



University of Nebraska at Omaha  
State of the University Address (2014)  
John Christensen, Chancellor

Good afternoon, and welcome to the 2014 UNO “State of the University.” My sincere thanks to all attending today; and please know it is an absolute privilege to stand before you as Chancellor of this great University, located in the heart of this remarkable community.

There are moments in the history of institutions that are monumental, and this is one of those very special times in the life of UNO.

Today, I will share an overview of the state of the campus; highlight the most successful fundraising effort in our 106 year history; and honor Jim and Shirley Young — genuine symbols of community leadership as well as dear friends.

And, I’m the lucky one who gets to represent the Maverick community and deliver the terrific news about where we are now, how we arrived here, and where we are heading.

When you come to UNO today and meet with faculty, staff, students, alumni, and/or university partners, you see it, you hear it, and you feel it.

The “it” I’m referring to is momentum, and UNO currently enjoys unprecedented momentum.

We are moving.

We are growing.

We are a force for change.

And as for overcoming obstacles that prevent our students from having the best faculty, staff, facilities, technology, and university experience, we are driven and the word “can’t” is not in the Maverick vocabulary!

At the core of the campus momentum is a UNO family — forward thinking, student centered, and proactive about continuous change, as long as it improves the lives of our students and community.

There is one thing that unifies every member of the UNO family, everyone in this room today, and everyone who contributed to our campaign. We share a belief that students are our present and our future.

Arriving at the place UNO now enjoys not only required commitment, it also took time.

In the 2006 State of the University address, just one month into my time as interim Chancellor, I said “if we can dream it, we can do it.” I believed that then, and even more now. Our vision and collective dreams were far-reaching, but because of the trust and support this community has provided, we have been able to translate those dreams into action.

Today, the dreams continue and much work remains. But, with the ongoing support of the community, UNO’s future is limitless.

I want to recognize the extraordinary efforts of our faculty, staff and students who have transformed UNO, to what it is today. And as always, time permits only a few examples:

- The entire campus structure has undergone reorganization to better support our strategic goals of being student centered, academically excellent, and community engaged.
- Academic and Student Affairs, Business and Finance, and Athletics have established, and are measuring, very specific priorities.
- UNO was reclassified by Carnegie as a Doctoral Granting Research University confirming our academic and research advancements.
- We will be reclassified by the NCAA as a Division I University in athletics beginning next fall and the levels of competition and excitement are growing quickly.
- We are a nationally recognized leader in community engagement and will host the Coalition of Urban and Metropolitan Universities national conference next October right here in Omaha.
- We are operating the campus very efficiently as compared with peers, and will continue to maximize the value of every dollar provided to us.
- Campus safety is paramount — we have increased our partnerships with area law enforcement, up-graded cameras, improved

lighting, and are working toward accreditation of the Campus Security operation.

- National recognition of our on-campus and online academic programs is growing and we are creating new programs that meet the needs of the changing work place.
- The complete renovation of the Student Center beginning in February will enhance and unify student services and organizations while providing places for networking and socializing.

So, let me tell you a little about our students:

- UNO serves the largest percentage of Nebraskans in the NU system. 87% of students are from this state.
- Our student body reflects the community in which we live. It is our mission to seek out and offer accessible higher education to all learners who are ready for college. Almost half of the ethnically and racially diverse students in the University of Nebraska system call UNO home.
- While most of our students hail from Nebraska, we want them to have global experiences. We are expanding study abroad opportunities for UNO students with the leadership of International Studies and Programs. At the same time, the world comes to study at UNO with more than 2,000 international students from 117 countries.
- We have a long and proud history of standing by those who make our freedom possible. I am honored that with the efforts of our staff and faculty, UNO is the #1 public

four year university in the country for Military Friendliness. We currently serve more than 1,300 active military, veterans, and their dependents in the recently established Office of Military and Veteran Services dedicated by our alum and current Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel.

Would active military, veterans, and dependents that joined us today please stand to be recognized?

I thank you for your service and sacrifices. You honor us with your presence and dedication to your education so you can continue to make significant contributions in military and/or civilian sectors.

I began today talking about momentum, and another place UNO is on the move is enrollment growth. We now have the infrastructure in place for working toward our target of 20,000 students over the next six academic years. Overall enrollment has trended up during the past few years, dual enrollment and bridge programs have grown, and our partnerships with community colleges and Western Iowa counties have expanded. We are now in the process of establishing a one-stop shop for on-campus and online transfer students coming to UNO to complete their education.

I'm particularly pleased to note that our graduate students now comprise 20% of our student body after two solid years of very impressive growth. This is strengthening the workforce pipeline as well as enhancing continuing education opportunities, which of course, are critical aspects of our mission in serving Omaha and the State of Nebraska.

We are also committed to serving students wherever they are. UNO's distance education has grown 22%. This delivery method offers our students, many of whom need to work, additional flexibility to take courses that fit their busy schedules. Moreover, this valuable access option allows students outside the metro and beyond to take advantage of the unique and excellent academic programs housed at UNO.

The recent additions of over 2 million sq. ft. of capacity affords us the opportunity to create some of the best learning environments and support services in the country, within a campus culture committed to success.

We have numerous learning communities where students of like backgrounds or interests can become a cohort sharing experiences and having access to specialized mentoring and tutoring. Additionally, all students have use of resource centers, for writing, speech, math, and science. And, student athletes have, for the first time, an athletic education center offering support services. This has directly contributed to a record high cumulative grade point average in the Athletic Department.

These capacity changes have also allowed us to enrich and expand our Office of Multicultural Affairs, Honors Program, and Project Achieve. At the same time, we have reinvented the Academic Career and Development Center operation to address career opportunities from admission through employment.

In large measure, these commitments and the implementation of our strategic enrollment plan have resulted in record campus and learning community retention rates as well as degrees

conferred. At the close of today's event you will each receive the UNO Advantage and Fact Books providing specific performance and operational details.

Beyond the changes directly affecting students, there have been significant advancements in research. External research funding last year approached \$16 million, and the UNO Office of Research and Creative Activity provided student scholars with approximately half a million dollars encouraging their research efforts.

At the beginning of the current academic year, we received the largest research grant in the history of the campus from the National Institutes of Health. The research team housed in the newly opened and privately funded Biomechanics facility received more than \$10 million to expand the "science of movement" with a potential to reach more than \$30 million by the close of the grant.

Clearly, the work of our faculty and their collaborative efforts with other researchers in the university system and beyond is broadening and deepening our research agenda in areas of need such as biomedical technology and urban specific challenges.

Community engagement is also thriving on the UNO campus and in the city. The privately funded Barbara Weitz Community Engagement Center expanded the scope of our efforts dramatically with 11 community organizations, 12 UNO operations, and the University of Nebraska's Buffett Early Childhood Institute currently housed in this new campus facility, with more coming soon.

Service Learning, which is located in the center and is one of the leading programs in the country, now has the capacity to expand its impact on students and the community with the advancement of experiential learning and scholarly engagement. A new Office of Civic and Social Responsibility has also been established in the facility to manage and grow "Service Days" for UNO and our K-12 partners.

In the last year, it was conservatively estimated that almost 10,000 members of the UNO community gave about 170,000 hours of service to a wide range of engagement activities, and approximately 25,000 people have used the engagement center since its dedication in April of 2014.

Much of what I just reported would simply not be possible if it wasn't for the support of old and new friends who believe in the mission of UNO.

As the University of Nebraska Foundation's "Campaign for Nebraska" was beginning, Jim Young agreed to serve as the UNO Chair. The campaign consultants suggested UNO should strive for a \$150 million goal. However, after reviewing the extensive input regarding campus need, Jim suggested \$250 million was a more appropriate target given our needs and opportunities for change.

Well, the campaign has been successful beyond the expectations of many, thanks to our foundation team, faculty and staff, and of course our supporters:

- Would Lori Byrne, our campus foundation leader, and her talented team stand and be recognized for their extraordinary work on behalf of UNO during this record campaign?

- If you didn't know, Lori has recently been promoted in the foundation, but we have been very fortunate to have Mike Bird an incredible development professional and UNO friend, step into Lori's position. Please join me in welcoming Mike, into the Maverick family. Mike please stand.
- Will all of our campaign committee members and college priority volunteers stand and be recognized?
- And finally, I offer special thanks to Clark Lauritzen, Rodrigo Lopez, and Carl Mammel for stepping up to lead the campus committee when Jim became ill.

Let me quickly share a few campaign facts. Because of your generosity we have received approximately:

- \$140 million in capital and/or equipment support
- \$48 million advancing our faculty, program, and/or research efforts
- And, \$42 million supporting our students and their success

Almost 12,000 people contributed to the campaign, of which approximately 7,200 were first time UNO donors. As of September 30, the total campaign investment in our campus is a bit beyond \$230 million. Well, we have a couple of months left in the campaign.

Simply said, bricks and mortar have become very special, and are transformative places of learning, collaboration, and scholarship; while gifts of scholarships and student support, professorships, and research have broadened

the horizon for countless individuals and initiatives.

- You provided us with a Biomechanics building, the Commerce and Behavioral Research Lab, Glacier Creek Research Center, a renovated Peter Kiewit Institute, and metropolitan river research stations which in turn, gave our faculty and students places for discovery and innovation.
- The College of Business Administration's Mammel Hall and completely renovated Rosken's College of Education and the College of Public Affairs and Community Service now have the capacity to grow and maximize teaching and learning for tomorrow's leaders.
- The Barbara Weitz Community Engagement Center has become a living problem solving lab to enhance experiential learning, scholarly engagement, and organizational collaboration which will advance the quality of life in Omaha.
- You made an expanded and renovated Library possible, but more importantly, it has become a remarkable resource center for campus and community scholarship.
- And the expanded and renovated Health, Physical Education, and Recreation facility and world-class soccer pitch are now places for health, wellness, athletics, and intramurals.
- Your gifts for student scholarships and support made learning communities and student resource centers possible, allowing us to better serve a diverse student body as

well as providing hope and opportunities for success.

- The funding for chairs and professorships gave us the invaluable resources needed to create meaningful high quality programs, attracting the best and brightest to campus.
- And finally, your support of the UNO/Community Arena, opening a year from now, is a “game changer” for our campus, a home for athletics and a place for campus and community educational, recreational, and entertainment activities.
- The sharing of your treasure has worked miracles on our campus. Your confidence in UNO is, at once, both humbling and inspiring. The momentum mentioned, required your impetus, and now, the incredible talent and creativity on campus can be fully unleashed. We are now, simply and thanks to you, that place without limits.

We all know there is much more work to do. It's what you expect of us and it is what we expect of ourselves. And by 2020, with your much needed and ongoing support:

- We will be able to grow the campus to 20,000, and strategically add personnel, support resources, and physical capacity in selected areas.
- Enhance academic priority efforts in STEM education, sustainability, early childhood education, and globalization.
- We can lead the way as a more diverse campus reflected in faculty/staff and students.

- Increase our externally funded research footprint.
- Maximize our collaborative partnerships, service learning and engagement.
- Become a force in Division I athletics by winning conference championships and competing for at least one national title.
- Expand on-campus housing availability to meet the significant increase in demand, while at the same time adding parking to parallel the intended campus growth.
- Establish an Excellence Center that will provide early childhood education with the direct teaching and research involvement of the Buffett Early Childhood Institute and our College of Education. This facility would also bring together UNO, our Metro Community College and Avenue Scholars Partners, and in all likelihood the Knights of Ak-Sar-Ben Horatio Alger scholarship program.
- We need to renovate and expand the Strauss Performing Arts Center to accommodate the more than quadrupled student/community usage and growing demands that this important facility was constructed to serve when it opened in 1972.
- And finally, we must try to capture the approximately 100 remaining acres abutting the Glacier Creek Tall Grass Prairie and research center. The addition of prairie will advance this unique metropolitan learning place for K-12 schools, our campus, and the community, before it is lost forever to housing or commercial development.

In closing let me say, it's time.

Time for everyone to know that the days of UNO's modesty are over.

That our mission to become a premier metropolitan university is more than an aspiration, it has been realized.

It's time. Time for people to know why UNO is a place where greatness comes to grow, a university that celebrates ambition. A place of higher learning that isn't afraid to do the hard work of promoting brilliance, where driven and friendly are not mutually exclusive. And, where being down-to-earth never stops us from reaching for the stars.

We are a Midwestern university, but one with global reach and vision. Where growing "big" is an attribute, but doesn't detract from

personalization. And along with Omaha, the city we call home, our collective future is very bright.

It's time. Time everyone knows that UNO accepts the challenge, that we are agents for change, and willing to reinvent the present, to achieve the future. Ladies and gentlemen, this is no brag, just fact. After all, we are Mavericks, and I have never been prouder of the accomplishments of our faculty, staff, and students.

We thank you and bless you all for being part of our Maverick team.

It is now time to present the Order of the Tower Award.

\* ORDER OF THE TOWER PRESENTED \*

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