

**UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA AT OMAHA
2006 CONVOCATION ADDRESS
INTERIM CHANCELLOR JOHN E. CHRISTENSEN**

**“A SNAPSHOT IN TIME: THE STATE OF THE UNIVERSITY, OCTOBER 2006”
OCTOBER 11, 2006**

Ninety-eight years ago, citizens of our community came together to build a new educational institution - Omaha University, later to become the Municipal University of Omaha, and finally, the University of Nebraska at Omaha. On October 8th, 1908, they signed the Articles of Incorporation, officially creating the university and providing us with a backdrop for today's Convocation.

As a result of this community collaboration, these founders set in motion a series of events which would:

- touch the lives of generations of Omaha citizens,
- expand educational and economic development opportunities,
- provide a venue for meaningful research,
- offer a means for citizens to be educated for a variety of careers, and
- profoundly change the higher education landscape in our community.

The challenges ahead of these founders were many and complex:

- Who would lead this fledgling institution?
- Could sufficient funding be found to sustain its operations and growth?
- Could students be recruited and enrolled to fill its classes?
- Would facilities be available to enrich the educational experience?
- And, at the heart of all of these questions –
- Would the community commitment and confidence provide long-term support?
Put another way, how could the partnership between the community and its university be nurtured and sustained?

Now, fast-forward to 2006, and while the context of the questions is different, for those of us who care deeply about this institution, they remain fundamentally the same.

The events of the past several months have tested the mettle of the campus community:

Publicity surrounding those controversies shifted the focus from the core business of teaching, learning, and discovery, to how resources have been used in support of the "greater good" of the campus. The financial health and future direction of our Athletic Department was called into question as was the lack of administrative transparency.

And, many expressed concern, both publicly and privately, as to the extent public trust in UNO had been harmed, and what course of action could restore it.

Since my appointment as interim chancellor, one month ago, I have sought out citizens and leaders across this community and the region for their advice. I have heard the disappointment, frustration and concern in their voices. Clearly, UNO is this community's university and many felt somewhat betrayed.

But I have also heard genuine and unwavering support for UNO, and countless offers of help to set us sailing into a bright future.

I am here today to tell you that the UNO we love, serve and care about remains strong and vital. The university that so many have dedicated their lives to build has never wavered in its commitment to students, the community it serves, or expanding the boundaries of knowledge and scholarship. It is important to recognize that what has happened is in no way pervasive or reflective of the campus culture or values.

Our commitment to UNO's Strategic Planning remains unchanged. And, I'm excited about UNO's future opportunities including:

- the development of the Pacific and Center Street campuses as part of Omaha's mid-city revitalization and the Ak-Sar-Ben Village project;
- the acquisition of additional housing, so UNO can continue to serve students who want a metropolitan university education and experience;
- enhancing student life opportunities through future renovations in the Student Center and Health, Physical Education, and Recreation facilities;
- continuing to value and improve campus diversity in terms of race, culture, gender, first generation students, and thoughts and ideas;
- increasing the support necessary to maintain high quality academic and research agendas;
- **growing partnerships within our community through meaningful engagement;**
- preparing students for a knowledge-based economy;
- continuing our highly successful Division II program, while reviewing our athletic conference affiliation options; and
- saluting UNO's centennial of achievement beginning in October 2008.

This morning, I want to celebrate UNO's many academic and outreach achievements. And, I want to share the mechanisms that have been put in place to improve fiscal oversight across campus, and to address the issues brought forward in the Karnes report.

Over the past decade, our campus has made significant progress on its strategic goal of helping students succeed and graduate. And, last year was no exception:

The quality of incoming students and persistence to graduation is the highest in UNO's history and increasing. A safe, welcoming, and supportive campus for all students is not only an expectation, it's a reality. Students find a mature, technologically rich campus

with support provided by redesigned orientation, First Year Experience, Writing and Speech Centers offering individualized tutorial service, the soon-to-be established Math and Science Learning Center, and a faculty and staff that is genuinely dedicated to their success.

Additionally, the Goodrich Program, Project Achieve, Multicultural Affairs, and a broad array of student organizations all make significant contributions to sharpening the student focus. Finally, as we dedicate the University Library addition immediately following Convocation, you'll see how new innovations, expanded hours of operation, and student-centered designs are changing the way students use this modern learning facility.

Special commendation to Steve Shorb and all the faculty and staff for the fine work they have done in bringing the addition on line. Media coverage this morning was spectacular.

Academic excellence, UNO's second strategic goal, was reflected in variety of campus activities and UNO's inclusion in highly visible national rankings:

For the first time in its history, UNO moved into the top-level Midwest Regional Tier in the U.S. News 2007 edition of America's Best Colleges. This is particularly gratifying because the peer evaluation component suggests we are highly regarded among our professional colleagues.

Several UNO programs were also recognized in U.S. News including Public Administration, the Criminal Justice Doctoral Program, Social Work, Speech Language Pathology, Teacher Preparation, the undergraduate Business Program, and Industrial-Organizational Psychology.

UNO's Service Learning Academy was cited as a Program to Look For among 42 programs listed nationally by US News; the only program in the Plains States with this distinction. Certainly, another important recognition is our second-year-in-a-row inclusion on the Princeton Review's 2007 Best Midwestern College guide. The rankings are based on surveys of college students and recent graduates, further evidence that our students and alumni speak for us, and they speak very well of us.

UNO's research agenda is being conducted in laboratories, classrooms, throughout the community and in the field from Afghanistan to Australia to South America. A significant contributor to the academic excellence priority, this research continues to attract external support from a variety of sources signaling the quality of work being done.

Other excellence indicators include the increasing student research profile, growing honors program participation, UNO's national leadership in the developing on-line

faculty and student portfolios, and innovative independent and collaborative on-line academic programs.

UNO's impact in the community, our third strategic goal, characterizes our overall metropolitan mission. It remains a strong component of our outreach, with benefits to both the university and its community.

One measure is the university's economic impact on the Omaha metropolitan region. According to a recent study, UNO's economic activity and the value of our graduates' degrees added \$1.6 billion to the regional economy. Furthermore, the Nebraska Business Development Center's economic impact of \$324 million created or retained nearly 4,000 jobs in the state.

Perhaps the hallmark of UNO's engagement with the community is its rapidly expanding Service Learning Academy. More than 40 courses this fall have service learning components, making meaningful contributions to community organizations, while enabling student learning in real-life contexts. Hundreds of students, faculty and staff have committed their fall and spring breaks to participate in three and seven Days of Service, resulting in tangible community benefits.

Finally, all colleges will contribute to the new Collaborative Science Institute, in partnership with the community. This Institute places UNO at the forefront of this emerging discipline with far-reaching benefits for business, industry, government and not-for-profit organizations. It will be an important complement to the innovative partnerships being created locally, nationally, and internationally by the Peter Kiewit Institute, the campus Colleges, and International Studies and Programs.

Now, let's move on to the significant action steps that are a result of recommendations from the campus community, constituents and the Karnes Report regarding stabilizing the Athletics budget, improving communications and conference affiliations. I also want to share measures that have been or will be implemented to improve fiscal oversight across campus.

Before we proceed, however, I want to publicly state that we have an exemplary Athletic program, a high-quality coaching and support staff, and student-athletes who have been blessed with both athletic and academic talent. This summer's storm was about fiscal and administrative issues; not the value of athletics on this campus.

An insert highlighting action steps (see attachment). All of these actions reflect our commitment to transparency and accountability. For example:

1. The Athletic Director now reports directly to me, and we have scheduled meetings weekly. This improves communication and provides continuous

monitoring of the budget situation, as will monthly oversight by the Chancellor's Cabinet.

2. Athletics will hire a permanent Business Manager who will work with the Office of Budget and Finance, the Athletic Director, coaches, their programs and booster clubs to provide budget development and on-going compliance and management.
3. The Athletic director and coaches will participate in budget planning and their annual evaluations will include both team and budget performance indicators. I'll continue to meet with head coaches and department heads as needed.
4. The department will engage in a five-year budget development process that will provide the stability necessary to plan, implement, and make mid-course corrections. We currently have a deficit in Athletics and we will put in place a three year plan to balance the budget. Moreover, the plan will address the need for new and reallocated resources to reconcile the problem.
5. The Karnes report recommended and we concur that, given our current and foreseeable Athletic budget situation, remaining in Division II, is our most prudent course of action and the right place to be at this point in our history.
6. As the NCC's future remains cloudy, exploring conference options is also appropriate. Preliminary discussions have taken place with the Mid-American Intercollegiate Athletic Association, (MIAA) whose member institutions are a 'good fit' with UNO's athletic program.
7. Booster club accounts have been reviewed, with access and authorization policies to be implemented to ensure accountability. I will also continue to meet with Booster Club presidents as needed.
8. Accountability begins at the top. Therefore, the Chancellor's discretionary expenditures will require approval of the campus Chief Financial Officer and the Director of Finance. Expenditures will be reported to President Milliken monthly.
9. Review of fiscal oversight for all campus expenditures is on-going and the business office will publish these guidelines in the very near future. I'm also happy to report, the UNO Alumni Association has also instituted new control measures to ensure that funds are used and disbursed properly.
10. Among the new financial reporting mechanisms:
 - a. monthly reports of discretionary spending at department and college levels approved by supervisors;
 - b. quarterly Athletic budget reports to the Faculty Senate Executive Committee; and
 - c. to the Dean's Forum.

Taken together, these action steps will achieve a three-fold purpose:

- First, that oversight for administrative expenditures will be scrutinized and approved by several individuals. Reimbursements will require the necessary receipts and documentation and will be for legitimate university purposes.
- Second, the athletic department will manage its budget, as we require of all university departments. Booster accounts will have appropriate oversight by the

boosters and the university and no funds will be expended without proper authorization.

- And finally, that we assure our stakeholders, donors, and the community that we take very seriously our stewardship of both public and private resources. We are accountable for the monies placed in our trust, and our use of these funds should reflect the highest levels of integrity and service.

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Ninety-eight years ago, UNO was dedicated to the education of its students, so that they might "earn a living and live a cultured life, not as two processes but as one." As members of the UNO family, I call upon each of us to rededicate our energies to this important task.

As we look at our progress, we realize that in great measure, good things have happened at UNO as a result of the public confidence and trust placed in us. The maturation of the Dodge campus, the development of the Peter Kiewit

Institute and the Pacific campus and soon, the Center Street campus, all reflect the investment of taxpayers, donors and the community at large. We will do everything in our power to earn that confidence in our daily actions and in planning for the future.

My optimism about UNO's future stems, in large measure, from my enormous respect for the quality and dedication of our students, faculty and staff, who have always demonstrated that: if we can dream it; we can do it.

In my role as interim chancellor, I pledge my full energies and commitment to lead in a manner that makes the campus proud.

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 in this journey.