



Growing With and Within our Thriving Community University of Nebraska Omaha



The question of whether academics should try to connect with their surrounding communities has, for decades, been a non-question: scholars typically assumed there was no way to devote time to public service or community engagement without abandoning their intellectual mission.

The Chronicle weighed in with articles such as “The Campus as City” depicting the challenges of urban campuses trying to build town-gown relationships, or “How One College Went ‘All In’ in Its Neighborhood”, highlighting one university’s partnerships with its local P-12 system. These reports convey the complexities inherent in being an anchor institution.

But if the Chronicle had studied the University of Nebraska at Omaha, it would have found a Carnegie-classified engaged university growing with and within its metropolitan community and aligning its activities across the academy with the aspirations of metropolitan Omaha and rural Nebraska. We seek to be an exemplar metropolitan university, one whose faculty, staff, students, and facilities are in partnership with community organizations, local government, schools, and businesses in building the economic and cultural life of the diverse and growing Omaha community.

To be a strong partner, we support faculty and students who focus on “engaged scholarship” – work on “pressing social, civic, and ethical problems” – and express this in our service learning programs and in promotion/tenure processes. We founded “community chairs,” endowed professorships whose scholarship is focused on community engagement and impact. We support faculty research such as our partnerships with Offutt Air Force Base and the U.S. Strategic Command in the study of violent extremist groups. Our College of Public Affairs and Community Service hosts the Nebraska Center for Justice Research, the Center for Public Affairs Research, and the Juvenile Justice Institute, which regularly provide support and analysis for local and state policy makers. We created the Center for Health Humanities, supporting faculty scholarship in the healing arts and partnerships with the University of Nebraska Medical Center. With over 400 engaged publications annually, our faculty are leaders in their discipline by leading in our community.

To be a strong partner, we work to maintain relationships across Omaha and Nebraska. We are a key

part of the Metropolitan Omaha Educational Consortium and Omaha STEM Ecosystem, consisting of representatives of school districts and community colleges. We explore workforce and business development with the Omaha Chamber of Commerce, and our Nebraska Business Development Center. Even city-wide events in Omaha are integrated into our campus, as the surrounding city parks are the site of concerts and outdoor theater. UNO and the community came together to build the Barbara Weitz Community Engagement Center, an incubator facility on campus for small non-profit and community organizations that partner with our students and faculty. The center is home to the Service Learning Academy, which builds pedagogical tools in service-learning and incubates partnerships with faculty, P-12 educators, and community organizations; over 600 projects since 2010 have engaged 11,000 UNO students and impacted students.

The community’s needs/aspirations are found in our student body, many of whom are from the Omaha metro area. Many are first-generation, Pell-eligible, and of diverse family backgrounds. Many are returning students, seeking to advance their lives mid-career. Many seek online and hybrid modalities, balancing careers and education. We have a long way to go, aggressively pursuing research-informed techniques to support these students. We support pathways to college for students from rural Nebraska communities as well, with hybrid opportunities for students.

Fortunately, the community has recognized our partnership. Through philanthropy, our Strauss Performing Arts Center underwent a major renovation. The community came together 10 years ago to build Mammel Hall for our College of Business Administration and again this year to build a major addition, as well as a doubling of our Biomechanics building. Endowed professorships in STEM Education have been established to support innovation across P-12 and the university. Philanthropy has been instrumental in building residence hall communities and student services on our Scott Campus. A deliberate strategy to promote public-private partnerships that involve federal, state, and local government funding with corporate and philanthropic support has flourished on our campus.

To be sure, aligning a complex comprehensive university with community aspirations and needs requires intentional commitment. At UNO, we are fortunate to have engaged community leaders who see UNO as integral to the economic and cultural life of Omaha and Nebraska, as reinforced by the recent business-led economic development report “Blueprint Nebraska.”

Conversations on this engaged metropolitan mission are essential. They speak to what we value as an institution and how we want our campus to be known both in the academic community and in the public eye. As higher education faces ever more complex economic realities, it’s vitally important for people to see us as a public good worthy of investment. The public truly needs us to be partners in the civic future.