

LR 210 – Testimony of Interim President Susan Fritz

Sept. 27, 2019 – Appropriations Committee

Chairman Stinner and members of the Committee, I am Susan Fritz (S-U-S-A-N F-R-I-T-Z) and I am Interim President of the University of Nebraska. Thank you for the opportunity to be with you.

I am grateful to Chairman Stinner, Vice Chairwoman Bolz and this Committee for your leadership in addressing the workforce issues facing our state. You have been strong champions of economic growth in Nebraska and the important role of higher education. Mr. Chairman, your support for greater investments in scholarships for our young people has been especially important in moving this conversation forward.

I think there is a reason that government, higher education, business, and K-12 are all coming together around the topic of workforce development. The reason is that Nebraska, as the Omaha World-Herald declared in a front-page headline a few months ago, is facing a “workforce crisis” that is growing more urgent by the day.

We have all heard the statistics by now, and Chairman Stinner has articulated them well. In the years ahead Nebraska will have 34,000 annual openings in high-skill, high-demand, high-wage jobs like engineering, IT, nursing, teaching and accounting. Most of these will require a four-year degree. And this is not an urban or rural problem. The needs exist across our state.

Nebraska has a choice to make. Are we going to take the steps necessary to close the gap, or not? My colleague Bryan Slone from the State Chamber has been clear in describing the challenge before us. There will be a 50-state competition for workforce, and there will be winners and losers. I know all of us in this room want Nebraska to be a winner. But that will require us to be decisive, creative and collaborative in developing new strategies to solve the workforce crisis.

H3 scholarships are, in my view, one such strategy. Right now Nebraska is simply not competitive when it comes to financial aid. We are in the bottom 10 nationally in state-supported grant aid. We are losing too many students to institutions in other states – students who should be staying right here in Nebraska to fill the H3 jobs that are key to our future prosperity.

For example, we know that only about half of Nebraska students who score a 28 or higher on the ACT enroll at the University of Nebraska. Certainly we will always lose some of these high-ability students to the Ivy Leagues, but there's no excuse for losing them to neighboring states. Full cost of attendance scholarships would put us in a more competitive position.

And this isn't just about attracting students with the highest ACT scores. When I look at our enrollment numbers, it is clear to me we need new strategies to attract *all* students. Only one-third of Nebraska students with 20-to-27 ACTs currently enroll at the University. Across all of public higher education, there is a significant opportunity to expand access for these students and grow enrollment in our H3 programs.

More financial aid would add to the investments the University is already making to build our STEM programs and grow the workforce.

You may have seen our announcement last week of a \$20 million gift from Kiewit toward a new facility for the College of Engineering. All told, and with the partnership of the Legislature and Governor, we are making a nearly \$160 million investment in engineering. This is our

highest programmatic priority. Nebraska is about to see double-digit job growth in fields like electrical engineering, computer and information systems management, and software development. We can't afford *not* to grow.

We have similarly bold goals at the College of Information Science & Technology at UNO. I have heard the Dean say that our students are so in-demand that they get hired without even having to prepare a resume. We literally can't produce graduates fast enough.

At UNK, the job placement rate in the computer science, information technology, and management information systems programs is 100 percent. A new cyber systems department, to be housed in a STEM building that you were a key partner on, will enhance our ability to meet workforce needs, particularly in greater Nebraska.

And at UNMC, our nursing programs are growing, but not quickly enough to meet the demand. I just read a newspaper report that said Nebraska's nursing shortage will grow to 5,400 by 2025. The needs are especially acute in rural parts of the state. And they will continue to grow as the population ages.

Scholarships are not the only solution to our workforce crisis. But I am convinced that a significantly greater investment in financial aid would make Nebraska more competitive, more accessible, and better positioned to build the workforce of the future. This is exactly the type of idea we should be considering as we think about what we want our state to look like 10, 20 and 30 years down the road.

Before I wrap up, I want to draw your attention to the data packet that has been distributed to each of you with additional information about H3 majors and ACT scores at the University. I would be pleased to answer questions about the data or any portion of my testimony.

Thank you again for your time.