she know, one day she would become the Foundation’s first executive director.

Created in 1971 by Rowena Moore, who served as the Foundation’s operational director, the Foundation aims to educate and inspire visitors on the legacy of the Civil Rights visionary Malcolm X, whose birthplace resides in the heart of North Omaha.

LeFlore-Ejike was no stranger to the Foundation; she volunteered as an undergraduate at the University of Nebraska at Omaha. After earning her degree in communication in 2014, she joined the all-volunteer Board of Directors and worked on event planning and public relations. She also earned a master’s degree in Managerial Communications from Bellevue University.

During her time at UNO, LeFlore-Ejike took on a leadership role as the assistant director of MaverickPR, the campus student-led public relations firm.

“When I was encouraged to take on a leadership role with MaverickPR, I was excited to learn more about how to apply what I was learning in the real world,” LeFlore-Ejike says.

She says MaverickPR helped her better understand how her skillset as an organizer with a public relations background can help improve community issues that she witnessed in North Omaha.

“My personal goals deeply align with the organization,” LeFlore-Ejike says. “And I decided to continue the mission of being a steward of my community.”

This means she always volunteered or did internships within her interests.

“Whether it was in community development or public relations, all experiences helped shape and prepare me for this important leadership role,” LeFlore-Ejike says.

LeFlore-Ejike says it’s rewarding to see how people find their passion and develop their own sense of leadership through volunteering.

“I’m still a student. I still get excited when I have the opportunity to learn from others.”

“That is the feeling that I had when I used to volunteer as well,” she says.

Her longtime connection to the Malcolm X Memorial Foundation fueled her own passion to lead the organization.

“It is a full-circle moment,” LeFlore-Ejike says. “I feel gratified knowing that my effort has been valued all this time, and I can still see the impact of my effort years later.”

LeFlore-Ejike says she feels a sense of responsibility to provide a stronger structure for the organization. Another major responsibility is preserving the 17-acre grounds around the historic landmark.

“Currently, there is just so much to do administratively that it is hard to sometimes accept the pace of how things are moving,” LeFlore-Ejike says. “I often have to reprioritize my day to connect with local residents, visitors, board members and facilities issues.”

LeFlore-Ejike says she looks forward to meeting the challenges brought on by this position.

“My energy is transparent,” LeFlore-Ejike says. “I’m still a student, I still get excited when I have the opportunity to learn from others.”

So far, what she likes most about her new position is when she digs into the past and revives efforts previously ignored. She says speaking up when needed and allowing for self-care gives her grace when she needs it the most. She also looks to her family and childhood friends for support.

“I’m thankful that I have the opportunity to create a culture that supports motherhood,” she says.

As LeFlore-Ejike navigates her role as executive director, she says it is important to plan for a long-term vision. Her goal is for all staff and volunteers to feel connected and involved for the longevity and success of the organization. The Malcolm X Memorial Foundation offers numerous opportunities for the community to get involved and support Malcolm X’s legacy.

“Anyone who gets involved with our organization has the opportunity to impact our larger vision,” LeFlore-Ejike says.

Most recently, the organization celebrated a long-overdue achievement of Malcolm X being inducted into the Nebraska Hall of Fame.

“I am most grateful for the community involvement to make this happen,” LeFlore-Ejike says. “We could not have done it without the public testimonies and letters sent in from people across the entire state. It is truly a moment to celebrate for all of us.”

Currently, the Foundation plans to add staff, build its programming and facilities and increase fundraising. These goals include $100,000 to help double the existing budget and a $20 million capital campaign, part of the original vision of founder Rowena Moore.

“I am following in those footsteps,” she says. “And I’m grateful to be part of this journey to help the organization grow.”

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“This kind of work truly takes a village, and I am gratified by daily opportunities and reminders of how to do so,” LeFlore-Ejike says.

She also juggles her career with motherhood. She and her husband Errik welcomed their baby girl, Erykah, on Nov. 18, 2021. Her journey to motherhood was a bit unexpected.

“I was originally thinking that I needed a little more time before I became a parent,” LeFlore-Ejike says. “But that’s not true, you can’t always decide when you’re called to do something.”

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Sheritha Jones brings to light some of the community’s most influential moments through her publications in the Omaha World-Herald’s History section, which include her “Reminisce” and “Back in the Day” columns.

The University of Nebraska at Omaha alumna has worked at the Omaha World-Herald for 28 years and now serves as one of only two librarians for Lee Enterprise newspapers. As the chief librarian, Jones’ first priority is to assist the newsroom with research using the newspaper’s library database and other search engines. In addition, she trains staff on the library system and maintains the photo archive.

Jones also contributes to the publication as its only female Black columnist and editorial writer. She uses her experience as a Black woman in Nebraska to write impactful opinion pieces that implore readers to think critically about pressing cultural issues.

“I write with a voice that has not been present in this paper before,” Jones says. “I am giving my opinions as an African American woman who has grown up in Omaha. I’ve gone to high school, graduated college, started a family, and a career in Omaha. I share my experiences throughout all of that.”

Jones credits her expertise in journalism to the education she received at UNO that gave her the chance to “get her foot in the newsroom.”

The job entailed scheduling, answering phone lines, and compiling building permits and real estate transfers. Jones says she enjoyed working for Gauger. With his encouragement, she pursued the newsroom job.

Jones recalls an exchange with Gauger that led to her promotion, it was a comically written obituary for her late boss.

“It was a hilarious, well-written obit,” Jones says. “I feel like if it was poorly written, he could have easily found someone else in his class to offer the job.”

Today, Jones uses her abilities to write editorial features, opinion pieces, and history articles. She has used her position at the paper to highlight important pieces of Black history in Omaha that often go unnoticed. Jones also takes photos to accompany her columns.

One of her personal favorites is a piece she published about the late Rudy Smith, who served as a photojournalist at the paper for over 45 years.

“My Favorite ‘Back in the Day’ piece was on Rudy Smith, who is a UNO alumnus and the first Black newsroom employee,” Jones says. “He was my friend, and I learned a great deal from him in the years we worked together. He was also my wedding photographer.”

In the future, Jones says she hopes to write more opinion pieces that highlight her experiences as a Black woman and other community issues.

“I want to write an opinion piece about the lack of Black male teachers and about Black and Brown children in juvenile detention in Douglas County, and why that is,” Jones says. “Sometimes, it is important to just put the question out there and let intelligent people with answers offer solutions. I’ll also continue to write about reproductive rights and reproductive justice for Black women and wage disparities in the workplace.”

by Bella Watson

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He heard about the Kim Jones Passion scholarship because his PRSSA adviser Karen Weber encouraged him to apply. Jones was one of Weber’s former students who studied journalism and public relations and worked as an event coordinator before her untimely death from illness.

Dinslage became the first recipient of the Kim Jones Passion scholarship in 2016. He was very excited when he found out, especially because this was his first scholarship. This accomplishment became a memorable part of Dinslage’s life.

After receiving the scholarship, he got a special phone call from Gordon Sudbeck, Jones’ husband. Sudbeck, congratulated Dinslage and took him out to lunch because he wanted to get to know Dinslage personally.

“It wasn’t like here is only a piece of paper for the scholarship,” Dinslage says. “I really got to learn about Kim Jones and her public relations and marketing role at Village Pointe.”

Dinslage enjoyed connecting with Sudbeck and hearing more about the woman who was a huge advocate for people in the public relations industry. Dinslage learned how caring of a man Sudbeck is, which made him appreciate the scholarship even more.

Receiving the Kim Jones Passion scholarship helped take away some of his worries because the money helped pay for school. Dinslage could now keep an even better focus on his studies, thanks to the scholarship.

Today, Dinslage works in public relations in his own personal way. The summer before his senior year, he worked at a youth camp in Pennsylvania where he discovered his love for working with children. His love for both children and public relations tactics such as event planning and logistics made him realize his career could encompass those skills.

“Working in the classroom is the ultimate solution because you have to event plan, lesson plan, and do everything for the children you’re teaching,” he says.

Dinslage says his communication degree is a “fantastic degree” no matter what career path. After earning his bachelor of science degree in communication, Dinslage stayed at UNO to earn his teaching certificate and master’s in education with an emphasis in urban schools and equity. After graduation, Dinslage landed his dream of teaching fifth grade for Gretna Public Schools at Falling Waters Elementary.

Dinslage is proud to give back to the community as a role model for children. He loves that his work planning field trips, parent conferences, lesson plans and designing classroom posters is beneficial to young students.

When Dinslage is not teaching, he coaches archery every week as part of his volunteer work for 4-H Nebraska. He says his work for this youth development program is very rewarding.

Dinslage offers one piece of advice all students should follow. He says students should be involved in a club or organization like MaverickPR or PRSSA. This is what helped him to continue to succeed and receive his scholarship.

“Say yes to all opportunities in college because it can open so many doors,” Dinslage says.
Charley Steed will always love being a Maverick, but he has spread his wings to become a Bluejay.

Having worked in higher education as a communicator and storyteller for 13 years at the University of Nebraska at Omaha, he now serves as Creighton University’s director of presidential communications.

Steed served most of their time at UNO as the associate director of internal communications. Throughout this position, he served as the primary internal communications point of contact for the Chancellor’s executive staff.

But for Steed, communication means more than simply sending and receiving a message. Steed’s role is responsible for understanding the community, which he says is necessary to communicate effectively. Steed learned the value of community in the best way possible.

“I always want to make sure that the communications decisions are being made to support people equitably and inclusively,” Steed says. “Knowing what people value, meaning people in the Omaha and Nebraska communities, is something I often think about. Knowing what they’re invested in and value makes it a lot easier to weave those things into your communications, so that you’re meeting the needs of that group.”

Steed says the opportunity to work at Creighton emerged seemingly out of the blue. However, his experience at UNO made for an easy transition.

“I just happened to see the opportunity, and figured I’d take a shot at it,” Steed says. “I will say though, the last couple of years, especially through the pandemic, there was a lot of communication that needed to go out to our university. Keeping folks updated, keeping folks informed, and making sure we had all the information was crucial. So, many of the skills that I have learned in that space helped me find a nice, sweet spot, in terms of leveraging the other skills that I built up to that point.”

Looking back at their career, Steed says his journey of hands-on learning has benefited his professional communication skills.

“Communication seems like it’s the easiest thing in the world. Because everyone thinks, ‘well, I send letters and emails, I can do this.’ Then you have to speak, or they go to write some content to a large group of people, and they don’t know what to do.” Steed says. “Being able to provide that skill set and help people articulate what they actually want to get across is something that I’ve always really enjoyed.”
By Kat O’Connor

In 2017, Bre Phelan found the perfect marriage between her strategic savvy and passion for feline friends when she founded Omaha’s first cat café.

As a nonprofit, Felius Cat Café & Rescue’s main mission is to match resident adoptable cats with their new forever home. Sipping on delicious coffee or tea and soaking in snuggles from the community’s most adorable cats, Felius transforms cat welfare through rescue, inclusive experiences and educational programming.

In her role as founder and president, Phelan led the organization to match over 900 cats with their new best friend and humanely prevent 542,000 community cats through 610 successful trap-neuter-returns.

Phelan recently left her 11-year career as an advertising manager and strategist at Yahoo to run Felius full-time.

In 2004, Phelan started her journey at the University of Nebraska at Omaha and declared a major in broadcasting. A passion for being the face and voice of a news story wasn’t in the cards for Phelan, but her heart found a new home through her growing involvement in the School of Communication.

Phelan quickly invested in her opportunities by joining UNO’s chapter of PRSSA, Advertising Club and student-run firm, MaverickPR. However, her three-year role as advertising manager for The Gateway, aligned the stars for the rest of her academic career.

“It was a great experience,” Phelan says. “It gave me exposure to the business side of how a newspaper and advertising business was run. That got me very interested in the whole advertising route. I switched my sophomore year to communication with a focus on new media art. Through that, I just got more and more involved.”

From meeting life-changing professors to her robust participation in the PRSSA National Bateman Case Study Competition, a challenge for students to create and implement a full public relations campaign, Phelan dove deeper into the overall experience the School of Communication offered her.

“My experience at the School of Communication was just so amazing,” Phelan says. “I found really passionate professors. If you invest time in those extracurricular activities and show that you’re passionate about them, they invest just as much time back into you. It really does pay off.”

Phelan transferred her tassel from right to left in 2009 when her undergraduate chapter prepared her to join the nine-to-five.

Her talents reached the Omaha community and extended nationwide as she earned advertising roles at SKAR Advertising and XO Group Inc. before joining the Yahoo team.

“Having that ability to strategically think, research and be able to pivot and adapt quickly was definitely something I learned at UNO,” Phelan says. “It’s honestly made it possible for me to transition and continue growing in my career, especially in such a fast-paced, ever-changing environment like digital technology.”

Phelan found a way to blend her acquired communication skills and wealth of knowledge to tap into her love of animals. Felius started as a free-time business plan and transformed into a full-functioning nonprofit organization helping cats in the Omaha metro.

Flash forward to the present, Felius has outgrown its current home on 24th Street, and hopes to find a larger location in the near future.

This is only the start of Felius’ next chapter to make the brand a little bit more accessible and inclusive for everyone in the Omaha community that is passionate about saving cats.

“To me, the long-lasting impact that our organization will continue to have is this community of people that have come together to rally around us,” Phelan says. “The amount of new friends that I’ve made out of this that I would never, ever in a million years have met. Then watching just random strangers in our playroom become friends based on their shared love of rescue cats has been a really unique experience, and it’s something that I’m super grateful for.”
When you’re doing something for a class, usually you’re making a fake campaign,” Menichetti says. “Verses MavPR really teaches how to sit down with a client, how to communicate with them, how to stay accountable and really meld your ideas with theirs and come out with a project everyone is proud of.”

Weber says she has witnessed students use their MavPR experience to get a foot in the door with employers.

“I’ve been told by employers that MavPR gives students about one-and-a-half to two years of professional experience ahead of a recent graduate who doesn’t have agency experience,” Weber says.

MavPR provides students with professional development opportunities across the country. Several students attended the PRSSA ICON Conference in Grapevine, Texas during the fall semester.

During the spring semester, Weber took Schulte and Menichetti on a trip to New York City to meet with several program alumni and tour agencies such as Edelman, Prosek Partners and Arnold.

“Going to New York was an incredible experience,” Schulte says. “It gave me new perspectives on the industry that I can apply to my own work.”

On top of being a platform for creativity, MavPR has another special power of bringing students together to form life-long relationships.

“I’ve made some friends that I know are going to be life-long friends,” Schulte says. “They’re people I know I’ll be able to lean on and call in the future if I’m working on a difficult project or just to chat about life.”

MaverickPR allows students to showcase their creative side
by Sam Pastorino

MaverickPR, the award-winning, student-run public relations firm, has given students their chance to provide innovative and creative solutions to real-world clients over the past 15 years.

MaverickPR completes a variety of tactics such as social media, graphic design, photography and videography, copywriting, media outreach and more for non-profit organizations and small businesses.

The team worked for 13 clients this year, such as Milford Magazine, Carole’s House of Hope, The Genius of Warren Buffett and UNO’s International Programs.

Lexy Schulte, the team’s student executive director, has used her position to showcase her creativity and help nonprofits.

“A lot of the non-profits are some of the most hardworking people I know, and they just don’t have the capacity,” Schulte says. “So, being able to help bring their vision to life is a very rewarding feeling.”

One of the most rewarding projects involved production of CommUNO, the School of Communication’s alumni magazine. The team also created a student testimonial video, recruitment card, and new brochure for the School’s marketing efforts.

“It just taught me so much and now I have a really big passion for graphic design,” says Tristen Menichetti, the team’s creative director. “Now it’s something I really want to pursue, and I can track it all back to the creation of that magazine.”

MavPR is such a one-of-a-kind team in the way it allows students to work with real clients, helping them build skills they’ll carry throughout their careers.
When Daytin Inserra stepped onto the University of Nebraska at Omaha campus she never imagined the opportunities that came from joining the Public Relations Student Society of America (PRSSA) chapter.

Through PRSSA’s network, she has earned a scholarship, landed a social media internship, attended an international conference and built her leadership skills on the Executive Board. But just as important, Inserra has developed close friendships.

“PRSSA brings passionate students together who share common interests,” Inserra says. “It’s been easy to create strong and lasting friendships within PRSSA. The friendships I’ve made in PRSSA go beyond school and the chapter.”

Inserra is proof that PRSSA isn’t just for students interested in public relations. A journalism and media communication major with a concentration in emerging media, her interests focus on photography and videography. She joined the UNO PRSSA Executive Board as vice president of archives, which chronicles the chapter’s activities through photography and video. In December 2022, her peers elected her president where she continues to grow her leadership skills. Her work in PRSSA and MaverickPR have allowed her to build an impressive portfolio.

One of the key messages shared with students is that PRSSA is not a club but a pre-professional organization that aspires to develop young professionals through education and advocacy.

One of Inserra’s most memorable experiences came in November 2022 when she attended the International PRSSA Conference in Grapevine, Texas.

“ICON 2022 was the most fun experience I’ve had since joining PRSSA,” Inserra says. The trip included exposure to new ideas, networking opportunities, social activities and new friendships.”

Now in her 25th year as faculty adviser, Karen Weber can attest to how PRSSA plays a vital role in the personal and professional development of students.

“It’s very gratifying to see how students grow their skills and build successful careers, not only in public relations, but all types of fields,” Weber says. “Some of our graduates use their communication experience in business, education, health care, nonprofit and other careers.”

UNO PRSSA’s strong alumni base gives back to the chapter through mentorship and other opportunities. This past year, alumni served as panelists at chapter meetings and reviewers at the chapter’s resume and portfolio event. They also served as internship supervisors and MaverickPR clients.

“I’ve witnessed this evolution from student to mentor first-hand, and it’s truly inspiring,” Weber says. “PRSSA embodies the meaning of giving back.”

PRSSA encourages its members to engage in service opportunities, giving back to their communities while honing their skills. This past year, the chapter held Santa Paws, a fundraiser for Hearts United for Animals that raised $1,200 for the no-kill animal rescue.

“Who could say Santa Paws isn’t fun? It involves two beloved concepts: Santa Claus and adorable dogs,” Inserra says. “Seeing dogs in cute outfits with tiny Santa hats or reindeer antlers can bring smiles and laughter to people’s faces, making Santa Paws a fun experience for everyone.”

Members also collected winter clothing for young women and their children living at Carole’s House of Hope. In addition, “Chapters for Change” campus book drive donated books to Kids Can Community Center.

“I’m so proud of our students, present and past, for their commitment to serving their campus and community,” Weber says. “Being in PRSSA sets the foundation for being a lifelong learner and an engaged citizen.”
Whether working on camera or behind the scenes, Maverick Digital Network, part of UNO Television, helps prepare journalism students beyond the classroom.

UNO Television has provided broadcasting experience for students since the mid-1960s.

“Maverick Digital Network allows students to do extracurricular projects,” says Michael Pacholski, producer and director. “It is mostly doing pregame, postgame and intermission things during athletic events.”

About 12 to 14 students currently work on Maverick Digital Network production. All students have their own specific roles, such as directing or audio operating. Despite these roles, students work together as a team to produce the broadcast.

Sophomore Sapphire Bennett has worked for Maverick Digital Network for the past two semesters as a graphics board operator. Bennett says her job is important because she runs full screen graphics to ensure the next slide or graphic needed is queued up and ready.

“I also helped out with some content producing,” Bennett says. “One of my favorite things is when I got to be a part of creating this piece where we had a bunch of members from UNO’s band come in and play tiny instruments to the UNO fight song.”

Bennett says Maverick Digital Network provides opportunities for students to work on something they are passionate about and grow their skills.

“You can really tell everyone wants the best for you,” Bennett says. “I know I could ask anyone a question regarding Maverick Digital Network, and they would be happy to help.”

The future goal for Maverick Digital Network is to get more students involved in all facets of production.

“I think really improving in the efficiency and quality of work will be great for everybody involved because it will help Maverick Digital Network to keep existing,” Bennett says. “I think bringing in people who are excited to be there and learn will also help.”

Pacholski says he’s proud to be a part of this network and the opportunity for students to gain more broadcasting experience.

“I would encourage all students to ask about the television or radio station,” Pacholski says. “Go to the School of Communication and find out about it.”

by Ashley Carroll

UNOTV gives students hands-on learning experiences
MavRadio

students grow their broadcasting skills and win awards

by Sara Meadows

For Austin Ulmer, MavRadio took him out of his comfort zone and gave him opportunities outside the classroom. The former general manager, who graduated in May, joined MavRadio to gain more experience in sports broadcasting.

In his role at MavRadio, he uploaded liners, created promos and led staff meetings.

Ulmer is passionate about both sports and music, which is why MavRadio benefited him both personally and professionally.

“I am able to do both, I call games but then I can also help students out with radio shows,” Ulmer says. “I’m also able to play different kinds of music that we wouldn’t necessarily play in the regular rotation, which is really rewarding to me.”

Students in MavRadio like Ulmer, not only gain professional experience, but they also win awards.

MavRadio won regional awards at the Midwest Broadcast Journalists Association (MBJA) festival for their Haunted Heartland Broadcast, which is an annual Halloween-themed radio show that features spooky audio stories.

“MavRadio team gain valuable broadcasting experience that produces awarding work. Photo courtesy of lecturer Jodeane Brownlee.”

“Those students show their passion to grow their skills and gain experience.”

Jackson Piercy, Jamie Harvey and Austin Ulmer took home several Broadcast Educators Association awards. Photo courtesy of Jodeane Brownlee.

by Sara Meadows

They compete nationally and hold their own against much larger programs with better facilities,” says Jodeane Brownlee, lecturer and MavRadio adviser.

Jamie Harvey earned Best of Festival honors at the Broadcast Educators Association (BEA) for a podcast they did on modern memetics, a station promo, and they also won awards at the BEA festival for the Haunted Heartland broadcast.

“It is truly a delight watching students that have all this talent and don’t realize it earn this recognition,” Brownlee says. “The best part of my job is to see students work hard and grow their skills beyond their expectations.”

Working for MavRadio has given many graduates a leg-up in the job market.

“I’ve talked with other students who have graduated who were involved in MavRadio, and now they’re producing radio shows and calling games,” Ulmer says. “It’s pretty similar to what we have going on, so that tells me I’m on the right track professionally.”

One of the most memorable experiences for MavRadio students is the collaboration with the Men’s College World Series. Ulmer recalls sitting in the press box with other professional journalists where he did write-ups and social media.

“That was definitely one of my favorite memories,” Ulmer says.

Both Ulmer and Brownlee encourage students interested in radio, podcasting, social media and other emerging media to join MavRadio.

“These students show their passion to grow their skills and gain experience in the field,” Brownlee says.
Abigail Faris first competed in speech at Hastings High School. Her coach encouraged her to pursue competitive forensics in college. The University of Nebraska at Omaha student took the advice to heart. Her passion for public speaking and acting inspired her to join the MavForensics team.

She became part of a talented and close-knit group of students that devote countless hours researching, rehearsing and performing in state, regional and national competitions.

To prepare for competition, Faris and other team members rely on the one-on-one coaching of co-directors Amanda Von Goodrich and Trae Graham. “They are absolutely amazing,” Faris says.

Students write and polish their performance pieces and compete at various tournaments over the course of the year.

“We run it numerous times and fine-tune it to make it so we feel the most comfortable presenting,” Faris says. “And so, the audience will be receptive to the pieces.”

Faris says she enjoys the versatility competitive speaking offers. “I’m able to have my fun little acting stuff, but then I’m able to talk about serious issues like climate change, abortion and access to equal rights,” she says.

Public speaking is often ranked the No. 1 fear that people encounter. Faris says one of the key benefits of joining MavForensics is gaining the confidence to publicly speak in front of large audiences.

Faris says that although her involvement in MavForensics has helped her confidence, she still gets nervous. “The best thing I can say is try to take a deep breath and know that the people who are watching you are supporting you, and they want you to succeed,” Faris says.

While MavForensics has played a large part in Faris’ college experience, she also finds time to work at the Maverick Food Pantry and to volunteer at Project Harmony, a non-profit organization that focuses on ending child abuse and neglect.

Last season, Faris created pieces she says will help prepare for a career in political science and international studies. One example is a piece about an art exhibit titled “A World Without Ice.”

“A highlight for Faris and her teammates was a trip to California where they competed at the 2023 American Forensics Association National Speech Tournament. “This California trip was one of my favorite memories,” Faris says. “We were able to connect with each other, we had a whole day to bond and enjoy each other’s company.”

The Mavs took a total of 33 individual events to the National Tournament and placed 18th overall in the nation. Their highlights include senior and captain Riley Smith being named to the 2023 prestigious All-American Team, sophomore Keith Allen was named as a semifinalist in the Program of Oral Interpretation, and Abigail Fairs was named as a 2023 finalist.

Faris is grateful for the connections she’s made, not only on campus, but throughout the country. “It also has impacted me in a beneficial way because it’s created a community,” Faris says. “Our little 14-person speech team is very connected to each other, we’re all really great friends.”