



Chancellor John E. Christensen
State of the University Address
University of Nebraska at Omaha
November 1, 2016

Good morning.

I want to thank the faculty, staff, students, community members, Board of Regents members, state senators, friends and my family who were able to attend today.

The first time I stood in this spot to deliver a State of the University address, I was interim Chancellor, and I had been in that role for a total of 28 days.

In that speech, I invited you to take a journey with me.

No doubt, it required a leap of faith on your part. Partially, because I am a viking but mostly because a new chapter at UNO had begun and there

was important and serious work to be done.

Thank you. Thank you all for joining me then, and going on this incredible journey that has taken us through approximately 3,702 days and led us here: my 11th State of the University address. And, yes, also my last.

I can sum up the State of University with this statement: We are in a time of historic momentum and accomplishment at UNO.

I want to thank you all for coming.

Best wishes. have a great future! And bye.

(Chancellor pretends the speech is over and starts to walk off stage.)

(Chancellor comes back to podium)
Just kidding. I have been wanting to do something like that for a long time.

One of the upsides to announcing I will be stepping down is I feel a bit more comfortable, shall we say, showing that kind of inner viking. And also, Jan told me since this was my last address I could go ahead and do something like this. So thank you Jan, who is also a lifelong educator, but a Dane.

So, where are we? We are in a time of historic momentum and accomplishment at UNO and, of course, I actually have a speech full of pride points about this special university and our Maverick family. I will tell you, it's hard to fathom time could move so quickly. It is a universal fact: the more you love something, the faster time goes. That is certainly the case for me and my

time at the University of Nebraska at Omaha.

Assessing the State of our beloved university puts me in a reflective mode.

Time for reflection is a gift. So, I am enjoying [thinking] about how we – the students, faculty, staff, alumni and our remarkable community – have built the best example of a metropolitan university institution in the heart of our country, and in the heart of Omaha, Nebraska. And, we have made telling our story a priority. We want everyone to “Know the O.”

During my installation speech when I became Chancellor in 2007, I shared a quote from Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard. He wrote, "Life can only be understood backwards; but it must be lived forwards."

(and it's no accident, by the way, that one of my grandsons is named Soren and Soren is here today. Thank you Soren.)

Leaders must be able to look back to measure accomplishments (and missteps); strengthen and adjust existing goals; and look forward to address the opportunities and challenges of the future.

In the past 10 years of building, shaping and implementing our mission, combined with a Maverick philosophy of access and support, it's led to historic growth in enrollment, student success and faculty accomplishment. And our partnerships with the Omaha community have never been stronger or more rewarding.

Let's talk for a minute about some measurement:

Here are some key facts about enrollment—which tells us not only how many students we have, but who the students are who attend UNO.

- Our first year classes in 2015 and 16 were the largest incoming classes in history

- Of our new 2016 record-setting class, 45% are first generation; 33% are ethnically and racially diverse.

Graduate School:

- We also had the largest graduate enrollment in a decade in 2016 with over 3,000 students

- Graduate students make up about 20% of UNO's student body and more than 400 of the Graduate students are underrepresented students

Our overall student body composition includes these facts:

- UNO enrollment has increased 12 percent since 2006

- Nearly 50% of students of color in the University of Nebraska system are students, here, at UNO

- More than double the number of under-represented students have enrolled in the last 10 years, currently making about 23% of our student population

- Approximately 5,000 undergraduates each year are first-generation students, making up nearly half of our undergraduate population.

- About 10% of our students are active military or veterans, 32% are nontraditional meaning over age 25, and 6% are international from more than 118 countries.

- And yes, 85% of UNO's student body are from Nebraska representing 80 counties.

On to Retention. We point to retention because it helps us know how well our students are progressing toward their academic goals.

UNO has increased its first to second year retention rate by nearly 10 percent since 2007. That's a critical number because we know that students who return for the second year are more likely to complete their

degrees. Which brings us to graduation.

In 2016, we graduated the largest class in UNO history with almost 3,500 students graduating.

And, we continue to make progress and increase the number of students who graduate in 4-years and 6-years.

Let me add, the support to our students, we have hired and have the best faculty and staff a university could hope for. My most sincere gratitude to all of you for what you do for our students each and every day. And I want to thank you.

(Applause)

The facts I just read aren't just good results ... they are historic bests in enrollment, retention, completion and staffing and it took the Mav family all pulling in the same direction to build that kind of momentum.

It's important we continue our intentional efforts to reach our

stretch goal for enrollment to 18 to 20,000 students, as I challenged the campus in my 2009 State of the University speech.

Data on the State of Nebraska website says that 91% of Nebraskans who are 25 or older have a high school diploma but only 29% of those individuals have a baccalaureate degree or higher.

As Omaha, Nebraska's largest city, continues to trend toward 1 million people, our enrollment growth goal is increasingly important to make sure we are meeting our greatest responsibility: educating the next generation and providing lifelong education.

Omaha and Nebraska will need even more from UNO in the future.

Looking back at Omaha University's founding purpose in 1908, we are reminded that the goal was to help local students realize their higher education aspirations through

access. It was to be a partner in Omaha's continuing development and a catalyst for research, collaboration, cultural enhancement and growth. It was, and is, a partnership based largely on hopes and dreams, but grounded in a mutual desire to create a better life for all of our citizens.

A better life for all is the bedrock of our mission.

Yes, I believe it's the bedrock of our mission.

As we all know, a mission is a statement of purpose for an institution – a compass, if you will.

UNO is Nebraska's metropolitan university – a university with strong academic values and significant relationships with our community that transforms and improves life.

Our goals within our mission are to be student-centered; academically excellent; and have engagement with

our community – our urban community but not only our urban community, our regional, national, and global communities.

The core tenants of our metropolitan university mission are:

- Of course, dedication to teaching, research, as well as public engagement
- Serving as a point of access to a diverse student body, reflecting the demographic composition of the region
- Responsiveness to the challenges and opportunities in our region, still striving for national excellence
- Providing an educated citizenry and workforce, and sharing the cultural and intellectual resources we have in this Maverick family
- Partnerships with our local organizations and,
- Leveraging the opportunity of an urban setting to enhance students'

education through applied experiences.

So, if the goal is a better life for all, then UNO's longstanding objective to be a point of access in higher education is at the heart of our mission and our purpose.

And, access in and of itself isn't enough. No, I don't think it's enough.

Let me be clear on exactly what that means: UNO is dedicated to both access to the university and a pathway to successfully completing a degree.

Access and success are a powerful combination. And when it's applied to higher education, lives change.

Over 40 years, I've watched what access to UNO means to our students: Chance. Inclusion. Belonging. Opportunity. Hope. Power. Transformation.

And then we watch the ripple effect ... one degree affects one life; one life

affects one family; one family affects one neighborhood; one neighborhood affects our community and that ripple effect keeps moving.

It is not an understatement to say that one individual, one individual achieving a degree makes a difference.

More than 5,000, as I said, UNO undergraduates are first generation ... they are the first in their family to go to college.

Think of those ripples when higher education becomes a new family tradition.

Perhaps I feel so close to this mission because that was me. I was the first member in my family to go to college. I am the grandson of immigrants to the United States. It gives me great pride to be the first UNO chancellor who is also an alum.

This is why UNO exists. This is our reason to be.

And, this is where Omaha comes in. Our students don't just have access to UNO, they get the best, world-class education in one of the country's best cities.

The opportunity offered in UNO is endless. By every measure, the city is an extension of our university.

Students who come to UNO, have the Dodge Campus, the Scott Campus, the Center Campus and the Omaha Campus.

The Greater Omaha Chamber of Commerce's "We Don't Coast" mantra is perfectly aligned with our shared vision. We are interconnected with all aspects of this city.

The chamber says that in Omaha – and I quote- "you earn everything you get. There is no standstill. No off switch. Only momentum. We are passionate about this community." End quote.

Well, that's also what we believe.

I am so proud of how we have combined the power of a metropolitan university with the strength of Maverick thinking.

All of these accomplishments, while still staying true to our founding metropolitan university mission, would not have been possible without the unique, bold and truly UNO way of thinking. I call that the Maverick philosophy.

Several years ago we shared with the community our definition of what a Maverick means to UNO: an independent thinker.

It reminds me of what the name of our city, Omaha, means. To the Native American Omaha tribe, their name means “against the current.”

Independent thinkers who are willing to go against the current. We are definitely located in the right city. We are definitely located in the right place.

Last year, we highlighted UNO Maverick points of pride: We are risk takers. We are willing to go against the grain. We are willing to ask the hard questions; and our Maverick way of life leads to this: We are doing things that people said would never happen.

All the while, we are willing to collaborate and partner to make a difference in our community, especially for our youth. We take enormous pride in seeing opportunity – not, not competition – with Community Colleges in the region as well as our sister campuses in the University of Nebraska system.

These institutions are our partners in addition to our longstanding formal collaboration with Omaha metropolitan area K-12 schools.

I guess you can say we are “a more the merrier,” “a more the merrier” kind of university.

And, we aren’t afraid of making a

mistake in the noble pursuit of innovation or experimentation if it could lead to a benefit for our students and/or our community.

In this approach, I feel very much at home. My father, Axel, insisted that if we were not making mistakes, it simply meant we were protecting ourselves and we weren't doing anything of value.

I can hear him now ... be fearless. Challenge yourself. Try harder. Find the answers. Make some mistakes. And when you set that bar for your goals, then raise that bar.

I have asked the same of this university community over the last decade, and you have responded in unbelievable ways with incredible community support.

Here are some examples of what we did together at UNO these last 10 years when we applied Maverick thinking and we were willing to risk making a mistake by trying

something new to fight for our students. Yes, it's true, some of the things on this list also needed a strong dose of courage:

- Maintaining the lowest tuition and fees of 15 Nebraska 4-year institutions and the most affordable metropolitan university compared with our national peers
- Investing almost a half a billion dollars, partnering with the community, for cutting edge facilities to enhance teaching, learning, engagement, living and athletics. (Much of this is because we are blessed to be in one of the most generous communities in the country.)
- Adding PhD programs and moving from a master's large regional institution to a Carnegie Doctoral granting research classification
- Transitioning athletics from Division 2 to Division 1

- Expanding the UNO campus with development of Scott and Center Campuses and adding critical housing and support centers for students, which is a priority of urban campuses.

- Adding almost 600 acres in the Omaha metro area, bringing our total, including Glacier Creek, to over 1000 acres, to protect a variety of at-risk Nebraska ecosystems, like tallgrass, where faculty and students have a unique opportunity for research and UNO serves as a steward of native land.

- Becoming an internationally recognized leader in community engagement by creating and implementing Service Learning, Community Service, and engagement with almost 400,000 hours of service donated to community projects in the 2014-15 school year.

- Building the Weitz Community Engagement Center, the first facility

of its kind in the United States, where the university-community facility has hosted 12,000 public events for free and almost 175,000 guests with 30 local non-profits housed in the center since opening.

- The Baxter Arena, a home for Division 1 athletics, a place for advancing and enhancing our campus life, our student life, and another engagement gathering place for Omaha

- Creating the Dreamers Pathway Scholarship College program, supporting undocumented students

- Expanding from one to five learning communities that serve as life boats for our kids - where, as an example, the retention rates have grown to over 90%

- Adding a gender and sexuality resource center

- Providing academic support services for students ranging from writing to

math and wellness support services—
from emotional to physical

- Enhancing our campus safety and emergency management strategies
- Celebrating national recognition by our students in such areas as Forensics, Public Relations, Aviation, Athletics and that list goes on and on and on.
- Having been named, for two consecutive years, the “most military friendly” university in the country and being home to one of the best Military and Veteran Service centers, connecting our long history of support to those who have served in the armed forces and advanced and protected the country
- Finalizing a formal partnership with the NU Foundation to create collective support for the Foundation, for the Alumni Association and the campus to advance our future
- Growing research opportunities.

Examples of growth include Biomechanics receiving the largest grant in UNO history and adding a new institute housed on UNO’s campus called the Nebraska Applied Research Institute, which is providing or will provide solutions to customer-focused problems facing businesses and government.

- Increasing our alumni network to 120,000 with 43,000 living and working in Omaha

And with that incredible set of just a few examples ... it was very important that I declared this in 2014:

The days of UNO’s modesty are over.

The future, not only for our students and our city, but for UNO is very bright. Of that, I am certain.

Last year, I asked the campus community to share with me your dreams for the next 10 years for UNO. We had an outstanding response rate and it was a joy to read

through your thoughts and your ideas. Please know, however, that we don't have parking issues at UNO.

(laughter)

Using your feedback and the feedback from the community, I'd like to close today with my five top dreams for this university.

In ten years I hope ...

1. That this campus increases its already outstanding commitment to kids and community and enhances our metropolitan university obligation—the same one that personally changed my life as a UNO student.

2. That we expand our partnerships and collaboration with community organizations, business and industry and donors who have helped us transform UNO into a premier metropolitan university that can and will create opportunities for all.

3. That we continue to expand our

educational research and service with our great neighborhood neighbor, across the block, or ten blocks, UNMC, and work daily to enhance collaboration with our teammates at [UNK] and UNL as well as Metropolitan Community College and all other regional community colleges.

4. That our government continues to support the university system and our campuses to maximize our responsibility to educate the next generation of Nebraska leaders and work force to increase the university's key role in economic development.

5. That we grow an already remarkable collaborative, interdisciplinary and highly-engaged Maverick family to maximize the advancement of our three strategic goals, which will change lives forever

So, how do I summarize state of the university?

We are incredibly strong and ready

for a new chapter of leadership with a future full of potential and opportunity for our students.

Tomorrow's leader must understand that internal and external collaboration and partnerships are the lynchpin for success in serving our kids and community.

I can't wait to see where the next ten years takes UNO, Omaha and Nebraska.

At the end of this academic year, I won't be going far. I'll be working on university projects for a couple of years and I want you to know "I'm the luckiest guy in the world" to be a part of the Maverick family. Also, this change will give me additional time to spend with Jan, and my three sons, their families, and our seven grandkids.

Thank you for an incredible journey. I love my family, and our extended Maverick family and this university, our city and our state.

And I'll end with my two favorite words: You see it coming, don't you? Go Mavericks!

Bless you! Bless you all my friends and thank you.