

UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA AT OMAHA  
2009 CONVOCATION ADDRESS  
CHANCELLOR JOHN E. CHRISTENSEN

**“101 YEARS: WRITING THE NEXT CHAPTER”**  
**OCTOBER 7, 2009**

Good morning and welcome to UNO's 2009 Fall Convocation. My sincere thanks to all attending today; and please know it is a privilege to stand before you as Chancellor of this great university and share this annual progress update.

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By any standard of measurement, 2009, UNO's Centennial, was an extraordinary year for our campus. It began with the Fall Convocation, and the announcement that Senator Chuck Hagel, a UNO alum, would be locating his Congressional Archives in the Criss Library. This was followed by the dedication of the newly renovated home for the College of Public Affairs and Community Service, groundbreaking for the Health Physical Education and Recreation Building renovation and expansion, the grand opening of our newest housing complex, Maverick Village, and the adjacent parking structure, and the Alumni Association's Homecoming Extravaganza. Not bad for the first week of celebration .....

But, as they say, "the hits kept coming" throughout the year with successful and innovative events planned by every college. I'd ask Russ Smith, chairman of the Centennial Committee and committee members in the audience to stand and let us thank you for a job well done.

The Centennial also marked the completion of a new operating agreement between the UNO Alumni Association and the NU Foundation. The leadership and staff of both organizations should be commended for designing a partnership to maximize efficiencies and enhance collaborative efforts, whereby advancing campus strategic goals. This is truly an example of the whole reflecting more than the sum of its parts, and will pay increasing dividends as we enter our next 100 years and prepare for University of Nebraska's Capital Campaign beginning this fall.

In February, the Centennial's crown jewel was added, through the efforts of the Foundation and Alumni Association. The Centennial Gala, with keynote speaker Roland Fryer, raised enough money to fully endow the first of two major community engagement Fellowships, with funding for the second well on its way to completion. Jack Koraleski, representing Union Pacific, and Barb Weitz, representing the Weitz Family Foundation please stand, and allow us to thank you for your extraordinary contributions to the engagement fellowship project.

And as the centennial year draws to a close, we begin writing the next chapter of our history by welcoming the 101st class of UNO freshmen to campus this fall—a class that joins the second highest student enrollment in over a decade. 15,300 now call UNO home, an increase of nearly 3% over last year.

Such recruiting successes do not happen by accident, and I extend my appreciation to Recruitment Services and the many faculty and staff who helped our efforts by telling the UNO story and making this campus a welcoming, supportive, and people-friendly place to grow and learn. You deserve a round of applause.

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As Chancellor, I am enormously proud of the strides our campus has made in realizing our mission as "stewards of place" and our primary strategic goals of being student-centered, building and sustaining academic excellence, and engaging the community through our teaching, research, and service. Not only does this progress reflect the intent of our founders, it also addresses the demands and needs of our students, partners, and community - now and far into the future.

One hundred and one years ago tomorrow, UNO's founders signed the Articles of Incorporation, creating "a University for the promotion of sound learning and education" whose very existence was predicated on its ability to study and respond to the "social and civic problems," afforded by our urban location. It was a time when less than 10% of the graduates from area high schools pursued higher education. In the words of our founders, "Omaha is, therefore still virgin soil in large measure for the development of an educational enterprise. Surely, this form of enterprise ought not to be lacking."

Visionary? Yes, but also prophetic as we consider that UNO remains the hometown choice for metropolitan area students seeking an educational experience rooted in an urban environment. Today, more than 60% of local high school graduates pursue higher education—many of them at UNO. Improved yes, but much work still remains.

Approximately 90% of our students are Nebraskans, with 80% coming from the metro area. True to the early founders' vision, UNO does more than fill an educational void - we offer a unique high quality educational experience in the heart of a thriving "city of the future" as we address the civic and social challenges of today and tomorrow,

In order to "keep the promise" of being a leader among metropolitan universities nationally and capitalize on the incredible momentum generated by our centennial celebration, we must redouble our efforts to build capacity for the future. If you believe, as I do, that no one cares about our students more than we do, then the completed and planned improvements to our physical campus offer additional opportunities to serve them well.

- Maverick Village, our fourth residential housing project opened last fall at capacity with dozens of students on wait lists at the start of the semester. Currently, about 10 % of our students live on campus, and while we do not aspire to be a fully residential campus, we continue to monitor supply and demand to meet the needs of students seeking a metropolitan experience.
- I am also pleased to report the Board of Regents has approved our request to own and operate University Village. Subject to approvals from the Higher Education Commission and the Legislature, we hope to manage the property in the near future, allowing us to provide students with improved service and maintenance as well as enhanced campus life and personal development experiences.
- The Milo Bail Student Center continues to make improvements in its role as the campus kitchen, and living room. Recent renovations to the food court area are streamlining service, while offering a new look and menu. A refurbished ballroom and the creation of additional casual meeting and study spaces are generating positive comments from students and the rest of the campus community. Special thanks to the Center's staff and our Facilities Management team for bringing the project in on budget and in time for the fall term.
- The completion of the multi-year Criss Library renovation compliments the new Library addition and creates an attractive and state of the art resource for the campus and community.
- Relocation of the Career Center into the Student Center creates an ideal location for our ever expanding commitment to serving students well—both before, and after graduation.
- Multicultural Affairs has expanded its service and moved into new quarters in the Student Center as well. If you have not visited, I invite you do to so. This move reflects the increasing demand for their services, as fully 16% of our students are ethnic minorities or international students, creating the most diverse student body in UNO's history.
- The Welcome Center will open its doors to prospective students and their families next summer. Moving from the Eppley Building to the newly renovated Hayden House, just west of Weber Fine Arts, the Welcome Center will provide a one stop visitors' center for recruitment, orientation, and the campus tour programs.
- Work is progressing well on Mammel Hall, future home of the College of Business Administration. And as the building rises, so does the excitement among our students and faculty. This building will be LEED Certified, as well as a model for future Business Colleges across the nation. As students, faculty and staff prepare to move in next summer, plans are underway to renovate the vacated Roskens Hall for the College of Education. In addition to providing approximately 35,000 additional square feet, we will create "state of the art" teaching/learning spaces for the preparation of tomorrow's teachers and educational leaders.

- As previously mentioned, we dedicated the newly renovated and expanded CPACS Building at the beginning of the Centennial Celebration. This incredible teaching/learning facility has served to bring the college's programs home under one roof while providing space for campus and community use in the Collaborating Commons.
- Finally, we celebrate the completion of Phase I of the HPER Building renovation and expansion project, which underscores our commitment to campus health and wellness in addition to creating spaces and opportunities for a vibrant campus life. It should be noted that university selection research suggests that such facilities play a key role in recruitment of new students, and I believe this building and the programs housed within it, will be among the best in the country and serve as one of the deciding factors for students contemplating UNO.
- At UNO, the educational experience and academic capacity benefits from a remarkable faculty. Their scholarship and pedagogy reflect a forward thinking approach to modern challenges and opportunities. Their use of technology advances the boundaries of knowledge in new and emerging disciplines, and faculty add value to the curricula by collaborating in the community. The UNO experience is in many ways defined by our students who, upon graduation, are equipped for success in a 21st century global society. If we are to remain true to our educational values, then we must grow the capacity of our academic enterprise and sustain academic excellence, which cannot and will not be compromised.

The building of academic capacity is reflected throughout our campus community. Examples include:

- New areas of academic study in Neuroscience and Information Technology Innovation which have been recently approved along with a minor in Islamic Studies. Also, two new centers in Collaboration Science and Israel and Jewish Studies have received Board of Regents approval. It should be noted that the campus continues to study the alignment of academic programs and future workforce needs in the metropolitan area and beyond. Preliminary findings suggest that approximately 90% of UNO's academic majors align with new job and replacement position demands through 2015. Still, reinvention of our educational programming capacity will be required as community and societal needs evolve and new disciplines emerge.
- The campus research enterprise is currently searching for an Associate VC for Research and Creative Activity. In the interim, Dr. Harmon Maher has served in this role and performed exceptionally well. External funding has increased 43% over the past three years, realizing a record \$16 million during the Centennial year. Permanently filling the research leadership position will add capacity to the campus research agenda and provide support for new and continuing faculty research initiatives.

- We are currently celebrating the 20th anniversary of granting doctoral degrees. Each of the programs has grown and matured into high quality leadership preparation and research enterprises in their respective disciplines. As the demand for this level of education increases in a growing metropolitan area, we will need to evaluate our doctoral capacity regularly.
- In an effort to provide access to our entire metropolitan area including Iowa students from the three contiguous counties, UNO established the Metropolitan Advantage program. This program offers reduced non-resident tuition to these students and participation has tripled since its inception. Clearly, this signals a need for continuing to develop innovative access opportunities and requisite capacity.
- The campus commitment to student success through graduation has resulted in the development of a variety of student supports including writing/math/science centers, a revised orientation program, a First Year Experience program, and a variety of mentoring opportunities. Currently, Academic and Student Affairs is examining advising practices and general education opportunities and experiences. This is intended to assist student movement through a quality core liberal arts experience and selected discipline curricula in a timely and coherent fashion.
- Since the 1970's the Goodrich Scholarship Program has served as a national model for students who lack financial resources but are rich with talent and potential. Today, the Thompson Learning Community building on the Goodrich principles increases accessibility to first generation and underserved student populations by providing student support, mentoring, and a supportive campus learning community. These programs represent the very best of being student centered in an urban environment.
- Now in its second decade, the Peter Kiewit Institute has committed to even higher levels of excellence and recognition. The Institute's new Executive Director, Dr. Mike McGinnis, comes to campus with a long and distinguished career in the military and information sciences. He is committed to growing the PKI research and development program while deepening scholarly engagement with local, national, and international constituencies. Furthermore, in collaboration with the resident colleges, he is developing a "PKI Experience" which will include "world-class" academic programs and expanded student opportunities. Please join me in welcoming Mike McGinnis to the UNO family.
- The Nebraska University System in collaboration with the State College System is implementing a new student information system. When in place, the new system will help us improve our application, admission, tracking, advising, and graduation processes. Changes such as this are difficult and complex and I would ask you to join me in thanking Linda Pratt and our campus team for their tireless dedication to make the initial "go live" systems functional. The work is far from complete, but I have absolute confidence in the UNO team ..... you are simply the best!

- Athletics is an important part of the fabric of American colleges and universities, as it often serves as the front door to the campus, generates community visibility, and significantly adds value to a sense of community and campus life. Our new Athletic Director has made remarkable progress in reengaging the community, addressing fiscal challenges, and creating a vision for what Omaha's Team can and should be in the future. Perhaps more importantly, he is building a culture of excellence within the department where leadership, personal development, and career preparation become priorities in the student athletes' university experience. Please join me in welcoming Trev Alberts to the UNO family.
- UNO continues to be a home to many non-traditional students who have been a significant part of our history. Faculty have made available multiple course delivery methods and non campus instructional sites such as Offutt Air Force Base, public schools, and community agencies to provide the scheduling flexibility many non-traditional and continuing education students often require. The Bachelor of General Studies degree programs and many certificate programs also add options promoting flexibility where needed. I'm pleased to report that UNO was selected as part of an elite group of institutions by G.I. Jobs magazine as a military friendly campus, which tends to be one of our larger non-traditional populations and highlights our efforts to serve the educational needs of all community groups.



As we look to the future of our campus, our vision remains to be a national leader among metropolitan universities. I do not believe this to be, any longer, an aspirational vision, but rather, a clear and focused path along which, we walk daily. Quality and excellence, it seems, is all around us on this campus.

We are the University of Nebraska at Omaha, but we always have been "of" our community. In many ways, I believe we are among the nation's distinguished institutions, serving as a national prototype for innovative interactions within our community, particularly in the area of service learning. However, the time has come to raise the proverbial bar.

Groundbreaking work in the field of institutional engagement suggests it is no longer enough for such activities to remain the province of a select few within the university. Rather, the art and science of engagement must permeate the academy, and be reflected broadly in all areas of teaching, research, and public service. In an article published in the Journal of Higher Education and Outreach, the language was more direct, "For the scholarship of engagement to become a core institutional practice, it will have to be advanced at the level of changes that involve institutional culture and underlying policy."

Ernest Lynton, one of the founders of the metropolitan university construct, refers to this as an "ecosystem of knowledge," one in which academic knowledge interacts with and is

shaped by community-based knowledge. Put simply, "the pursuit of knowledge itself demands engagement."

I have called upon the campus to begin a dialogue that moves us closer to this goal. Admittedly, some disciplines lend themselves more readily to community engagement activities, but clearly there is a role for each of us to play.

If engagement is to become a core institutional practice, I believe as do many others, that a home for these activities is essential. A University/Community Engagement Center could house:

- campus organizations such as the Service Learning Academy and the Metropolitan Omaha Education Consortium
- community agencies and initiatives that we currently support such as Omaha By Design, Omaha Community Partnership, Building Bright Futures, the OPPD Energy Research Project, and the Neighborhood Association
- a not-for-profit incubator, and
- spaces designed for engagement innovation and research

This campus based center would not only provide organizational synergies, it would facilitate connections to the entire UNO teaching, research, and service agenda. Recently a university/community team visited engagement centers similar to what I envision in Salt Lake City and Portland. The reports were very encouraging, and soon team findings will be shared with the campus Task Force studying community engagement as well as the Strategic Planning committee who has dedicated the past year to revisiting our strategic goal for engagement. As always, I will seek out and listen to your thoughts as we move towards these goals.

As we close the chapter on UNO's first one hundred years, we realize that the next chapter is truly ours to write.

Looking forward, the path is clear, the stars aligned, and the future, my friends could not be brighter for this institution.

As I envision a UNO in 2020, I see:

- a campus of 18,000 to 20,000 students
- a place providing access and opportunity for traditional, non-traditional, first generation, underrepresented, and international students
- a home for approximately 20% of the student population who choose to reside on-campus
- a carefully redesigned and integrated general education core
- enhanced academic advising and student support services
- distance education and mixed delivery course opportunities increased by two fold

- student retention and graduation rates in the top quartile of comparable institutions nationally
- a Carnegie classified doctoral granting institution
- a place where international partnerships are increasing, faculty and students are routinely involved in exchange, and collaborative scholarship is common place
- increased support for scholarly activity, with external funding reaching at least \$25 million annually
- a campus community deeply involved in P-16 efforts facilitated by close collaboration between MOEC, our colleges, Building Bright Futures, and the Learning Communities
- a University/Community Engagement Center serving as a national model for engaged scholarship
- a home for UNO athletics South of Center on the former Chili Green property and the implementation of a leadership academy for student athletes
- expansion of Information Science and Technology to the UNO footprint between PKI and Mammel Hall facilitating growth, innovation, collaboration, and engagement
- additional student housing on the Pacific and Center Street campuses
- a third parking structure on the Dodges campus freeing up surface parking to create additional capacity
- efficient transportation between the three UNO campuses with additional parking opportunities on the Pacific and Center sites
- a completed Strauss Performing Arts Building footprint
- a Radio/TV addition to the Weber Fine Arts building
- the economic impact of the campus and alums residing in the metropolitan area far exceeding the current \$2 billion mark
- a successful Capital Campaign supporting human, programmatic and capital capacity building at UNO

Ambitious? Perhaps, but these goals are not only achievable, they are necessary as we continue to seek new and better ways to serve our students, provide leadership in our community, and reflect the momentum and vitality of the metropolitan area.

We are the stewards of that future. Let it be said 100 years from now, that we took a good university, and made it great. That our actions set us on a course for success, and that we left for future generations, a university that will not only stand the test of time, but thrive in the experience.

Thank you very much for joining us on this important journey, and don't forget-we are the Mavericks.