

UNO building on its future - Dorms, student life transform longtime commuter school

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UNO is a much different campus today than when Bryan Bortol began his studies two years ago.

More students live on campus. There's more to do there - even at night, long after most classes end.

In other words, the junior from Omaha said, there's more student life at UNO than there was before.

"I'm already doing events at school and hanging out with people on campus," said Bortol, 20, who lived at home with his folks during his freshman and sophomore years but moved into the dorms last week. "It's like it's actually a state college now."

The University of Nebraska at Omaha - which began its 2011 fall semester Monday - is no longer just a commuter campus.

A new 480-bed dorm, Scott Court, opened this fall on South Campus near Aksarben Village. Bortol is all moved in.

"It's really awesome. It feels like I'm not in a dorm," he said.

University officials say the opening of Scott Court continues the university's ongoing, deliberate move toward an urban campus environment.

"Simply said, our vision for the future is to be a leading metropolitan university," said UNO Chancellor John Christensen. "We've been making great progress in that direction. A lot of the building that has been going on has been directed toward it."

In fall 1999, the first dorms at UNO, University Village, opened with 576 beds. Since then, the university has opened four more dorms, including Scott Court. That's brought the total number of beds to 2,088.

Christensen sees that number continuing to grow over the next decade.

About 13 percent of UNO's roughly 15,400 students now call the dorms home.

At most metropolitan universities, Christensen said, about 20 percent of students live on campus. He wants UNO to be no different.

To help UNO get there, more dorms will probably be built in the area where Scott Court is, "on the Pacific or Center Street campuses in one form or another," Christensen said. "We're going to need to consider additional housing as our campus grows."

Blake DeForest, a freshman from Council Bluffs, spent the last few days before classes began getting settled in the University Village dorm. Shortly after moving in, he went to a campus barbecue and a laser tag competition.

"It's been really fun," said DeForest, who plays trumpet in the UNO marching band. "I just know that a lot will be going on around here."

Earlier this year, UNO dropped football and wrestling as part of its move to NCAA Division I. Christensen acknowledges that the loss of both sports is going to be an adjustment for the school.

"It will require some significant nurturing," he said.

Even so, Christensen said, other milestones will help keep up the momentum for faculty, staff and students.

For instance, the College of Education just moved into a newly renovated Roskens Hall. The building is state-of-the-art and "is designed to align with our philosophy and the way education is going," said Nancy Edick, the college's dean. "No two classrooms are the same, so we can allow educators to experience learning in a variety of different environments."

The university also is working on securing private funding to build a \$23 million community engagement center that will, among other things, house UNO's Service Learning Academy, the Metropolitan Omaha Education Consortium (MOEC) and other community groups and programs.

One of Christensen's goals for the school year is to raise the money and finish plans for the 60,000-square-foot building so that ground can be broken over the next few years.

"The hallmark of a metropolitan university nationally is that there is engagement with the community," the chancellor said.

But the heart and future of UNO lies in its students, and its growing student life, Christensen said.

"This is a university that is being transformed every day," he said. "I think the timing is perfect."

Student housing at UNO

University Village

576 beds, opened fall 1999 (Dodge campus)

Scott Residence Hall

168 beds, opened fall 2000 (Pacific campus)

Scott Village

480 beds, opened fall 2003 (Pacific campus)

Maverick Village

384 beds, opened fall 2008 (Dodge campus)

Scott Court

480 beds, just opened (Pacific campus)

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- **Caption:** Color Photo/1 Elijah Philson, left, and his brother Noah prepare to move possessions into Scott Court, a new 480-bed dorm on the University of Nebraska at Omaha's South Campus. Elijah, a UNO freshman and a graduate of Elmwood-Murdock High School, moved into the dorm earlier this month. Classes started Monday. Utkarsh Sahu, left, and Rahul Nambiar Rajagopalan try a free "walking taco" Wednesday as part of "welcome back" festivities at UNO. Both students are from India.

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