



THE UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA AT OMAHA STATE OF THE UNIVERSITY ADDRESS

Destination Omaha
Thursday, September 19th, 2024
2:00 P.M. – 3:00 P.M.
Strauss Performing Arts Center

Introduction

Good afternoon, and welcome. I am so grateful that you have all joined me today to give this year's State of the University address. As I enter my 4th year as your chancellor, I can proudly say that here at the University of Nebraska at Omaha, we have become more than just a place of learning. We have become the destination that embodies ambition, innovation, and community.

Before we dive into what we have become, we must look back at how we started. In the last three years, I often asked myself these two questions: why is it essential in the story of UNO? And how we can propel forward for the future of our university? As many of you know, UNO was first established in 1908 as a small institution serving less than 30 students. Around the same time, the city of Omaha had around 100,000 residents. Today, the metro-Omaha area, also known as Omaha, is the most populous area in Nebraska with about 1 million people. If one pays attention to the economic development, metro-Omaha has gradually extended to the west side of the city, effectively making UNO the center geographically. You shouldn't be surprised that Elmwood Park's original name was Central Park. This economic expansion is crucial in the UNO's evolution as we double down on our commitment of supporting the community. And look at where we are now! With the continued support for our home of Omaha, our university now serves 15,000 learners and has grown into a leading urban-metropolitan university playing a major role in providing accessible and quality higher education in Nebraska.

As we gather today, I stand here proudly and ready to tell you that over the past year alone, we have made tremendous strides. Today, I am sharing with you this important purpose: UNO is THE destination. Sure we always talk about how Omaha is our campus, but we are the urban university. We are the destination. So what does that even mean?

Recruitment

UNO is the destination for students and families. This includes all learners from all walks of life, regardless of their socioeconomic background. We strive to create an environment where varied backgrounds and perspectives are not only welcomed, but celebrated. Diverse viewpoints are essential when it comes to intellectual growth within our university. By engaging with a variety of experiences and ideas, our learners will be better equipped to tackle challenges that come their way and leave ready to face the world.

No doubt, access to an education is a privilege. And at UNO we work hard to ensure that every individual has the opportunity to grow within our university community.

UNO's student body is made up of 15,000 students, with 66 countries represented, and about 40% of total undergraduates are first-generation. That's roughly 5,000 first-generation students in our undergraduate student body. This year, I want to highlight the successful partnership between UNO and Metropolitan Community College. UNO witnessed new transfer student enrollment grow by almost 13%, driven by initiatives like the TransFERmation Project between UNO and MCC. Led by Dr. Rich Klein and Dr. Sammi Kaiser from UNO, and Maria Vasquez and Chris Swanson from MCC, the collaborative effort simplifies the transfer process through improved practices, policies, and

structures making it easier for students to navigate their academic journeys between the two institutions. Our people work hard to appeal to all learners, no matter your background, no matter your age. In fact, in 2022 we even graduated someone at 80 years young. We honor our core of educating people of the world.

The student body here at UNO is special to me. A university's character is often reflected by its student body, and ours shows that UNO is dedicated and driven by the needs of our community. We serve vibrant, curious learners, and the commitment to the community shines through everything we do. We strive to create opportunities for our students and measure their success based on their growth in the programs we have to offer here. We welcome students as they are and support who they become upon graduation. I really enjoyed what our new President said in his investiture. Let me quote Dr. Gold. "Every entering class is a celebration – now we must make sure we retain these students and support them all the way to a degree as we pursue the Odyssey to Extraordinary."

While continuing to advance our UNO mission, we reaffirm our commitment to fostering a profound diversity of thought, enriching the learning experience, and enhancing the learning environment. At UNO, we believe that our ultimate goal is to educate individuals from across the globe and prepare them to succeed. We do this by focusing on what we set out to do, which is to educate and innovate. This is the foundation of which our institution stands on. These objectives enhance the intellectual and practical capacities of our students, while contributing to the advancement of knowledge and societal impact. In this pursuit, we must recognize that advancing social mobility is a sacred task of higher education. Education has the power to transform lives by providing opportunities that transcend economic and social boundaries. We must continue to reflect on whether we are honoring that goal, be it in the classroom, in our research lab, in our interaction with students, and in completing every task.

Now, in addition to being the home for learners and families, we must ask if UNO is the destination for our partners. Our commitment to creating and fostering meaningful collaborations and advancing innovation, positions us to contribute to shaping the future. We value our partnerships and seek to engage with organizations that share our vision because our relationship with employers and the business community is crucial. In order for us to train our students to be ready for the workforce and create labor agility, it is important to understand how to improve our curriculum and fit the needs of our community and the ever-changing workplace.

To stay relevant in higher education, UNO must also be a destination for distinguished faculty members and researchers. Our faculty has supported our vision of advancing the social and economic mobility of our learners while continuing to serve the Omaha community. But, they must feel empowered to pursue their passions, work on an ambitious research agenda, and inspire the next generation of learners.

You might ask, how do we attract such talent to UNO? That is by providing a nurturing environment that faculty and staff want to grow in. But we want to do better. In this coming decade, we must be

disciplined in allocating resources to support star programs and strategic areas. We must not be apologetic in doubling down our strategies in our comparative strengths. Yes, we will be exceptionally smart in allocating resources. Yes, we will need to make short-term sacrifices. We must not be afraid to compete in areas that we are good at and by doing so, we enrich our whole university campus. We must trade the fear of giving up short term comfort for a bigger and brighter future for this university. We must grow the university in a holistic approach. We will study how we can create a smart future for our constituents. Can we do so by providing more sustainable childcare services for our faculty, staff, and students? How about providing affordable accommodation for our new members of the UNO family? Can we meet the demand of our on-campus experience for our students and expand the residential footprint?

Research

For our faculty and researchers, we must make it known that we are committed to supporting research that pushes boundaries and addresses relevant issues.

We have continued to raise the bar for research. The National Institutes of Health awarded UNO an 11M dollar grant through the Center of Biomedical Research Excellence program, emphasizing our commitment to innovation and addressing critical health challenges. This was led by the Chair of the Department of Biomechanics, Dr. Alexey Kamenskiy. Receiving this COBRE grant will continue to transform our research efforts at UNO.

In addition, the National Counterterrorism Innovation, Technology, and Education (NCITE) Center of Excellence for terrorism prevention and counterterrorism research aligns with our core by doing pragmatic and impactful research for the betterment of national security. Thanks to the leadership of Gina Ligon with NCITE being a part of UNO, this makes us and the state of Nebraska more competitive.

As many of you know, last year, NCITE also filed a patent for chatbot technology that aims to improve suspicious activity reporting, and that patent was approved. NCITE can now work up to 35M dollars per year in a Basic Ordering Agreement with federal agency research. Since its inception in 2020, NCITE has been awarded over 40M dollars in federal grants and contracts. For the 2024-2025 fiscal year, NCITE once again received 4.6M dollars from the Department of Homeland Security to conduct and manage counterterrorism research.

The world is changing fast, and it is imperative to emphasize that UNO responds to these evolving needs in a timely manner and executes them efficiently.

Technology

Which means we are also the destination for technology and innovation. In my last State of the University Address, I spoke to you all about a book by Michael Crow. Please allow me to suggest two additional books for us to read together. Michael Crow - Fifth Wave: The Evolution of American Higher Education. And Richard Susskind and Daniel Susskind – The Future of Professions. (disclaimer: I do not receive any commission from these books but I will take some now). Michael

wrote about universities that aspire to excel through integration with cutting edge technology innovation while the Susskind's dove into how technology will fundamentally challenge the relevance of professions. I am a big believer in how the advancement of technology will provide hints on navigating the complex higher education landscape.

Many people are worried about a technological unemployment. Simply put, some people are concerned that due to technological advancement, such as AI, robots, and machine learning, many will lose their jobs. Yet, history has shown otherwise. I remember this one example in the financial services. When ATMs became such a hit, many predicted all the tellers would lose their jobs. The truth is, while the number of tellers did shrink per branch, this country saw a tremendous growth in the number of bank branches in urban cities. Hence, the number of tellers increased. What does this story tell us? Technology advancement increases productivity, resulting in growth of wealth and bigger consumption. Tellers no longer need spend most of their days to take care of transaction of cash deposits and withdrawals, routine part of their jobs. Technology allowed these tellers to focus on customer services and financial advice. Economic displacement does not need to happen if we understand how technological progress can be a complement and not a substitute. Going forward we have to explore our curriculum in the context of technology, so we can maximize human creativity and ingenuity, not replace it.

Classic economics will say when the supply increases, the price will decrease. However, the increase of college graduates in the IT fields, obviously an increase in the quantity of candidates, we don't see the salary of these IT professionals drop. It is what the economists call it - the skill biased workforce. This phenomenon sheds light on what we need to do as a university. UNO must rethink our curriculum and design programs to equip our students and faculty with the tools they need to lead and innovate in this rapidly changing world. We know technological progress will create skill bias. Hence, we must lean on strategies to produce those candidates. UNO has created an environment where technology flourishes and intel is shared.

While we continue to educate our current and future students in areas of need, in order to do this, we must focus on updates and expansion of the Peter Kiewit Institute. Last year, UNO engaged outside consultants to analyze classroom spaces, room capacity, and growth potential. This detailed space assessment showed that the PKI building, home to the College of Information Science and Technology and the College of Engineering, lacks space. Together, those colleges are expected to double in enrollment by 2030. IS&T has grown from 600 to more than 1,000 undergraduates. Graduate enrollment has increased by one-third during the same period and is expected to double by 2030. The College of Engineering plans to double their enrollment by 2030.

This is not just a building expansion of College of IS&T at UNO, it is an articulation to promote transdisciplinary research and workforce development. We will continue to poise UNO as the leader in technology talent development for our state and beyond. It is quite simple: if we want to respond to the state's dire need for more technology workers, we will all need to stand firm behind the PKI building expansion. We must increase the input of students so we can expand the output of tech professionals.

Being the destination for technology and innovation isn't just about staying ahead, it's about preparing our students to be leaders in their fields. And as we continue to embrace the future of technology across all disciplines, we must remain focused on providing exceptional educational experiences so that our learners can excel in this world. What does it mean? We will ask questions about future tech professions? How can we stay ahead of the curve? UNO is now the first and only university in the state of Nebraska to offer a Bachelor of Science degree in A.I. That also makes us the 14th university in the nation (joining 13 Ivy League and Ivy Plus Universities) to offer such programs. The degree will teach students AI skills to meet the growing industry demands and stay ahead of technological advancements. But we must not stop there. There is so much more we can do.

Highlights

In the last three years, UNO has spent significant amount of time and strategy to curate our urban university profile – a university that understands workforce development, and one that provides opportunities for our learners through hands-on experiences. Allow me to share some highlights on each college.

The **College of Arts and Sciences** provides students with skills for today's job market. They are developing a first-year experience course providing academic and personal support while helping students explore academic programs. Additionally, they have facilitated over 60 internships and practicums to connect students to the workforce.

In the **College of Business Administration**, their nationally recognized programs are creating the next generation of leaders for Omaha. The Economics Research Seminar connected 163 community members through monthly sessions. And enrollment in the MBA program surged by 33% addressing workforce demands by preparing highly skilled professionals for leadership roles.

The **College of Education, Health, and Human Sciences** provides a wide variety of programs that support our mission and address local workforce needs. The Department of Education Leadership held the first Midwest's two-day Community Leadership & Education Summit with nearly 1,000 attendees. Also, their UNO Pitching Lab drew in global athletes and received significant press through interactive community engagement.

In the **College of Communication, Fine Arts and Media**, students learn how to balance academics with application to prepare them for their future careers. Their School of Communication students have earned national acclaim with the MavForensics team consistently being ranked, their Public Relations and Advertising students received top industry awards, and the MavRadio is ranked 5th in the nation.

The **College of Information Science and Technology** is a regional leader in supporting Nebraska's workforce development when it comes to the tech field. Over \$300,000 was raised for

scholarships, activities, and research, and a classroom renovation for an innovative code studio was completed, thanks to a gift from FNBO. There was also 4.7M dollars in research expenditures.

In the **College of Public Affairs and Community Service**, learners are empowered to make a meaningful difference in the world. Academic excellence is evident through their doctoral granting degree programs being highly ranked at 13th in Criminology and Criminal Justice, and 26th in Public Administration. They also provide learning opportunities for our Mavericks through internships and service-learning projects where students explore solutions to current community challenges.

I am grateful for the leadership of our Senior Vice Chancellor Dr. Phil He, our colleges approach their mission with a well-defined purpose. Their common goal is to offer programs and experiences that allow our learners to grow and expand their knowledge while being able to apply these efforts back into our Omaha community. Let me also rapid-fire news on some exciting new facilities. The STEM TRAIL Center just had a grand opening. The space over Roskens Hall has already garnished \$2.8M on new grants and \$3.4M in pending proposals. The Durham Science Center renovation project is now complete, and we will celebrate the grand re-opening of the building on December 3rd. The renovated space is the opening of MatheMaverick Zone, a tutoring center that supports students in UNO's college algebra sequence, which saw approximately 2,000 student visits in the spring semester. The newly renovated Health and Kinesiology facility will open in November and has already been an enrollment catalyst, for example the Kinesiology program has experienced their highest undergraduate enrollment to date at 320 students this upcoming year, that will now be learning in this new state of the art facility. And, our Creative Production Lab has expanded over in the Criss-Library.

Let me also give a shoutout to our Chief Engagement Officer Dr. Julie Dierberger. UNO is all about **Community Engagement**. There are many benefits of community engagement through partnerships, experiential learning opportunities, and creative activity and research. Here at UNO we have more than 400 community partners with over 9,000 students engaging with the community in and outside of the classroom.

Finally, our **student athletes** have excelled both on and off the field this year, demonstrating their skills while maintaining a strong commitment to their academics. Across all sports, our Maverick athletes earned an average GPA of 3.43 in our Spring 2024 semester. Outside of the classroom, we also had a banner year – three sports won their Summit League Championship title: softball, men's soccer, and volleyball. Our maverick athletes also made history this year in multiple fronts. Our hockey team made it past the first round in the NCHC playoffs and competed in the Frozen Faceoff; our men's soccer team made their third appearance in the NCAA Division 1 Tournament; and our women's volleyball team also made their first appearance in an NCAA Tournament this year. Additionally, our softball team won the Division 1 AAA All Sports Trophy. But not only do our student athletes excel in and out of the classroom, they also show up when our community calls. I will never forget hearing about our hockey players, basketball teams, and many more helping our community after the tornadoes swept through our neighborhoods. For that, I am truly grateful.

Which leads me to tell you that we are also a destination for talent development. Our mission extends beyond just the classroom, it encompasses the growth of every individual who walks through our doors. We pride ourselves in creating an environment where talent is recognized, and leaders are developed. From innovative research opportunities, to facilities, to mentorship programs, to extracurricular activities, we offer a wealth of resources designed to promote our learner's potential and help them reach their dreams.

Role of Higher Education

And lastly, UNO is the destination for academic freedom. Our university works hard to uphold the principles of academic freedom, and we foster the environment where respectful debate is not only welcomed but encouraged. At UNO, we believe that the pursuit of knowledge thrives in an atmosphere where ideas can be freely exchanged. Being the destination for academic freedom means that we are enabling our UNO community to explore the diverse perspectives and engage in thoughtful conversations without fear. As a university, we have a moral responsibility to seek the truth despite uncomfortable discussions.

UNO is dedicated to maintaining our neutral stance, ensuring that our university remains a platform for open dialogue. Having different viewpoints should be seen as the utmost foundation of a university. Through respectful exchange of diverse opinions, we present an opportunity for growth and learning. Together we must uphold our values and maintain our neutrality yet contribute to an environment that celebrates intellectual curiosity and encourages collaborative growth. While some may argue political neutrality is no longer a choice, we must not walk away from the commitment of allowing different opinions no matter how we personally feel about the circumstances.

Budget

On September 5th, our system installed the 9th President – Dr. Jeffrey Gold. We are turning a new page with our new leader. I know Dr. Gold understands UNO because he was the chancellor for this great institution for four years. I am enthusiastic to welcome his intellect as an academic, his ability as the system provost, and his wisdom as a visionary. I intend to work closely with Dr. Gold and support him to start important conversations on resource allocation so he can honor his vision: The Odyssey to Extraordinary. UNO will stand by to do its part.

Perhaps one of the biggest challenges for UNO is the current and future budget. As many of you know our system has faced and continues to face a deficit. UNO must continue our conversations, continue our efforts with a sense of urgency, and increase our focus on our visions and strategies. We must advocate for our students, faculty, and staff because this urban university is worth the investment of our state and our citizens.

UNO makes up about 33 percent of the student body for University of Nebraska System, yet we receive less than 11 percent of state dollars. There have been many sleepless nights where I contemplated on what honest conversations we must have to advocate for a reasonable budgetary support for our great faculty, staff, and students. Despite a thin budget, our purpose is to serve our

community. One might beg the question of how much our community is being valued under the current financial condition.

And our goal as a metropolitan university committed to the CORE, is to educate the learners of the world. Do you remember that space assessment I discussed earlier? Well, interestingly enough, this analysis shows that we are too lean to grow, and our growth would be at the expense of our financial health if we fail to find avenue to increase our budget. If we are careless, we could grow ourselves into bankruptcy.

However, UNO has been holding steady for the last two decades at around 15,000 students and our consultants tell us that based on our current budget model, our optimal student enrollment should be 12,500 students.

While this may seem like a conundrum, we know that the right thing to do is to welcome all learners. After all, we are the destination for so many students who are the first in their families to go to college, students that never imagined that college was for them, and students who are inspired to pursue a specific program at this great campus. We will never turn our back against these students.

That said, my personal belief is that our budget model is simply not sustainable. It is my job to advocate for you and for our students. I have no problem explaining the math to anyone who will listen... and maybe a few who won't. I will continue to demand a fairer distribution of resources - one that does not leave our students, faculty, and staff disadvantaged. And one that allows us to grow.

Tuition

As the campus disproportionately relies on tuition dollars, it is important to be transparent about our tuition. Tuition growth has not kept up with inflation in recent years and has created significant challenges in our financial health. Based on the College Board study, the state of Nebraska's five-year average tuition increase, after the adjustment for inflation, is negative 10 percent. It is time to rethink the value of higher education provided by UNO. UNO has never walked away from the responsibility as we strive to maintain our commitment to accessibility and academic excellence. Dare I say the value proposition of UNO is second to none. We must not talk down the quality education we provide for the community. Families and students must be reminded that the University of Nebraska is a leader in higher education and UNO is a community treasure.

As a leading institution educating people of the world, we want to give our students quality education. The idea of earning a degree should not and will not be reserved for those who can afford it, but for those who have the ambition to succeed. It is essential that we work together to find innovative and scalable solutions that align with our goals for continued growth and success.

So let me pose a hypothetical question for you all. How much are YOU willing to pay to attend one of Omaha's jewels (AKA UNO)? I want you to think about this question because our commitment to providing accessible education is at the heart of what we do here at this great university.

This is why we fought to keep our tuition increase at a minimal number. After approval of our tuition increase of 3.3% by the Board of Regents this past June, UNO's annual tuition and fees are now at 8,718 dollars, making us one of the lowest in the state of Nebraska and in the country. In fact, we are the second lowest in tuition and fees among our peers compared to the 15 other states that have the Omaha Urban Rate. Our tuition must remain competitive so we can continue to offer programs and be recognized for preparing our students to excel. And while we might not be in the "cheapest" contest, we are in competition to be the best value in higher education. We are here to march on with one mission: University of Nebraska at Omaha is committed to provide accessible quality education to the mass.

When learners choose UNO, they benefit equally from their education experience and their finances. The value of an education is not only in the knowledge gained but also in ensuring that this knowledge is accessible and attainable for ALL.

FAFSA

Yet we have been hit with another challenge. This year's FAFSA Simplification Act. This Act was put in place to award federal financial aid to students with a goal of expanding Pell eligibility to more students. HOWEVER, due to a flawed rollout, it did more harm than good. Families and students in need didn't know what financial aid they were eligible for, and either put their college dreams on hold or abandoned it completely.

This could reduce the professional workforce in our state, particularly for urban campuses like UNO. Over 36% of UNO's student body is Pell eligible, 85% of our student body are from the metro Omaha area, and over one-third of our student body are first generation, meaning they often do not have the guidance of a parent who is familiar with the education system. Additionally, about 25% of our students are Nebraska Promise students. In fact, UNO is the largest intake of Nebraska Promise students by percentage of our student body. What does it mean? UNO honors our mission as an urban university and is proud to serve our community. But while our goal is to lower obstacles for entry of higher education, the dysfunction around the FAFSA has made this task exceptionally difficult.

We work hard to make sure our students leave with minimal debt. The 2024 national student loan debt is around 1.77 trillion dollars, and on average, for graduates, it is about 37,000 dollars. This number is for borrowers who have completed their degree. But for UNO, average student loan debt for our students is only about 19,000. This means that on average, our students carry less debt than the national number and have the lowest amount in the university system. We take immense pride in this.

Brain gain

Out of our more than 125,000 total living alumni, more than 65,000 live and work in Omaha. This means that UNO students STAY in Nebraska after graduation. According to the spring 2024 Nebraska Department of Labor Data Analysis, out of all students we serve, the post-graduation rate of students that stay and work in Nebraska after their first year is 81 percent. By year five post-graduation, UNO's numbers remain high at 67 percent. By comparison, these numbers make UNO the best performing undergraduate campus within the University of Nebraska System in retaining talent for our state. This is proof that investing in UNO is investing in Nebraska's workforce. UNO transforms itself to be the most reliable talent development agency in the state of Nebraska. We fight to bring talent in and keep talent for the state.

Which brings us to another challenge we face, which is the perception that economically underprivileged students are academically unprepared learners. While there is an existing correlation, UNO doesn't shy away from identifying a solution. As I said in my last State of the University address, talent is equally distributed, but opportunities are not. After all, we cannot choose our parents. The latest data shows that we have improved our fall-to-fall cohort from 75% to 78% in student retention. However, we are not quite there yet. We will continue to work hard in this sense and ensure that our students will cross the finish line in an effective way. We stand up and say we are proud to serve this student body. After all, we celebrate those students who prevailed regardless of their economic backgrounds.

The students who graduate from UNO and make Omaha their home are proud of their university.

UNO's brand is strong and is growing. I know mid-west people are modest. I know this because I married one. Yet, today I challenge you to tell the story of UNO. Just like our apparel sale have. In 2021, UNO sold 20,000 branded gear. Throughout 2024, we have already sold 48,000. Your community is proud to wear your brand. By the way, UNO is now a proud Coca-Cola campus.

We have expanded programs, enhanced our facilities, and deepened our partnerships with the community. These advancements underscore the dedication we have put into providing an exceptional education while contributing to the social and economic mobility of our learners within our state. Our commitment to academic excellence has been evident through our nationally ranked programs, innovation and research achieved, and the successes of our graduates. We have positioned UNO in a responsive way to let Omaha know that we are here, and nothing will slow us down.

As we look forward, and the growing questions about the value and purpose of higher education continues, we will push forward with our strengths and stand out as a leading university. Remember Larry Keeley, our last speaker from the Future of Work Symposium back in December? He told me once, "if you want to do good, be the best in its class, or don't do it."

This is why we changed our general education requirements to now be based on a new agreement with community colleges. Associate of Arts and Associate of Science degrees from regionally

accredited institutions across the country will fulfill UNO's lower division general education requirements. This means we are aligning our academic programs to provide an effective academic journey for our students. And we are not going to stop there. We must continue to identify the most efficient and effective path for our learners because we can't afford them stepping out.

We must also keep our eyes on the prize, which is to be the destination that allows all Mavericks to learn, grow, and innovate. Together we must uphold our values ensuring that UNO remains a leader in providing an inclusive educational experience.

The workforce has become a real challenge across the world. According to the World Economic Forum, around 50% of all employees will need reskilling and upskilling by 2025. So what did UNO do? We diversified the pedagogy of teaching. We have approached these challenges with a critical mindset.

Within just this past year we rolled out our first micro credential, and many more to follow, addressing the needs by providing industry-relevant skills and allowing our learners to remain competitive in a rapidly evolving job market.

Additionally, we introduced competency-based education. This means we allow students to advance based on the ability to master a skill at their own pace. Allow me to recognize our faculty who approach and embrace this initiative with such courage and determination.

We will continue to do this through the evolution of education. Which is why we introduced our Core Statement last year. I want to remind you all of our commitment to the Core Statement that defines our institution.

As we stand at the threshold of a transformative decade in higher education, UNO is committed to facing the challenges and embracing the opportunities that lie ahead. We are not afraid to meet the challenges coming our way. We will embrace the evolution of higher education because the future promises to be dynamic and demanding, but presents opportunities for growth and innovation within our university.

Philanthropy

However, being the destination comes with a price, which is why we must extend our dearest gratitude to our philanthropic community. We are tremendously grateful for them. We know that as an urban university on a very meager budget, without the wonderful support, love, and care of our philanthropic community and the community at large, we cannot do the work we set out to do.

Last year alone, UNO secured more than 57 million dollars in private philanthropic support even without a capital project. We set a record. UNO also surpassed 8,400 individual donors that supported UNO with a philanthropic gift – another record. In fact, UNO has been setting a record for a third straight year. As part of the Only in Nebraska Campaign, UNO is ahead of pace to exceed our

fundraising goals. By a LOT... Are you surprised? I'm not... I mean this in the nicest way... but UNO is worth the investment.

In March, the Suzanne and Walter Scott Foundation gave a generous 20M dollar gift to support the Scott Scholars Program here at UNO.

The growth of this program has been nothing short of transformative. This pledge allows more students to enroll in the highly competitive program and expands the capacity from 128 students to 168 students. Since this program began, around 600 Scott Scholars have graduated, with more than 80% choosing to stay in Nebraska after graduation to pursue their careers. You know why... because we are the destination.

There are many more examples I could talk about, but the point is that our efforts would not be the same without our philanthropic support.

As we navigate our steps towards the future of this university, we must remain focused on what awaits us. There is a famous quote being repeated again and again in hockey. "Skate to where the puck is going, not where it has been." It is an insightful comment when it comes to strategy. But if everyone goes to where the puck is going to be, we will be in deep competition. May I suggest that we pay close attention to where everyone wants to be, and mark my words -- UNO will define the space where the puck will be.

Together we will continue to make UNO not only a place for learning, but a place where every individual will thrive and contribute to a brighter future for our community. Omaha, our campus, isn't just part of your journey. It is the Destination.

Thank you.