



State of the University Address

Powered by Purpose

Transforming an Urban Campus

10/17/25

Good morning and welcome. It is my privilege and honor to stand before you today for the annual State of the University Address. Today, we gather to reflect on what we have achieved together, and to chart the course forward – a course rooted in our Maverick Spirit, guided by our mission, and powered by the commitment of this wonderful community.

I would like to take a moment to recognize President Gold and thank him for being here today. His leadership across the University of Nebraska System is strengthening our collective work, and we are grateful for his guidance.

Today, I speak to you under a theme that lies at the very core of our mission: Powered by Purpose – and through this power, how we are forging new paths for learners at every stage of life. At the center of this purpose, we must explain our “why.” Why our work matters to our community. Why does the community want to listen to what we do here at UNO?

As we gather here, we are reminded of our shared commitment: to transform lives by opening doors, breaking down barriers, and preparing our learners for the future.

Recognizing the Colleges

Regardless of your position, the work you do within each of our colleges empowers the University of Nebraska at Omaha’s mission. Today, I would like to take a moment to recognize the extraordinary accomplishments across our campus and how each college stayed true to UNO’s CORE in their own unique ways.

The College of Arts and Sciences had a wonderful year full of impact and growth. Faculty in the college advanced impactful research with over \$7 million in grants and contracts. Additionally, outreach and engagement remain central to its mission with Chuck Hagel events drawing 600 attendees and a High School Math Problem Solving Contest engaging more than 2,000 high school students and educators.

The **College of Business Administration** is central to the success of UNO’s new sports management dual degree with Real Madrid Graduate School – Universidad Europea. Students in the program benefit by gaining a strong business foundation alongside specialized training in international sports management.

The **College of Education, Health, and Human Sciences** recently broke ground on a \$17.1 million expansion of the Biomechanics Research Building Phase 3. Meanwhile, the UNO Pitching Lab, residing in our newly opened Health Science Collaborative continues to gain national recognition, showcased at the College World Series, the Kiewit Luminarium, and in visits from collegiate and professional teams from around the world.

The **College of Information Science and Technology (IS&T)** is driving Nebraska’s future-ready workforce in artificial intelligence and data science. This year marked a historical milestone as two faculty members received the first-ever NSF CAREER Awards in the college’s history. Additionally, in partnership with the

University of Nebraska-Lincoln, IS&T developed a campus version of the Master of Science in Artificial Intelligence program.

The **College of Public Affairs and Community Service** embodies excellence in education, research, and community impact. Enrollment in Aviation grew by 22%, while Social Work saw an 18% increase in undergraduate enrollment and a 7% rise in graduate enrollment. Additionally, two faculty members in the School of Public Administration were named Fellows of the National Academy of Public Administration, and the Goodrich Scholarship Program earned the inaugural NU System President's Innovation in Student Success Award.

The **College of Communication, Fine Arts and Media (CFAM)** continues to demonstrate creativity and student success. This year, CFAM achieved an impressive 88% student retention rate from spring to fall and saw a remarkable 38% growth in enrollment for the Master of Fine Arts in Writing degree. MavForensics placed 16th nationally at the American Forensic Association Tournament. And finally, CFAM launched its first-year experience seminar designed to increase student belonging, success, and retention.

All of these achievements honor UNO's Core Statement. We are dedicated to fostering intellectual curiosity and promoting critical thinking. We do impactful and pragmatic research as well as commit to workforce and economic development. We understand real-work learning experiences bring public good to our learners. Collectively, we strive to serve our community through the transformative power of higher education.

Best for Vets

Additionally, UNO has been named as the best public university for veterans, according to the latest Military Times Best for Vets ranking. This is a distinction that honors our institution's commitment to supporting military-connected students and their families.

Athletics

It is only right that we take time to brag about our Athletics too. In 2024, Baxter Arena was voted Omaha's Choice Awards Winner for Best Arena and First Place Winner for Indoor Sports Complex by the Omaha World Herald. This year, Baxter Arena once again served as a gathering place for our city and a venue where generations of Mavericks come together to celebrate excellence.

This past year was a historic milestone for our program. For the first time, I jumped out of a trash can with a heavy AEW belt... and my daughter called me cool. Oh, and our men's basketball team earned a spot in the NCAA March Madness Tournament. The exposure – from Selection Sunday through the opening round game versus St. John's – drew 74 million viewers worth an estimated \$9 million in advertising value equivalence. UNO's appearance reached nationwide coverage on CBS, ESPN, SportsCenter, and through extensive highlights shared by NCAA and national sports media outlets. It brought national attention to UNO and energized our community. Additionally, UNO became the official co-host of the NCAA Men's College World Series at Charles Schwab Field.

But while competition and visibility matter, what makes us most proud is the holistic success of our student athletes. Since my arrival in 2021, UNO has made 16 championship appearances in 9 sports, 11

conference titles, 8 NCAA tournament appearances, all while achieving a 3.5 cumulative GPA. Student-athletes, across three consecutive academic years, have achieved a 95% Graduation Success Rate. Our student athletes continue showing that they are just as committed to excellence in the classroom as they are in the arena.

Additionally, Omaha Athletics ranked #8 nationally among all division 1 programs for community service, completing 4,579 hours in fiscal year 2024-2025. Whether it is stepping onto the ice against national powerhouses, facing off in conference play, or giving back to the community, our student-athletes carry with them the pride of this university. When our teams compete, they represent our entire community. They show the nation what it means to be a Maverick.

But these successes are only the beginning. The question before us is how we, as a university, harness this energy to transform not just UNO but the community and workforce we are called to serve. This is our next chapter.

At the University of Nebraska at Omaha, we have always believed that students must remain at the very center of all we do. Their success defines our success. Their aspirations drive our innovation. And their futures give purpose to every initiative we pursue.

This past May I was honored to have Bud Crawford join us as our commencement speaker. He inspired our graduates with a powerful message about perseverance, purpose, and the pursuit of excellence. During that ceremony, we also presented him with a special award recognizing his extraordinary achievements and his commitment to his hometown.

A few months later, Bud reminded the world what determination looks like when he stepped into the ring in Las Vegas and earned yet another championship victory. But what makes Bud remarkable isn't just his success, it is his heart for Omaha. He continues to give back, mentor young people, and remind all of us that greatness begins right here at home. That is the spirit of a champion. That is the spirit of a Maverick.

Powered by Purpose: Transforming a Metropolitan University

Let us reflect for a moment on what it means to be "powered by purpose." It is not just about preparing students for jobs, it is about empowering individuals with the skills, mindset, and adaptability to thrive in our evolving society.

This dedication reflects a larger truth about our identity: UNO is, and always will be, a premier metropolitan university. That means our policies and practices are designed around the needs of those we serve. It means listening to students and asking ourselves how we can make their path clearer and their experiences richer.

Our university has always been a place of learning, but we are also becoming a hub of lifelong opportunities. We have transformed our institution into a launchpad for success, whether a learner is graduating high school, returning mid-career, or reskilling in retirement.

The purpose we hold dear to our heart forms the internal compass to everything we do. Yet, I will argue the most important part of our job is to ask the following question – “what contributions do we bring as a university to the larger community, to the prosperity of our economy, and to the many future generations of workforce?”

Community and Workforce Alignment

UNO is deeply embedded in Omaha. Through employer-driven conversations, we are listening closely to what our partners need. Whether it is through workforce partnerships, credentialed work experiences, or collaborative planning, we are ensuring that UNO graduates are educated and workforce ready. This balance is what makes our university unique.

At UNO, we call this the Power to Employ. It is how we honor our promise as Nebraska’s metropolitan university – by connecting education directly to opportunity, and by ensuring that the future of Omaha’s workforce, the workforce that is of demand, is shaped right here on our campus.

The Power to Employ is what distinguishes UNO. Let me highlight a few ways we are delivering this promise. But first, allow me to use an analogy. Let’s say we need an engine to transform a campus. To make sure this engine works well, we will need to build gears. I call them the elements of infrastructure.

Building an Infrastructure

To remain at the forefront of higher education, UNO, indeed, has started to build the infrastructure of the future. This means rethinking how we design curriculum. How we prepare students for the future workforce. How we integrate innovation and technology into every part of the learning experience.

Gear 1: In the due course of doing that, we launched a comprehensive General Education Reform effort. Our goal is to make gen-ed more coherent, more relevant, and more flexible for students. By reducing required credit hours, we are giving students greater freedom to tailor their education while still grounding them in the essential knowledge and skills they need. I appreciate our colleagues for their courage to think differently and help give UNO a competitive edge by incorporating AI in GedEd curriculum. This reform is about streamlining our academic structure with the realities of modern careers and the needs of today’s learners.

Gear 2: UNO is expanding Cooperative Education (Co-Op). This model integrates classroom learning with meaningful, paid work experiences tied directly to a student’s major or career goals. Co-Op is more than an internship – it is an education philosophy that recognizes the power of learning by doing. By embedding these opportunities into our students’ academic journeys, we are giving them a head start in building their resumes and their confidence. As I always say to our community, UNO is in the business of training professionals before they become your professionals.

Gear 3: Our work in Competency-Based Education. This model shifts the focus from credit hours to a skill-based approach that allows students to progress at their own pace. UNO is reimagining what higher education can look like for the 21st century, offering pathways that are learner-centric, student-paced, skill-focused, and career-aligned.

Gear 4: UNO introduced Career Connect in May 2022. An initiative with one articulated purpose. Through our partnerships with Omaha-area employers, we are guaranteeing paid internships to provide students with real-world skills and experiences. This allows Mavericks to graduate with a degree and meaningful work experience. Since the inception of Career Connect, we gained an additional 157 new employers and 13,341 paid internships on our Handshake platform.

Gear 5: Parallel with our accreditor, The Higher Learning Commission, UNO has made a lot of strides in expanding the offer of our microcredentials. As of today, we have already created 33 different microcredentials from Project Management Tools to Retention Focused Management. We also recently launched 8 new microcredentials focused on A.I. Obviously, there are lots more in development. We believe the future of higher education demands high level of flexibility. These digitally badged courses provide learners with in-demand skills that align with workforce needs. They are flexible, stackable, and allow students and working professionals to stay competitive in fast-changing industries.

Gear 6: I have been so proud to tell everyone that UNO is the first university in Nebraska to offer a Bachelor of Science degree in A.I. This program trains specialists and equips students across disciplines to integrate A.I. into their work and prepare them to become the next generation of innovators. By leading in this space, UNO is preparing the next generation of innovators who will shape the future of applied A.I. And soon enough, UNO will be in the process of offering an in-person Master of Science degree in A.I.

Gear 7: Two important organizations stood up to supercharge our engine: the Division of Innovative and Learning Centric Initiatives and the Office of Engagement. These two divisions drive UNO's innovation and partnership creation.

Of course, these are not all of the gears that make UNO's system run. They are simply some of the many examples in our infrastructure that we have already built in the last four years. Like any finely tuned machine, it takes countless interconnected gears to keep us moving forward.

Operational Excellence

Holding ourselves accountable to our community and our employers, UNO must demonstrate its commitment to operational excellence. To power this engine so as to advance this modern university, we need thought out processes. (The right fuel).

Fuel #1: The Momentum Initiative. I like to call it a momentum partnership with Metropolitan Community College (MCC). Through this initiative, UNO and MCC are rewriting the story of transfer education by aligning our policies, improving practices, and removing unnecessary barriers, ensuring that our students, not UNO or MCC students, but our students, can transition smoothly between institutions without losing momentum. This effort is about honoring the journeys of our learners who may start in one place but find their home at UNO. It is about making higher education a ladder, not a maze.

Fuel #2: At UNO, we must adopt a business-mindset to run a university. Because resources are scarce, we are exceptionally vigilant in allocating resources to increase our productivity. To guide these efforts, the

Office of Academic Affairs has adopted a Grey Dashboard. This powerful tool affords us new visibility into program performance, allowing us to examine revenue by course, selection, program, and college. This data-driven approach gives us clearer insights into where our resources are most effective and where we need to adjust. With this dashboard, we are not guessing about sustainability, we are measuring it, tracking it, improving it, and holding ourselves accountable for institutional resources.

Fuel #3: UNO is very mindful and intentional to tender the needs of our employers. Employer-driven conversations help inform how we train our students and develop our curriculum. Every single conversation with an employer is an opportunity to build a relationship for our students. We must be obsessed with strengthening workforce skills, supporting career growth, and building the pipelines Omaha needs to remain competitive in a rapidly changing economy for our learners.

Fuel #4: Workforce Partnerships. As we say, we exist to serve the community. How does it work? We work hard to optimize talent development. We help our city and the state of Nebraska retain talents. We stop the brain drain. Many of you know the statistics provided by the Nebraska Department of Labor. Over 81% of our graduates still live and work in the state one year after graduation. By five years post-graduation, that number remains high at 67%. Did you know, there are over 70,000 alumni that still live in Omaha? UNO understands the ability to develop talents with scalable operations and the knowledge to retain can help our community to attract outside investment and employers to our state.

Fuel #5: Position UNO to capitalize on the market opportunities such as Workforce Pells and adult learners re-entering higher education. Workforce Pells are short-term Pell Grants to cover high-quality, workforce training and certification programs. UNO must learn to quickly recognize how the demand of higher education has evolved. Knowing how to adapt to the market needs is crucial for a modern university operating on an urban campus with a critical mass in our community.

When you have the right fuel, everything begins to move with purpose. One gear turns, and suddenly the other begins to move with it – each part working together towards a common direction. That is what happens when a university aligns its mission, people, and priorities. Momentum builds. Energy spreads. What starts as a single initiative becomes a coordinated movement that drives transformation across the entire institution. When every gear works in sync, UNO becomes an interconnected system powered by purpose.

Gainful and Fulfilling Careers

As we prepare students for their academic success, we must also prepare them for success beyond graduation. Our responsibility is to produce graduates and ensure that they are equipped to pursue gainful and fulfilling careers.

Today's students are seeking employment and purpose. They want careers that sustain their families, strengthen their communities, and give them meaning. UNO is rising to that challenge.

Power to Employ

Why does it matter? Because the future of Nebraska depends on it.

The latest Nebraska Economic Report is clear: we are losing talent. Too many skilled workers are leaving our state, and too few are staying to power our industries. But remember, every challenge is an opportunity. This economic headwind provides an opportunity for UNO to lead.

We are transforming our campus into a powerhouse of workforce development. This gives us the critical mass to connect graduates directly with meaningful careers. In doing so, we strengthen our community, fuel innovation, and attract new investments and companies to our state.

Our role is foundational. A thriving community needs a university that not only teaches but converts potential into a professional workforce for tomorrow. This is not optional work – it is essential to the state’s future.

By anchoring our strategies in workforce development and community partnerships, UNO will ensure that our graduates are prepared for jobs and are leading in careers that keep Omaha growing and competitive.

All of this progress is powered by purpose and what I call the Power to Employ. It is an engine built of people, partnerships, and innovations.

Our faculty and staff are the heart of this engine, driving excellence in teaching, mentorship, and research. Our community partnerships connect UNO to businesses, nonprofits, and industries, ensuring that we remain deeply engaged with the world around us. And, our curriculum gives students the tools to adapt, lead, and succeed.

It is this engine that positions UNO as a national leader in preparing learners for the future.

Challenges

However, you will never know where to go if you are not honest with where you stand. The majority of regional public universities are facing enrollment challenges. Despite national trends of declining enrollment, we are fortunate that UNO continues to demonstrate resilience and stability, enrolling 15,000 students this fall while increasing student credit hour production by 0.5% to 171,425 hours.

New and first-generation, first-year students have been key drivers of this stability, with freshman enrollment rising 3.9% and first-generation students within that group increasing 7.3% year over year.

These outcomes underscore UNO’s commitment to access and student success, reflecting a multi-year trend of enrollment stability and affirming the university’s mission to educate all learners and strengthen Nebraska’s workforce. But this is not a moment of celebration. It is a moment of staying focused on our journey to provide affordable and accessible education to the mass. We must think through the way we do business and challenge some of the processes we have. We must be obsessed with changing them for the better.

Yet, another challenge we face is the burden of remissions. Too often, financial strain becomes the deciding factor in whether a student can persist and complete their degree. President Gold recognizes and understands this reality. His commitment to finding solutions reflect a leadership style that places students first – the very same philosophy that drives us here at UNO.

We are excited to continue this work alongside a president who shares our belief that higher education should be accessible. Together we are ensuring that financial barriers never stand in the way of a Maverick completing their journey.

Future Thinking

It is also important that we take time to talk about the future of our university. As we look ahead, we are embracing the shift in our rapidly evolving world.

Imagine a future where a UNO graduate's transcript doesn't just say what classes they took. Imagine it clearly articulates that they can analyze data, manage projects, communicate effectively, or solve complex problems. This is the future UNO is building.

UNO is leading the way in reimagining how education translates into employability through the power of artificial intelligence. We are developing a groundbreaking initiative that utilizes AI to read and interpret student transcripts. This work will transform traditional academic records into skill-based profiles that employers can easily understand. The initiative identifies the specific skills, competencies, and real-world abilities that students gain through their coursework, research, and co-curricular activities.

For employers, this means a clearer picture of the talents our learners bring to the table. For students, it means their learning becomes more visible and valuable in the job market.

Our innovative spirit was on full display earlier this month when UNO proudly hosted the OMA x AI Conference, a sold-out event that brought together industry leaders, educators, researchers, and innovators from across the region. The conference exemplified our pragmatic approach to learning. Through sessions led by experts and hands-on demonstrations, participants explored how artificial intelligence is transforming sectors such as healthcare, finance, education, and public service. By fostering these conversations and partnerships, we continue to ensure that Omaha, and Nebraska, remain at the forefront of innovation, workforce development, and responsible technological advancement.

Leadership and Community

None of these efforts would be possible without the leadership of our people. At UNO, leadership is not confined by titles or offices. It is exercised every day by those who teach, mentor, research, and serve. Our students, staff, faculty, and administrators are our chief organization team leaders. They are individuals who lead from where they are, advancing our mission through their daily actions and collective commitment.

Leadership at UNO is about action. It is about showing up, building trust, and moving this institution forward. It is about the courage to innovate and the resilience to adapt. This is the human element at the core of our success.

The Big Picture: UNO's Promise

If we step back and look at the whole picture, we see more than just individual initiatives. We see a university living its promise.

Our vision is to be the premier metropolitan university, recognized nationally and globally. Our mission is to transform lives, strengthen communities, and drive workforce and economic development. UNO is a force for good. We are educating all learners, driving pragmatic research, engaging deeply with our community, and leading Nebraska's workforce into the future. That is our promise. That is our purpose.

Philanthropy

Let me show you just how deeply our community believes in that purpose. I am proud to share that this year, thanks to the generosity of our donors and the unwavering support of our community, the University of Nebraska at Omaha exceeded our fundraising goal. The past fiscal year, UNO secured more than \$59 million in private philanthropy. Additionally, 9,199 individual donors chose to invest in UNO to account for more than 12,700 individual gifts. UNO alumni invested nearly \$10 million in UNO. This achievement is a testament to the shared belief in UNO's mission and the transformative power of education.

This year for our annual Wear Black Give Back, we hit a record by receiving 6,726 gifts, raising more than \$1.4 million!! You should have seen my office cheering! Every contribution, large or small, strengthens our ability to expand access to scholarships, advance impactful research, and deepen community partnerships that uplift our city and state. Most importantly, these gifts open doors for our students, ensuring that more Mavericks can pursue their dreams and shape a brighter future for us all.

The UNO community is familiar with the Weitz Innovation and Excellence Fund. This is a multi-year commitment that invests \$14 million in strategic UNO priorities that may benefit from new investment. We are extremely grateful for Barb and Wally Weitz. The fund's purpose is to elevate good programs to nationally recognized ones while addressing critical areas of need in Omaha and Nebraska. Some of the ways this generous gift is being used is through 3D printing for Healthcare Education and Workforce Development, AI-CCORE, NebraskaCYBER MATRIX, Developing Educators and Promoting Achievement, and many more.

And we are not done. In January, UNO surpassed our \$300 million fundraising goal as part of the University of Nebraska Foundation's Only in Nebraska Campaign. To date we are over \$340 million in progress towards a stretch goal we have made of \$400 million.

These numbers represent belief. They show that our alumni, partners, and friends across Nebraska see UNO as a catalyst for change and a source of pride for this community. Every gift is a vote of confidence in our future and a reflection of the trust our city places in us. As we look ahead, this momentum will

continue to propel us forward strengthening the connection between UNO and the community we are proud to serve.

Appreciation

Before I close, I want to express my deepest gratitude for our faculty, colleagues and staff. Our success is only possible because of your hard work, dedication, and commitment to our students and communities.

I want to extend a special word of appreciation to our staff, who have endured a difficult year, particularly as we continue to navigate the realities of tight budgets and the absence of staff salary increases. I see you. I value you. And I am deeply grateful for the way you continue to show up for our students and UNO each and every day. Your resilience and loyalty are not taken for granted.

Call to Action

The state of the university is strong, but strength is never the end, it is the beginning. As we look ahead, our priorities remain clear. Grow enrollment, retain our students, remain agile in responding to the workforce, and continue to innovate in how we teach, partner, and serve.

We are proud to be Omaha's urban campus, serving the broad mass of students and families who can and should see UNO as their university. But reaching them requires every one of us. Each of us is a recruiter. Each of us has the power to share UNO's story and convince those we encounter that their future belongs here.

At the same time, let us be mindful and act as one community. Our strength comes from our unity - working together toward a shared vision. Together, we will lift our model of education, lift our campus, and lift our students. We will continue to transform lives and build a stronger future for Omaha and Nebraska.

I ask each of you to see yourself as a moving gear in UNO's engine. When a student graduates and begins the search for their first job, help make that personal introduction. When you meet a prospective student, tell them about the opportunities they will find here. When you serve in the community, represent UNO as the engine of opportunity that it is.

When Mavericks thrive, Nebraska thrives. And when we remain true to our mission, the world feels the impact. Together, we will ensure that UNO not only serves today's students but shapes the future of our city, our state, and our world.

Thank you – and as always, go Mavs!