

OMAHA PRESS CLUB SPEECH
CHANCELLOR JOHN E. CHRISTENSEN

RECENT CHANGES AT UNO

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Introduction

Omaha Public Radio presents another luncheon broadcast from The Omaha Press Club on Noon Forum. On today's program, we will hear a talk by John Christensen, the Chancellor of the University of Nebraska at Omaha. The title of his presentation will be "Recent Changes at UNO". This program was recorded by Omaha Public Radio on Thursday afternoon, May 16, 2013, for broadcast at this time. The opinions expressed are those of the speaker and do not necessarily represent those of The Omaha Press Club, KIOS FM, or the Omaha Public School District. Here now to introduce the program is Hugh Cowden, a member of The Omaha Press Club's Education Committee.

Hugh Cowden

Today we are going to get an update from UNO Chancellor John Christensen on at least a number of the important changes that have been occurring at the University of Nebraska at Omaha over the last several years. Dr. Christensen was named Chancellor six years ago this month in May of 2007. Since then, UNO has had developments in academics, for example, information technology and proposed changes in engineering, in athletics, including the move to Division I and the impending hockey arena and in the physical plant, for example, the **new Community Engagement Center** and the new College of Business Administration.

Dr. Christensen began teaching at UNO in 1978 in the College of Education's Department of Special Education and Communication Disorders. He was Chairman of that department for twelve years before becoming Dean of the College of Education and later, the Vice Chancellor for Academic and Student Affairs. Dr. Christensen earned a B.S. in Speech Communications and Drama from Dana College in Blair, Nebraska, in 1971, a Master's degree in Special Education and Speech Pathology from UNO in 1974, and a Ph.D. in Speech Pathology and Audiology from the University of Kansas in 1980. He is the first UNO alumnus to occupy the office of UNO Chancellor. After his remarks, he will be glad to take questions from the audience. There are pencils and paper at your tables for you to write them during the lunch and an Education Committee member will come around and pick them up and bring them up to me. It is a pleasure for me to welcome a long time colleague of mine until my retirement in 1995, Dr. John Christensen, the Chancellor of the University of Nebraska at Omaha.

[Applause]

Dr. John Christensen

Thank you. Hugh violated one of the policies that I have now instituted on campus and that is, you may not retire until I retire but that was kind of his nature. It is great to see you again, Hugh. I want to thank all of you for attending but most of all, I want to thank you for giving me this opportunity to provide a brief update about what's happening at UNO today. I also want you to know what a privilege it is for me to serve as Chancellor of UNO, to be a part of a hundred and five year history of a great institution, to be a part of its growth and to be a part of the growth in this community, it's amazing.

I am going to start by framing with just a few things, kind of a campus profile, if you will, and then I want to talk a little bit about what is going on. We are a campus of about 15,500 students and occasionally, you hear different numbers. You hear 14,700 or whatever the case may be. Let me tell you what the difference is. On our campus in Omaha, we have about 14,700 students but we also have programs that are based in Lincoln and they are our students, they are our programs, Criminology and Criminal Justice, for example, and so those students are part of our population. Our total enrollment for the University of Nebraska at Omaha is about 15,500 students.

This has been a ratio. The nature of that student body has remained rather stable over the years, about 80 percent of our students are from the metropolitan area. About 10 percent of our students are from greater Nebraska, and the remaining 10 percent are students from out of state or out of country, and as I said, that fluctuates periodically but that is a fairly typical profile of our student body.

This year we have a minority population on campus which is 17 ½ percent, that is an historic high for our campus. It is very important to our faculty and staff that we reflect our community. We are still working on that, there is work to be done but we are growing in terms of access, not only to minority and underserved first generation students. Our percentage of first generation students generally ranges from 40 to 55 percent during any given year. This fall, it was about 41 ½ percent. We have been as high as about 55 percent. Again, a metropolitan university should look like that kind of profile.

We have students from 130 countries and a statistic that I take pride in on behalf of the entire faculty and staff and that is, 95 percent of our graduating seniors in exit interviews suggest that they would recommend UNO to family and friends which I think says something about the nature of our campus and

the care and concern that faculty and staff have for students, not only academically but personally.

I want to share something with you that I asked our Institutional Research to gather some data for me and I think it is a fairly interesting and powerful set of data, albeit small at this particular juncture, but in the recent past, the last couple of years, what we have learned, and I will use our graduating class in December, '12. What we have learned is more than 80 percent of that group had the opportunity to have an internship, a practicum or a job like experience during their educational time at UNO, and if you dig a little deeper with that population, what you find is that more than 70 percent of those students had job offers when they graduated, and I think interestingly enough, and this one surprised me a little bit, 45 percent of those students graduated with no debt. If you think about the population we are serving, I think that is a rather remarkable statistic. Those who did not graduate in that position were below the national average for debt and, generally, left campus with about \$20,000 in debt, slightly more than that, but their percentage of student loans was about 12 percent below the national average as well.

The message there is, I think, UNO is a great value proposition in that regard and if you recall recently, the Omaha World-Herald, I think it was the end of April, had a piece showing the cost of tuition and fees for about eleven four-year institutions in our area and UNO was at the bottom of that list. I don't like being at the bottom of any list but that's one I'll accept. Being at the bottom in terms of not only the tuition but the amount of fees that students are responsible for paying so I think we are doing good work there.

The message that sends to me is that we have a lot of our students who need to work and do work and I think that is a good thing at the end of the day that they have those experiences along with their academic experience but my concern at the same time is making sure that we support them in a way so that work is truly part-time and not at a level which interferes with their academic experience.

Our vision is to be a premier metropolitan university. I think we are making progress in that regard and I want to tell you, if you haven't been on campus in a while, come onto campus. The passion and the talent that we have there with faculty, staff and in the student body is absolutely remarkable, and any success we have will be attributable to that particular data.

Our three strategic goals are simple but meaningful. We want to be student centered, we want to be academically excellent and we want to be community engaged. I think you may be aware of this that each spring we have a Strategic Planning Forum on campus. It is a campus and community forum where we

discuss those goals, the metrics related to those goals. We get a lot of suggestions about how we might continue to tweak our strategic plan and it is a great day for the campus and I think has guided us well. This year, we had about 250 people participate in an all-day discussion of how it is we continue to transform the University of Nebraska-Omaha.

At the core of our transformation has been building capacity for growth and for change. Some of you remember I believe it was back in the '90s where we actually had a student enrollment of about 17,500 students. We were not prepared for that. That's not a criticism, it is a reality. We did not handle those students well and as a result, I think not only did the students suffer but the campus suffered to a certain degree so what we want to make sure going forward is that we have the capacity to grow and change the campus.

To that end, we have enjoyed some success and I just want to read off a few of those. I know you are probably familiar with this but just as a reminder. We have had three-phase renovation of the library and an addition to that library. We now have Mammel Hall, a new college home for business. We have for the first time a home for the College of Public Affairs and Community Service which is in the old Engineering Building which was totally renovated. We have a new home in the former College or Business Building, Roskens Hall, which was totally transformed, also an addition there is now the home for the College of Education. They were in Kaiser Hall and so the domino effect allowed us then to repurpose and renovate Kaiser Hall to serve our Learning Community's Testing Center and a variety of other things, where we simply didn't have space on campus.

The Health, Physical Education and Recreation Building had been around for a long time. We totally renovated that and made a significant addition there. The remaining house on campus which is an historic home, was renovated and now serves as a welcome center, it is a beautiful facility on our campus. Our Student Union has been renovated and we are in the process of creating an even more student friendly student use kind of environment there.

We have added housing. We now have 2,150 beds on our campus, that is about 13 percent or somewhere in that neighborhood. Nationally, metropolitan universities typically have about 18 to 20 percent beds available for their total population so in the future we will continue to grow the opportunity to live on the campus. We have also just completed a Learning and Academic Support Center for student athletes in the Sapp Field House. In total, we have added about 1.6 million square feet of teaching, learning and student life space on the campus and that is kind of the physical capacity that we have been able to build to this particular point in time.

Now, there are other additions taking place, I'm going to share that with you in just a minute but before I do that, the transition is more than just buildings so a significant part of the transition going forward is to bring the campus together to create a single campus wide priority and that is enrollment management. We started work on this about three years ago. We have used Noel Levitz which is a well-known national consulting firm to help us develop strategic plans for recruitment and retention on our campus. Those plans have now been completed. It is always going to be a work in progress, they are never done but we implemented the original plans in February and I anticipate that we are going to start seeing a change in student population, a growth in student population beginning this summer and in the fall and we will find out based on that what we have done well and what we need to continue to work on.

As you know, in 1909 or 2009, 2010, at the State of the University Address, I proposed that we try to set the bar for the growth of this campus at 20,000 by 2020. Some snickered, I get that a lot. Some were critical; some didn't think it was reasonable. I think it is a bit of a stretch goal perhaps but if we just meet the Regents' strategic goal there, that would take us to roughly 18,000 plus student anyway. My philosophy is let's set the bar and then let's move it up because we are never going to accomplish change unless we push for that change.

It is also important to me because the data will show that about 50 percent of the jobs available during this particular economic recovery, and you may question whether or not there really is an economic recovery occurring, but if you believe that, about 50 percent of the positions that are going to be available are going to require a college degree. If you look a little further out, I think J.B. did an editorial piece in the paper not long ago, and I think he used 2018 or something like that where about two-thirds of the population, two-thirds of the jobs available will require college educations so our attempt there is to continue, particularly with the growth of this metropolitan area, to continue to prepare students for positions that are going to be available going forward.

We have also done some fairly dramatic reorganization internally on the campus. We have totally reorganized Academic and Student Affairs. We have purchased a fairly significant amount of new technologies to support recruitment, retention, admissions and advising. We have a new website which has, some of it is done, and we continue to work on that. There is now a virtual tour, I hope at some point you have an opportunity to take that or I would prefer you come to campus and let's a drive around.

We have redone our branding. We have added wayfinding to the campus. One of the concerns of the community is I don't know where I'm going, I can't find the right building, so the signage on campus now is there. We have reorganized Public Relations and I think for the first time in the history of the University actually a marketing director who is helping us to figure out how to tell the story and bless someone who gave us Erin Owen in terms of helping us think about how it is we tell the UNO story. I think it is a wonderful story, we've been rather shy and reserved about that which is, I guess, kind of the Omaha way. We need to stop doing that and tell the story as best we can.

We brought graduation back to campus and this year Mother Nature was not very nice to us but we decided to implement Plan B Tuesday after getting as much weather information as we could. We did implement that and it is a great experience. Let me tell you why I think it's a great experience. We had over 14,000 family members and friends on our campus. To put that in perspective, when we did commencements at the Civic Auditorium, our big number was 7,200. Now, not only are they on our campus, our students have the opportunity, and we see it throughout the day, to take Mom and Dad and brother and sister and uncle and neighbor and significant other to the buildings where they had a chance to study to let them the campus, it's just a great experience.

I also have the analytics but I haven't had a chance to study them very well and some of my colleagues here may have looked at this more carefully but we also streamed this so if people couldn't come to campus here locally, they had a chance to participate. Also, we have a large body of international students so this was streamed internationally to 20 countries where parents who could not come had the opportunity to see their children receive their degree. We are going to continue that and as we talk about the arena, we are not going to group everybody up again, we are going to have a general commencement ceremony at that point in time and we're going to do basically what a lot of other universities do. It's certainly the way that KU did this when I happened to be there and that is there was a general celebration in the football field which by the way was the only time the football field was used and students would march down and it was a great, a lot of pomp and circumstance, a great ceremony, and then each of the colleges as we do now had the opportunity to have something very personal for their students.

We have established three Student Support Centers that I want you to be aware of; one of them is in Oral Communication, one of them is in Writing and one of them is in Mathematics for students who might be challenged. They are used frequently, students are very, very pleased about that kind of support. We have established a number of learning communities. You all remember Goodrich which has been around for a long time and has been a very successful learning

community thanks to Susie Buffett and the Buffetts; we have about 800 students in the Thompson Learning Center on campus now. Jim and Shirley Young have a learning center and on and on. These have proven to be wonderful ways to support students who, in fact, may be at some risk of not being successful and the data are remarkable regarding how well this is working. We also have now an honors learning community and it has been equally successful.

We have created a one stop Wellness Center so students aren't having to run around for student health and if you're not sick, it's a good place where you can get information about wellness and all that goes along with that. That is now part of the Health Physical Education Recreation Building.

We have created a new Academic Career Development Center. The notion there is from the time a student comes on our campus until the time they sign their contract for employment, we are going to support them. I think that is being incredibly well received and I think it's going to be very effective.

One of the things that personally I feel very strongly about and I know you'll share this with me, is we have MaV USO which is really another one stop shop for our active military personnel, their families and veterans on our campus and I'm pleased to report that this year UNO was ranked sixth nationally as military friendly and support campus. We all feel very good about that.

We needed to sharpen our academic focus. You've heard it, it's trite and I'm going to say it anyway, and that is we can't be all things to all people and so I don't think you're going to find very many universities that have gone through the effort, collective effort, a combined effort of the campus to identify five academic areas which are going to be priorities on our campus. One of those is Early Childhood Education. One of those is STEM Education or in other words, Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics. One of them is Sustainability, one of them is Globalization and the last one is Research which is woven into all of those. I want to tell you that this has been well received by the campus and it's amazing to see the things that can happen when you have interdisciplinary activity going on. There isn't a program on our campus that can't contribute and participate in this but these are area that are high need areas going forward and so at least for a three to five year period when they will be reevaluated, these are going to be our campus academic priorities.

If you didn't know, the Carnegie Foundation changed our status from a Master's Large to a Doctoral Granting Research Institution. That was one of the goals that we had in terms of becoming a premier metropolitan university. We, I think, are doing a good job of growing our doctoral programs. Just recently, we had two more approved, one in Biomedical Informatics which is in

very close collaboration with the Medical Center and the second is in Exercise Science. We are also ramping up the type of research that metropolitan universities are best suited to do and that's applied research, translational research where you take what we know and you are very pragmatic about how it can be translated into community advantage.

I said our third strategic goal was to be community engaged. We have been recognized nationally for the engagement that occurs here. We are deeply committed to a number of organizations, not for profit business and so on, in the community. We have a long standing relationship with K-12 with Metropolitan Community College and then special initiatives in the city like Building Bright Futures and Avenue Scholars.

As a metropolitan university, these are things we ought to be doing. I was pleased to learn that students on the Freshman Entry Survey say one of the important factors in making a decision about coming to Nebraska-Omaha is the fact that they have opportunities to be involved in the community and they also have opportunities to be involved in applied learning opportunities so you've all heard of Three Days of Service and Seven Days of Service. For example, Seven Days of Service, we have thousands of students now; it used to be hundreds, who give up their Spring Break to serve in the community.

We also have a large and significant Service Learning Academy and this is now comprised of about 150 courses spread across all the colleges and curricula on our campus. Service Learning in a word is taking the academics experience at some point into practical application as opposed to stand and lecture and then turn students loose.

I'll give you a good example of that, there are any number of them but a good example is the River Station work that we're doing. We have research centers on the Elkhorn and Platte River, soon to be on the Missouri River; also we have temporary stations set up in Lima, Peru at the request of the country and related universities there. These stations are monitoring water toxins, changes in water, and it's particularly important when you're in a metropolitan area. That's not a surprise but we have a lot of agricultural activity immediately around that interfaces with those river systems and so this is really a way to study what's going on there, what are the possible effects, what have we learned?

Well, students who take biology courses, instead of writing a paper perhaps on what are the effects of pesticide runoff in river systems adjacent to metropolitan areas now do a Capstone Research Project. We're also doing the same thing on Allwine Prairie in terms of having students involved in that so these are all things that I think are adding to the power, the collective power of

our engagement with the community. I think it is adding significantly to our students' academic experience. I think it contributes to citizenship and giving back as well.

This is an estimate but I know that over 10,000 students last year were involved in Three Days of Service, Seven Days of Service, Martin Luther King Day, Global Youth Services Day, service learning kind of activities along with our student organizations doing things like raising food for the food banks with the Salvation Army so collectively we're touching a lot of lives on the campus and I think in a meaningful way.

A couple of great things are happening on campus as we're speaking. One of those, and I'll pass this around, is a Biomechanics Research Center that is adjacent to the HPER Building, it actually connects to that building so that the space inside can also contribute to this research center. This is all about motion research and what can it do and people puzzle over that. This is the only freestanding research center in the world to focus on this. We work very closely, again, with the Medical Center. We've been involved in helping to develop training programs for surgeons who are trying to create particular movement to utilize robotic surgery, for example. These people are looking at infant populations to try to examine motion and movement differences which might be predictive early on of neurological disturbances.

They are also working with geriatrics, I am very much interested in this one where they're studying falls which is a common geriatric problems. Are they ways once we understand the mechanics of motion in geriatric populations that we might be able to mitigate the potential of fall possibilities? This is going to be a great addition to the campus. The dedication will be on Thursday, September 5, 2013, so in other words, this fall. If you have an opportunity, I wish you could join us.

The second thing that's going on, on campus and this is unique as well, Community Engagement Center and this is going to be a facility that will help us to engage with the community in better and more effective ways so it's going to house Sam Mizelles who the University has hired to do the Buffett Early Childhood Institute. It will house some nonprofits. It will house a student leadership center where we're helping and have a program to help students who are interested in not for profit and community service to actually be certificated in the training required to do a good job there. It's going to be an incubator of sorts as well as a staging place for community engagement opportunities. Often we get called and people will say we don't have a place to put it all together and bring everyone before we go into the community and could we use Sapp Field House. Well, generally, that's being used. This is going to be a highly flexible facility. There will be community parking at all times

because the community told us. We did a number of group meetings with the focus groups in the community and they told us parking was an issue. Now I disagree with that. That's my story, UNO does not have a parking problem and I'm sticking to that but we did it anyway, just out of courtesy.

We are going to build an arena and we're making progress on that. As a matter of fact, I think they're going to surcharge the property here pretty quickly. That arena is going to be south of Center. It's going to be immediately across from the Villages. Matter of fact, if you were to look out the window of the community ice piece of this which will be all glass so people driving down Center can see the activity going on there, it's a good baseball throw away from Stinson Park and so I think it's going to add value to Aksarben Village. It's going to add tremendous value, historic value to the campus.

We have no home for athletics. If our kids want to go watch a baseball game and we're leading the summer league right now, they have to find a ride to go to Boys Town, Class B facility. It doesn't make sense to me and I don't think it makes sense to anyone else and so as a result of that, we're going to have a home for hockey, for basketball, both men's and women's for volleyball and across the creek, we have plans in the works for baseball and softball. There's going to be competition ice area. There's also going to be public ice that will be used so there are two sheets of ice. I want to tell you, we are almost overwhelmed with people interested in using the facility and that's in part, and perhaps in large measure, due to the elimination at some point here in the near future of the Civic Auditorium so not only will this serve campus functions beyond athletics, it will serve graduations. For example, Metropolitan Community College has already requested the use of it, Omaha Public Schools, Millard, others who are not quite large enough to need it yet are very much interested so we're going to try to do what we do with everything and that is make sure that it serves the community and our students at the same time so that's the scoop. It's about \$76 million, your checks are appreciated and it's going to be a great deal of fun.

But I want to say a couple of things about athletics. We were the first institution in the country to make the move under the new rules from Division II to Division I athletics. It was a brand new process, it is very complicated. For some of you who know, the NCAA, they have in their rule book more rules, and I counted them, more rules than the IRS and Obamacare combined and I made up the counting part, I apologize but at any rate so we have been for the last two years working on making sure that operationally, organizationally and in terms of compliance, we're on target and they have visited us now three times and we're getting a positive feedback. The success of our teams already is incredible, our baseball team, our women's softball team, out of this world so we're going to have some fun with this.

What I'm most proud of is the cumulative GPA of our student athletes is 3.35, highest in history. It's being led by women's volleyball and men's hockey, those are the two highest team GPA's and I want to tell you, we don't have any slackers among the group and that's what it's all about. I'm also pleased to report that last year for the first time in eleven years, the Athletic Department closed the year in the black and I expect that to happen again this year. That is great news but you need to understand, that's news with some caveats and the most important is part of the arrangement was we're capping state support to athletics. It cannot grow beyond what that cap is, and so it says something about the management and the decisions that were made with respect to athletics, painful but necessary.

I want to tell you that of all the institutions in Division I that do not have football, all of them, and Trev can tell you the exact number. I can't remember so I'm not going to make up anything. If it were a different group, I'd make up something but you'll check me out. Of all of those programs, UNO and Wichita State are the only two, they are the two that have the lowest state support and they are the only two who are under 50 percent support. Now if you examine universities right now, you're finding institutions that are contributing \$15 to \$17 million a year in student fees to maintain their athletic programs. That's not the case at UNO and by virtue of the decisions we made then, it will never be the case.

Great cities have great public universities and our capital campaign has helped us in this transformation incredibly. We're at about \$171 million in gifts to help us build capacity to help us support our students and our programs. We have about 18 months left, that number is going to grow and the generosity of this community is absolutely remarkable. I share with some of my colleagues at national meetings about things that go on and I know they think I'm fibbing, they just don't get it. Most of them don't know where Omaha's at anyway so the vision that we have of being a premier institution is going to happen. One of the reasons it will happen is because of the passion of our faculty and our staff and another reason is that we're in Omaha so heartfelt thanks to all of you for helping us transform what is a tremendous university. Thank you very much.

[Applause]

Hugh Cowden

Thank you, John. I'm amazed at, I didn't know about some of those developments and it is very impressive. I hope you don't have a plane to catch because we have a couple dozen questions up here.

John Christensen

I don't . . .

Hugh Cowden

Oh? Okay. [Laughter]. But I want to ask this first one. The loss of football and wrestling, what have been the pluses and minuses as you look back on it. I just want to mention and from personal experience, people seem to understand the dropping of football, it's a financial thing but it's hard to explain the dropping of wrestling so could you speak to that?

John Christensen

Yeah. Well, they are both the most difficult personal decisions I've ever made in my life and there's not anything that's even comparable. I was a college wrestler; my kids were all college wrestlers. My son's the head wrestling coach at North High School. That was a part of our lives; it still is a part of our lives. I grew up riding my bike to UNO and watching football at Caniglia Field. I love both of those sports but in the role of Chancellor, decisions had to be made. We could not continue to bleed a million five every year to support those programs.

Now, it's true that the majority of that, about \$1.3, something like that, \$1.2 was from football but wrestling actually had more support in terms of funding that did football which surprises a lot of people and yet they were losing money every year as well. And here's what it came down to, the conference, the only conference and under the new rules, you had to be accepted by a conference. It was like the old days where you could say, gee, we're going DI and then you hoped you found a conference.

You had to be accepted in advance. The Summit League did not have wrestling. The leagues that were available would have required a tremendous amount of travel. If you're going to be competitive, Mike Denney was absolutely the most competitive Division II program in the country and in the history of Division II but the teams that they were going to be competing with, we're talking about million dollar budgets and so we're going to go from about \$200,000 budget to a million dollar budget to be competitive when, in fact, in the conference, it's not there so it was a variety of those factors. I don't like to this day, the advantage has been we've stabilized athletics. I really felt, honestly, that if we didn't resolve that problem, I was at a point where we might have to get rid of athletics totally because I was unwilling to go to the academic side of the house and take money to fund a trend over 15 years which showed no promise for change. That's the long and short of it.

Hugh Cowden

How are you able to keep the costs to students lower than other comparable institutions while keeping and surpassing your high academic standards?

John Christensen

Well, I think the University and the Board of Regents have done a remarkable job of trying to manage tuitions. When there were double digit tuitions that we were at a level of 4 and 5. As you know, tuition does not cover the cost of attendance by even, you know, even close to it. I think maybe it might on our campus, it would be about 50 percent and the state numbers keep going down. Historically, and by historical comparison, Nebraska still supports us better than many states, their public education, so it is a challenge.

I think when you're student centered and when you have access to populations that you know at the outset are coming from poverty or not from financial wealth, you're more sensitive to the issue and I think there is a collective effort on the our campus to try to be as creative and as efficient and as effective as we possibly can.

We've also made some tough decisions along the way. We can't be all things to all people so there have been some academic programs that were good programs but they just weren't priority programs. In other words, they had very few students and so on, and so we stopped providing in some of those areas and reallocated that money to help us do better. I'll tell you also that public support, private support from the public providing scholarship support has been remarkably incredible. I think in this capital campaign, that number's about \$35 million that we wouldn't have. I think the University also made a great decision in Collegebound Nebraska where for all Nebraskans who are resident, you don't have to pay tuition if your family has an income that's below a particular level so it's not only our campus, I think it's the University System that's tried to be very good about managing it. I really think we have done a terrific job, particularly when you compare what we're able to do with what we have, and, again, I will tell anyone any time and challenge them if they don't believe me, that when you have a faculty and staff who about passion and service rather than the clock, we have people going way beyond the call of duty because they're committed to serving students. It makes a huge difference.

Hugh Cowden

There is a question here about students from Iowa, specifically, how can you attract more students from greater Nebraska and from Iowa? Doesn't large growth depend on this? I'm curious about Iowa students.

John Christensen

That's a great question. Something we started a few years ago. It took us awhile to get it approved by the Board because there is kind of, there was kind of at the time, a sentiment that, boy, we ought to concentrate on serving Nebraska and here you are, giving us a proposal saying Harrison, Mills and Pottawattamie County are inner MSA. They're part of our, you know, federally defined metropolitan area. Our mission is to serve the metropolitan area. We happen to have a river here but what difference does that make? And so that was kind of a struggle but people finally agreed that it was worth a run. It's now a reality and we've expanded the three areas to now all of the counties on, the western Iowa counties that touch the Interstate and also a couple that are back from the Interstate but very close proximity to Omaha.

The notion was that we would give them residential tuition rates. Out of state tuition rates or non-resident rates are three times higher and it seemed crazy to me but, you know, I could be closer than in West Omaha and drive to UNO and pay three times the rate. We took a swing at, and by the way, I still have some scarring over this one, we took a swing at resident tuition and it didn't play and I understand that, and so we're at a 150 percent of resident rates so it really put us in line with what it cost to go to Iowa State to total cost of attendance, for example, with housing and so we calculated it that way with Iowa State, Iowa University and Northern Iowa so that students in those three counties originally and now all of the counties could make a decision based on the institution and what they wanted to do as opposed to cost and I think it's been a very strong move.

We now have an Iowa recruiter as of this year. We work very closely with Iowa Western, Dan Kenney's the president over there and we almost are approaching the point where our articulation agreement with them is as positive as the one we have with Metropolitan Community College so I think we are going to be able to serve that. I was frankly a bit startled to find out how low the density rate was in baccalaureate attainment in the three county area. It's not so much Pottawattamie County but as soon as you get away from that Mills and Harrison County, we're about half of the density, baccalaureate density that Douglas and Sarpy County have, for example, so if we're really truly going to serve the metropolitan area, we need to address issues like that because that's all going to be a part of the business industry pipeline, education pipeline and so on. I'm very pleased with it. I think the students that we have were about 600 now, that's, I think, going to go up. I'm going to make another run at perhaps reducing that from 150 percent maybe to 125 and see if that plays so it's even a little more attractive but it's been a great thing.

Hugh Cowden

Talk about the UNO branding effort. The icon is excellent. I think it's excellent, too, but it sort of resembles Olson Subaru but . . . [Laughter] . . . but talk about that.

John Christensen

I'm going to have to ask them for a donation. We're selling cars now. The brand was the result of work that we had done with a consulting firm. We wanted to change a lot of things about the campus as part of this transformation to send a signal about this is not your parents' UNO any longer. That's not out of disrespect for history, trust me. It's about trying to move the institution forward.

This was really the campus consensus of all we had and if you look at it and you distinguish the colors, there's the U, the N and the O. They also recommended that we change the Maverick and the look of the Maverick, that's been the more interesting one. Aaron has been incredibly involved in helping with this but this is very popular, that one is less popular. It's popular, I'm comparing it with the old Maverick and some people like that a lot, some people like the new one better but I think the message is, we're trying to have people who perhaps have perceptions about UNO and we all know what those are, and I'm not going to bring them back up again because you know, but we're trying to change the perception of what UNO is, and we'd like to get people on campus and actually see the physical change. I'd love to have them meet our faculty and staff so they get a sense of the quality of people we have on this campus.

I mean, it's absolutely remarkable, and get a feel for this transformation. It's been my belief if you get people; it goes beyond Omaha, if you get people from out of Nebraska into Omaha. I recently invited and they came and actually it was about the Iowa thing. It's River City and I had the privilege of serving as the president of the National Organization of Metropolitan Community and Urban and Metropolitan Universities recently and one of the things we talked about was there are a lot of river cities where you federally are responsible if you're a metropolitan university, academically, in terms of your mission, for the other counties but the river seems to create a problem and so IHEP which is the Institute for Higher Education Policy and I had a chance to meet with those people and I've worked with Dick Riley whose with the Education Council now former Secretary of Education, been in Omaha quite often, had him back here. They came to Omaha, five people from D.C. and three from Baltimore and we had a conversation, a day long conversation with community leaders about, you know, how is it you make this work better to serve students better, to serve families better and to serve your communities better so it was a great discussion but all that being said, what's amazing to me is five of these people had never been to Nebraska and to hear them after they'd been here for a

couple of days talk about, you know? I told them before they were coming, I said, and trust me, we do have concrete at least out, you know, out to about 72nd Street from the river and, you know, there were moments where I don't know if they recognized that being a pretty poor attempt at humor but so it was kind of like, yeah, you do, I mean, that's pretty cool. I think if you get people here, they get a feel for this place, you know, Omaha sells itself.

Thank you very much.

[Applause]

Closing

You've been listening to a luncheon broadcast from The Omaha Press Club on Noon Forum. On today's program, we heard a talk by John Christensen, the Chancellor of the University of Nebraska at Omaha. The title of his presentation was "Recent Changes at UNO". This program was recorded by Omaha Public Radio on Thursday afternoon, May 16, 2013, for broadcast at this time.

Special thanks to The Omaha Press Club's Education Committee for helping to make the recording and broadcast of this program possible. The Omaha Press Club presents these noon time educational forums each month. If you'd like to attend future programs in the series, call The Omaha Press Club at 402-345-8008. These events are open to both members and non-members of The Omaha Press Club. The Omaha Press Club is located on the 22nd floor of the First National Center, 16th and Dodge in downtown Omaha.

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