

“Rising to New Heights”
Installation Speech of University of Nebraska President Hank Bounds
April 15, 2016

Thank you, Regent Schroeder.

And thank you to the Board of Regents for the trust and confidence you have placed in me. I pledge my best to fulfill this responsibility. Today we formally transfer leadership of the University of Nebraska. This is an opportunity to celebrate the transformative power of higher education. And to honor the university’s rich history of service to the state and nation while asking ourselves how we can rise to even greater heights.

To Governor Ricketts: Thank you for your remarks. It was clear right away that we share a goal to make Nebraska a stronger, more competitive and more economically vibrant place and I look forward to working with you.

To Dr. Rodney Bennett... It is rare to find a colleague who is a confidant, whose judgment you trust, and whose friendship you know can withstand the challenges of time and place. Thank you for your kind words. Southern Miss is lucky to have you.

To the faculty, staff and students of the University of Nebraska, to those who have offered greetings or honored us with your musical performances or helped organize this event, to my family and friends, and to all Nebraskans... Thank you! I am humbled to stand before you today, and grateful for your presence and support.

Those who know me best, know that I am a man of faith. I am grateful to the God of mercy who loves us all and for such rich blessings. Thank you to Father Hendrickson and Former Chairman Parker for your prayers.

Many thanks to my parents, Henry and Barbara Bounds, who made the trip from Mississippi, where they raised me on the family farm and taught me important lessons about hard work, humility and self-sufficiency.

I am particularly grateful to my wife, Susie, and our children, Will and Caroline. Any parent knows that asking your children to leave behind the only place they’ve ever called home is a difficult decision.

But Susie and I did it – because we thought the University of Nebraska represented an opportunity to truly change the world – an opportunity to leave Will and Caroline a world that is safer, more secure, and more prosperous than the one we inherited.

When I interviewed for this job, I said that the University of Nebraska had the potential to be a giant in higher education. I said then – and I am even more convinced now – that we can be one of America's great universities. The University of Nebraska has a noble mission focused on the creation, transfer and use of knowledge. We can be an institution that serves as a change agent in the lives of students and people around the world. An institution that knows what it's good at and works tirelessly to be the very best in those areas. An institution that never loses sight of the mission that informed its founding almost 150 years ago... but that is also future-focused, constantly looking for ways to be better, to expand its reach further, and to be relevant to its stakeholders.

And, an institution that puts people first. Because people – our students, employees and many friends and partners across this state – will always be our most precious asset.

Over the past year I have been able to explore this notion that the University of Nebraska can be a giant in higher education. I have traveled the state. I've spent time on each university campus and extension and research facility. I've cheered on the Mavericks at Baxter Arena... toured the space where our medical center's treatment of Ebola patients earned international acclaim... met students in Kearney who are the first in their families to attend college... walked the fields where our faculty are leading the way in feeding a growing global population... seen the ranches and beautiful open spaces at our two-year agricultural campus in Curtis.

I have listened to and learned from farmers and ranchers, taxpayers, legislators, faculty and staff, students, moms and dads, and business leaders about their hopes and dreams for their university.

A few things are clear.

Nebraskans love this university. They want us to be successful. They want to send their children here. They love to cheer on our athletic teams and support our artistic performances. They have generously given record amounts of private donations and supported higher education with their tax dollars. They do that because they want us to continue to be affordable and accessible and competitive.

Nebraskans also know that we can reach higher.

From my conversations over the past year, four common themes have emerged. I will frame them as cornerstones. Four cornerstones that help create a rich ecosystem for our quest to become a giant. Four fundamental commitments that we must relentlessly pursue – that will separate us from the rest of the higher education world.

Let me be clear. Being a giant doesn't mean we can be everything.

The University of Nebraska won't have the largest student body or research portfolio. We'll never have unlimited resources to do everything we want to do.

Nor will becoming a giant be easy – especially when you consider that we are operating in the most competitive higher education environment of our lifetimes. But if we focus on our priorities, then I believe we have an opportunity to define a new era in the history of the University.

Cornerstone No. 1: The University of Nebraska will be the best place in the nation to be a student.

On my first day as president, I met a young woman named Kayla Lindell who is studying middle-school education at UNK. Kayla joined me for an appearance at Grand Island Senior High School, her alma mater. I invited her because of how strongly her story resonated with me. She is the first in her family to go to college. She's immersed herself in campus life at UNK and spoke of the amazing professors she's met and new passions she's discovering. She dreams of becoming a teacher.

Kayla had a simple but powerful message for the high school students that day: I did it, and you can, too.

I want to see Kayla's story replicated over and over again.

In my conversations with students, I am often reminded of their diverse backgrounds – particularly the differing experiences that our young people have from birth through high school. Some come from urban cities, some rural. Some grew up in families of means, some did not. Some have always known they would go to college, while others, like Kayla, are the first in their families to navigate this exciting and sometimes scary world. Some are returning home

after serving their country in the military, while others are balancing jobs and family life with online coursework.

Nearly all need a little help as they forge a path to their future.

True to our land-grant heritage, the University of Nebraska must be a place where ALL students, regardless of background, can succeed. I want every student who enrolls at one of our campuses to be able to say these things:

“I can afford this university.”

“I’m getting a great education that is preparing me for a career.”

“I feel safe here.”

“I learned something here that changed the way I look at the world.”

“I matter here.”

The University of Nebraska was founded in the spirit of accessibility for all. Yet with demand for an educated workforce growing, we must double down in making sure a University of Nebraska education is accessible to all who want to pursue it... especially those for whom the promise of a college degree has not always been within reach.

Once a student is on campus, we must provide outstanding advising – intrusively, if necessary – so that students stay on the path to graduation. We must show them how to get to the finish line on time, so that they control the costs of their education, leave with minimal debt and start their careers sooner.

The quality of our education must set the gold standard, particularly in the area of learning outcomes. Great teaching is at the heart of any university and we are fortunate that our talented and caring faculty come to work each day asking what they can do to help our students succeed. Every student should walk away from the University of Nebraska with the knowledge and skills to adapt to a rapidly changing job market. That starts with a broad-based liberal arts education that teaches them excellent communication and critical thinking skills. And it means our students must be trained to be entrepreneurial. They must be creative and flexible and innovative. They should learn inside and outside of the classroom – through

internships, study abroad, research projects and service learning. They should have an appreciation for the arts and humanities, history, science, and global affairs.

Finally, our students must feel safe. Our university community is an extended family and that means we must take care of each other. Students must be able to live and study in an environment that is free of harassment, discrimination and violence. They need to look around and see faces like theirs. They need to know they have someone to turn to if they're in trouble or troubled. As president, there is perhaps no more important priority to me than the safety and success of the 52,000 students who each year make a choice to attend the University of Nebraska.

Cornerstone No. 2: The University of Nebraska will transform lives through research and innovation.

I said earlier that one of the things we need to do is select a few areas where we think we can be the best in the world – and then go own those conversations.

We have enormous opportunities. That is a credit to the talented faculty and staff who dedicate themselves to the pursuit of new discoveries that will improve the health and productivity and well-being of people in Nebraska and around the world. Nebraskans can be proud of the work that is happening at their university.

I invite you to dream with me for a moment about how much further we could go.

The University of Nebraska could sit at the head of the table in figuring out how to feed 9 billion people by 2050. We already have an international reputation for our focus on food and water security. This challenge isn't going away. I believe it will be the single most important factor in global security and well-being in the years ahead.

We could be at the forefront in developing treatments for cancer, a disease that touches every person in this room.

The university could help make Nebraska the best place in the nation to be a baby. The care of our youngest and most vulnerable citizens matters – and it has enormous implications for our future competitiveness and success.

The University of Nebraska could be the place the Department of Defense turns to when it needs to fight terrorism or combat weapons of mass destruction.

The University of Nebraska could be the institution that makes rural America – our nation’s backbone – a place where young people want to live and work and raise a family – a place where all have access to quality education, health care and technology.

We have leadership opportunities in engineering and information technology, business and computer science, the arts and humanities. We can and should be the institution Nebraskans look to for cultural opportunities, artistic performances and lectures on history or politics or literature.

This is hardly an exhaustive list. But the areas I’ve mentioned have a few things in common...themes that should drive our research and innovation agenda moving forward. Most importantly, they represent priorities for our state, nation, and the world.

They are interdisciplinary, engaging multiple departments and university campuses. They marry the talents of a diverse range of faculty.

They are areas where we have history and expertise and established partnerships – a strong foundation on which to build.

And they are areas where further investments will position us to change lives.

We are going to have to think boldly and invest strategically... In talent and targeted hiring, so we can build capacity and be more competitive for limited grant funding. In facilities, so faculty can work in an environment conducive to cutting-edge discovery. And in a culture...that values entrepreneurial activity, where the path from lab to market is clear, where risk-taking is not only allowed but encouraged, and where interdisciplinary activity is not the exception but the norm.

Cornerstone No. 3: The University of Nebraska will work hand-in-hand with our partners to achieve our goals.

Today’s challenges demand a collaborative approach. As the state’s only public university, we have a responsibility to lead in addressing these challenges. But we can’t do it alone. We will do it working side-by-side with our partners in every part of the state.

When you think about it, most of us want the same basic things for our state. We want our children to get a good education. We want our citizens to have jobs they enjoy and that

allow them to make a good living. We want good health care. We want a strong economy. We want the things that make life rich: culture and the arts and sports.

And when we stay focused on the things we agree on, we can get a lot done together.

We will ask our partners at the Capitol to continue to support affordable excellence at the university.

We will join hands with the business community to build the talented workforce our state needs. We will connect students with internship and job opportunities, helping to keep talent in Nebraska. We will aim to grow in areas where leading companies tell us they need more graduates: engineering and IT, business, agriculture, health care.

We will join with our colleagues at the state, community and private colleges, who share our goal for increasing educational attainment. We will make sure students can transfer as seamlessly as possible between our institutions. And we will collaborate with K-12, knowing that the university's success relies on the outstanding work being done by Nebraska's teachers, counselors and principals.

Private giving has transformed the university in recent years, and I can't thank our generous and visionary donors enough. At the same time, we'll have to think even more boldly about philanthropy. Our ambitious goals for student access and success, academic excellence, and transformative research demand it.

Most of all, we will partner with Nebraskans. We will ask the people of the state to tell us what they think. We will invite them to measure our progress, to celebrate our achievements and challenge us when they know we can do better. We will ask for their continued support.

Cornerstone No. 4: The University of Nebraska is going to win with people.

Over the course of my career, I've developed a basic leadership philosophy - You win with people.

None of the goals I've talked about would be possible without people. Talented, hard-working people who share a commitment to the fundamental values of public higher education.

Nebraska can't be the best place in the nation to be a student in the absence of great teachers and advisors, housing professionals or financial aid experts, career services staff or counselors.

We can't protect our nation against emerging threats to national security without faculty who are leaders in their field, who understand the urgency of this research and what's at stake.

We won't cure cancer without care givers who perform their jobs with tenacity and grace, or researchers and lab workers who come to work every day hoping to find a breakthrough.

We can't be the place that leads the charge in ensuring global water and food security without the people who recognize that this is one of the most urgent challenges facing the world today.

We won't be the best place in the nation to be a baby without educators, policy experts and extension educators who understand what it takes to create a more level playing field for all children.

And the University of Nebraska wouldn't have the impact that it does without the 16,000 people who are working daily on behalf of students and the state.

Nebraska cannot recruit and retain talent based on our mountains or beaches... or San Diego weather. But we can be a great place to work. We can compensate our talented employees competitively. We can create an environment that is inclusive and welcoming to all. We can provide our faculty and staff with the tools they need to do their jobs well. We can celebrate their achievements so Nebraskans know how their university is working for them.

And we can appreciate them, every day, for all they do for the University of Nebraska and state. So I want to thank the people who make the University of Nebraska what it is. I am humbled to be a part of this institution, which has so much potential, whose future is so bright. We live in the heart of the greatest nation the world has ever known – a nation that is great in large part because early leaders recognized the value of education.

Today other nations are catching up. We have to maintain our competitive advantage, and the University of Nebraska must play a part. The federal government has to invest. The state of Nebraska has to invest. We have to serve our students effectively. We have to hold

hands with our partners. And the University of Nebraska must be a giant in the places that our state and nation need us to be.

Thank you again to the Regents for allowing me to serve in this role, and to all Nebraskans who have so warmly welcomed my family and me to our new home state. I can't wait to see what we accomplish together.