UNO is set to move ahead

The University of Nebraska at Omaha has undergone a remarkable transformation in recent years, and the forward momentum is continuing.

In his State of the University address this week, UNO Chancellor John Christensen looked back at the recent growth and accomplishments, then set out a thoughtful, strategic vision for the school’s future.

The central goal he described is the right one: To make UNO nationally known as a top-flight metropolitan university. That means having a campus that serves high academic standards and builds close connections to its community.

UNO has taken some huge steps toward that goal. Here are just a few examples: Through its dormitory construction, UNO is shifting from a commuting campus persona. The HPER building, with its array of exercise space and equipment, exemplifies UNO’s commitment to boosting athletic programs. Student safety and security have shown new heights of performance. The College of Public Affairs and Community Service, the College of Business Administration and the College of Education are doing great work.

As Christensen noted, the point isn’t to pursue construction for its own sake. Rather, new facilities need to open up new academic opportunities and strengthen educational quality.

Academic strides forward include the national accreditation of numerous programs as well as UNO’s winning three NU-wide awards.

In looking to the future, Christensen called for UNO to grow over the next five years to an enrollment of 20,000, up from the current 15,400. That plan incorporates dormitory construction on the south campus as well as stepped-up marketing efforts not only in Nebraska but also in western Iowa.

Christensen also has made community engagement a key goal for UNO, and last year UNO won a national award for the quality of its civic involvement. The chancellor’s strategic plan calls for connections to the local community.

Ronald and Community Engagement Center, for example, would open up new opportunities for UNO to host public discussions and forums on a wide array of community issues. Also on the to-do list is completion of a long-range plan for UNO’s athletic facilities, due this fall.

Christensen was straightforward in saying that UNO departments must designate a few key academic offerings as priorities and concentrate resources on key goals. “The financial realities now and into the future for public institutions,” he said, “will require that new and reallocated resources directly support campus priorities.”

That’s easily said but not so easy to implement, of course, given the multiple demands and expectations from faculty and donors. After all is said and done, the overarching priority for UNO needs to be this: strong academic quality.

Build up that quality, and a university is better able to attract more students. It’s better able to solicit donations. Better able to gain local respect. And better able to burnish its reputation on the national stage.

Christensen’s plan can help UNO move in that direction. A joint effort is needed to make it happen.

THE PUBLIC PULSE

Railroad is better than pipeline

As a loyal American and combat veteran who has given his blood, sweat and tears for America, I can’t imagine a safer pipeline. I know Warren Buffet would have done great influence with the Burlington Northern Santa Fe Railroad, which controls the pipeline industry and proved to America that a railroad could be the best way to deliver oil from Canada to Texas.

Even if more railroad track had to be laid, it would still be cheaper than a pipeline and much safer to our future.

William H. Prieto, Omaha

Pipeline efficiency is hard to top

I write neither in favor of nor against the proposed Keystone XL pipeline, but I do have a question for the growing number of people who have suggested the solution is to build a refinery somewhere so the nasty crude oil won’t have to be piped across the Ogallala Aquifer.

Once we’ve built an ultra-modern, high-efficiency, ecologically friendly, high-capacity refinery, how would we get the gasoline and other refined products efficiently to the markets that would consume them?

I know, how about a pipeline? We certainly wouldn’t want to have those big energy-burning trucks hauling those dangerous chemicals over our roads, would we?

John V. Mervy, Omaha

Be careful with our health care

A proposal to add Nov. 23 from the Deficit Reduction Supper Committee regarding budget recommendations. A bipartisan letter from U.S. Reps. Joe Courtney, D-Conn., and Tom Cole, R-Okl., is currently circulating and will be presented to the committee.

Let parent decide pupil absence

I’m greatly concerned about Nebraska’s truancy law and its ramifications on our students. By eliminating the distinction between a student and a citizen, the law makes it very difficult for parents to keep their children out of school. This is a violation of parental rights and an infringement of the rights of the child.

Tom P. Lukas, Omaha

To write to the Opinion pages

Letters must include the writer’s first and last names as well as the writer’s address and telephone number. Addresses and phone numbers are not published. Letters written anonymously or with pseudonyms will not be printed. Letters must be the original words of the writer and may be edited for reasons including taste, accuracy, clarity and length. We will not knowingly print letters sent to other publications.

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By mail: Public Pulse
Omaha World-Herald Building
1314 Douglas St., Suite 700
Omaha, Neb. 68102
By fax: 402-444-1221
By email: pulse@owh.com

Forecasts

With the arrival of fall, the forecast is for cooler temperatures. The time for a jacket is near. Park the lawn mower as there is no need for it anymore. Let’s enjoy the cooler temperatures and the beauty of fall.

Jim Sullivan, Emmett, Neb.