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UNO Redefines Itself The new mission: An urban university offering a strong undergraduate program, and graduate programs linked to the business, social and cultural needs of the city. It also emphasizes practical research and partnerships within the university and with organizations in the community. School Pins Its Hopes On Niches of Expertise Current Weaknesses Future Strengths

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By standard measurements, the University of Nebraska at Omaha is a mediocre university. Its spending per student is low, its retention rate is abysmal, its research funding is low, and its enrollment has dropped 10 percent in the last four years.

So why is there an overriding sense of optimism about UNO within the Omaha community and at the university?

Perhaps because the statistics don't measure the physical and academic improvements on campus during the last 20 years, or the general demand for UNO graduates because they make good employees, or the potential of the new Institute of Information Science and Technology and Engineering.

Many of the traditional measurements that find UNO lacking are based on standards for the nation's older, established universities, where students go to school full time and basic research is prized. The numbers don't measure the strengths of urban schools, like UNO, that serve all kinds of students - older ones, part-timers, people who didn't do well in high school.

So UNO is in the midst of redefining itself as a good urban university: one that stresses practical research, partnerships, flexibility and serving the local community.

While a land-grant university like the University of Nebraska-Lincoln serves a state's overall academic needs, an urban university focuses on the demands of its metropolitan area.

"An urban university has to be light on its academic toes, able to meet changing conditions," said Barbara Holland, executive editor of the journal "Metropolitan Universities," and chief academic officer at Portland State University.

As UNO moves toward a more urban nature, it anticipates carving out a national reputation in at least three areas, including the new Institute of Information Science and Technology and Engineering. It also will continue to emphasize quality in its undergraduate academic programs.

There are some concerns on the UNO campus about what the change will mean. Some faculty members worry there won't be enough funding to both build programs with a national reputation and maintain the quality of other programs.

Still, there is general support of the shift in direction that is already apparent. The urban flavor can be seen in programs like these:

Business graduate Suzanne Hopp wasn't thinking "urban university" when she worked as an intern at Bozell World Wide in the spring of 1996. But an emphasis on internships is one way urban schools link students with their communi-

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ty. The College of Business Administration expects to double its 65 internships in the next two or three years. Ms. Hopp got a full-time job from the experience. She's now a research analyst in strategic planning at Bozell.

Patrick Gartin, associate professor of criminal justice, helped organize and is an adviser to the Omaha Coalition of Citizen Patrols, composed of about 24 Omaha neighborhood groups, with about 800 volunteers participating in the patrols. Gartin is helping create a database for them in this partnership between the academic expert and the local community.

It's Christmas in July for UNO Professor Hamid Sharif, who is unpacking new equipment for an electronics engineering lab. The \$ 450,000 in equipment was purchased with the help of local corporations and will be used by students and businesses. The lab is another example of the growing cooperation between business and UNO.

For each of the last three years LeEtta Grabowski, who works for Family Services in Lincoln, has spent a week taking classes on how to run a nonprofit organization at the Peter Kiewit Conference Center in Omaha. This summer she graduated with a certificate from the Midlands Institute for Nonprofit Management and a better understanding of what it would be like to be an executive director of an agency. The program for professionals is offered through a partnership of UNO and Creighton University.

A half-dozen Columbus, Neb., residents may begin earning master's degrees from UNO without the commute. They will get lectures via satellite, hook up with their professors and other students over the Internet, and drive to the Omaha campus about once a month. The College of Business faculty put together the program after Tony Raimondo, president of Behlen Manufacturing, said some employees were interested. The proposal reflects UNO's effort to respond quickly to a specific business need.

Then there's the Institute of Information Science and Technology and Engineering, with its new College of Information Science and Technology, expanded engineering programs and a yet-to-be built home on the Ak-Sar-Ben campus. IST&E has "urban university" stamped all over it.

It is a working partnership. It was born of local business need. About two-thirds of its start-up and construction costs are coming from \$ 47 million in private donations, a first at NU. It is intended to be a place where the business and the educational worlds intersect, with students working as interns in the business world and corporate employees spending time teaching and doing research at UNO.

While the bridge between business and UNO is the focus of current attention, urban universities have "communities" beyond the corporate world. For example, more than 60 local teachers and professors have been trained to use technology in the classroom, one benefit of a collaboration that brings together superintendents from seven local school districts and the UNO education dean.

Regent Chuck Hassebrook sees UNO as building bridges with "small business, neighborhoods and other institutions."

UNO will continue to expand its graduate offerings to meet urban professional needs, many in the Omaha business and the academic world believe. "The demand," said Fran Marshall, UNO graduate and senior vice president at First National Bank, "is there for more graduate programs."

But not programs that duplicate UNL, particularly at the very expensive Ph.D. level. Regents and NU President L. Dennis Smith are clear that UNO's mission to serve the metropolitan area does not mean duplicating Ph.D. programs now offered in Lincoln.

"Expanding graduate programs depends on need," Smith said. "I don't think we will duplicate most Ph.D. programs now offered in Lincoln. I doubt seriously we would offer a Ph.D. in chemistry or biological sciences."

UNO and UNL are not much different from other university systems in the historic tension between the younger urban school and the older state school with its array of doctorate programs, said Dr. Holland, a national expert on urban schools.

Rather than mimic their sister schools, many urban campuses are looking for new and different ways to be a good university, she said. Their graduate programs largely are connected to the cultural, social and business needs of their cities.

"We can't be the best of everything. There are not the resources and not the will," said Louis Pol, professor of marketing at UNO. "But being nationally known in a few areas can be a rallying point for your own community."

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UNO supporters believe that the university will need at least three nationally recognized areas to gain greater prestige. The criminal justice program already has a national reputation. The second will be IST&E, and the third is unnamed.

UNO's Center for Afghanistan studies, with the largest collection of material about Afghanistan in the western world, has an international reputation but within a narrower arena.

The search committee looking for a successor to Chancellor Del Weber, who retired in June, sought out candidates who understood the changing nature of urban universities, said Carl Camp, professor of political science and member of that committee.

Finalist Richard Flynn, dean of UNO's College of Education, is co-authoring a series on collaborative programs at urban schools nationwide. Chancellor Nancy Belck is working with a group of urban schools to develop yardsticks to measure the quality of the institutions.

The urban university's focus on practical research and serving the local community worries some faculty members who fear that too much emphasis on applied research will chase away good faculty and that educational quality could be lost in a frenzy to curry community favor.

"We have to be concerned that we don't become so trendy and sensitive to the latest idea that might come floating by that we lose the liberal arts tradition which is important to any real university," said Janet West, president of the UNO Chapter of the American Association of University Professors.

"We have to be a university first," said Shelton Hendricks, professor of psychology and faculty senate president. "We can't just mirror what business wants. Otherwise all we are is a consulting firm."

Those studying urban schools agree. Academic quality is important to an urban university, said Dr. Holland. A good undergraduate program is the foundation for everything else the university does, she said.

Dr. Belck has said that as she familiarizes herself with UNO, she will be looking at improving the academic core.

Money will continue to be an issue. The Lincoln and Omaha campuses will still compete for state tax dollars. UNO faculty members fear that money they need to maintain quality in current programs will be used to pay for new initiatives.

Despite the concerns, the optimism about UNO is pervasive, buoyed by a glowing report from a national accreditation team that concluded: "In sum, the health of the university is excellent and it is embarking on several new developments with outstanding private and public support, which are exciting and hold great promise for the future."

And there is the clear hope that UNO will continue that evolution. "UNO is moving from a commuter campus into a truly urban institution," said Regent Nancy O'Brien of Waterloo. "The next step is the solidification of our role as an urban university."

"That means serving the student population and being tied more closely to the community - to the students, the taxpayers, businesses and the professionals who live in this community."

Current Weaknesses

Inability to keep students in school: Only 22 percent of full-time freshmen graduate within six years.

Enrollment is declining as students go elsewhere: UNO has 2,000 fewer students than four years ago.

Because it is often compared with the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, UNO tends to come up short in such standard measures as number of Ph.D. programs.

Future Strengths

Bring stability to the student population by building dormitories. UNO is starting with about a 500-to 600-bed dorm. Some hope to see up to 2,000 dorm beds.

Build a national reputation for two to three programs such as the Institute for Information Sciences. UNO's criminal justice program is already nationally recognized.

Expand graduate offerings but tailor them to the needs of professionals in local business community. Also, offer non-degree programs for professionals.

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GRAPHIC: Color Photo/1 **UNO:** The University seeks to differentiate itself from UNL by focusing on Omaha's needs. B&W Photo/1 **CORPORATE TIES:** **UNO** Professor Hamid Sharif sets up new equipment for an electronics engineering lab. The \$ 450,000 in equipment was purchased with the help of local corporations. Mugs/2 Ms. Hopp Dr. Belck; PHIL JOHNSON/WORLD-HERALD/1sf/1

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