

People, Programs and Points of Excellence (P³E)

Report for February 28, 2025

The People, Programs and Points of Excellence (P³E) is a biweekly update from across all four campuses of the University of Nebraska System leaders that focuses on the best work happening across the University of Nebraska and allows us to recognize and lift up the outstanding efforts of our faculty, staff and students.

University of Nebraska at Kearney

1. UNK Chancellor Search Moves Forward as Candidate Interviews Begin

The University of Nebraska at Kearney's search for its next chancellor is advancing, with officials reviewing applications and preparing for candidate interviews. The national search, led by a 17-member search committee and supported by the executive search firm CarterBaldwin, is now in the interview phase, with candidates meeting with the committee in March. A priority candidate will be named afterward, followed by a 30-day public vetting period, as required by state law. The goal is to have the new chancellor in place before the start of the Fall 2025 semester. University of Nebraska President Jeffrey P. Gold, M.D., expressed confidence in the process, noting that the search has attracted a highly qualified pool of applicants. The new leader will succeed Doug Kristensen, who retired in 2024 after 22 years as chancellor, with Charlie Bicak currently serving as interim chancellor.

Related Media Item: <https://unknews.unk.edu/2025/02/17/search-for-next-university-of-nebraska-at-kearney-chancellor-entering-interview-phase/>

2. More Than a Job: UNK students prepare for teaching careers at KPS after-school program

The University of Nebraska at Kearney (UNK) is providing future educators with valuable hands-on experience through the Kearney Community Learning Center (KCLC), an after-school program offered by Kearney Public Schools. Thirty-three UNK students—primarily from the teacher education program—currently work with KCLC, serving nearly 450 students across nine elementary schools and one middle school. The program provides academic support, enrichment activities, and mentorship while reinforcing classroom learning in a fun and engaging environment. UNK students strengthen their teaching skills, classroom management abilities, and confidence as educators. Through this real-world experience, they are building meaningful relationships with students and gaining firsthand knowledge of instructional techniques. The program's structure also benefits KPS by introducing school leaders to potential future hires while ensuring local students receive high-quality support.

Related Media Item: <https://unknews.unk.edu/2025/02/20/more-than-a-job-unk-students-prepare-for-teaching-careers-at-kps-after-school-program/>

University of Nebraska–Lincoln

1. NASCAR Hall of Fame honors Sicking for driver safety breakthrough

Dean Sicking, professor emeritus of civil and environmental engineering and former director of the Midwest Roadside Safety Facility at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln, received the Landmark Award for outstanding contributions to stock-car racing during the NASCAR Hall of Fame ceremony Feb. 7. The achievement was featured in more than 130 national media outlets, including Essentially Sports, NASCAR.com, Racer and Speedway Digest.

Related Media Item: <https://news.unl.edu/article/nascar-hall-of-fame-honors-sicking-for-driver-safety-breakthrough>

2. Olsson commits \$1 million to create endowed engineering chair

Olsson, a national engineering and design firm based in Lincoln, has pledged \$1 million to establish an endowed chair for the University of Nebraska–Lincoln College of Engineering.

Related Media Item: <https://news.unl.edu/article/olsson-commits-1-million-to-create-endowed-engineering-chair>

University of Nebraska Medical Center

1. New research shows common medications could hamper fetal brain development

Two UNMC researchers authored a paper in the scientific journal Brain Medicine detailing research that shows that common medications could hamper fetal brain development. Both have done previous work linking disruptions of sterol biosynthesis with common drugs, and they now have issued a new perspective on the available literature.

Related Media Item: https://www.upi.com/Health_News/2025/02/25/common-medications-eyed-adverse-effects-child-brain-development/7241740067298/

2. UNO, UNMC launch dual degree to equip future dentists with business skills

The University of Nebraska System Board of Regents on Friday, Feb. 7, approved a dual degree offering between the UNO College of Business Master of Business Administration program and the UNMC College of Dentistry Doctor of Dental Surgery program. DDS students will be able to pursue the dual degree starting in the summer 2025 semester.

Running a dental practice isn't just about clinical expertise. It's also about managing a business. By combining dentistry with an MBA, this program equips future professionals with leadership, financial management, and strategic decision-making skills crucial to the modern health care environment. This unique, cross-university collaboration provides students with the very best aspects of each institution, leading to a talented, skilled dentist ready to successfully run their own business.

Related Media Item: <https://www.unmc.edu/newsroom/2025/02/10/uno-unmc-launch-dual-degree-to-equip-future-dentists-with-business-skills/>

University of Nebraska at Omaha

1. NIH-Backed Project Investigating Heat Therapy as a Long COVID Treatment

Gwenaél Layec, Ph.D., an assistant professor in the School of Health and Kinesiology at the University of Nebraska at Omaha (UNO), is in the midst of a \$3.2 million, five-year research grant from the National Institutes of Health (NIH) to examine how heat therapy can serve as an effective rehabilitation strategy for individuals experiencing post-acute COVID-19 syndrome, commonly known as long COVID.

Related Media Item: <https://www.unomaha.edu/news/2025/02/nih-backed-project-investigating-heat-therapy-as-a-long-covid-treatment.php>

2. UNO Aviation expert speaks to the potential collision at Chicago Midway

Aviation professor Skip Bailey emphasized the precision and professionalism of the Southwest pilots in executing the "Go Around" maneuver, which prevented a potential collision at Chicago Midway. He explained that communication barriers between inbound and ground aircraft may have contributed to the incident, likely due to human error or misinterpreted radio directions. While acknowledging an increase in media coverage of aviation close calls, Bailey reassured that the U.S. aviation system remains the safest in the world, with highly trained pilots prepared for such scenarios.

Related Media Item: <https://www.ketv.com/article/omaha-friends-on-southwest-flight-react-to-close-call/63925767>

Agriculture and Natural Resources

1. Crops Judging Team stands out for student-focused instructional approach

The University of Nebraska–Lincoln Crops Judging Team, led by coach Garrett Kuss, is equipping students with essential agronomic skills to prepare them for careers in agriculture. Kuss, a Doctor of Plant Health student, emphasizes a student-driven curriculum, allowing team members to identify and focus on their areas for improvement. This approach enhances their practical knowledge in soil science, pest management, crop systems, and more.

Students benefit not only from coursework but also from peer mentorship, with experienced members teaching newer teammates. Senior agronomy major Thayer Jonak values the team's hands-on learning, which reinforces classroom concepts and prepares students for real-world agricultural challenges.

The team competes in regional and national contests, where they apply their knowledge in agronomic exams, plant identification, and field-related problem-solving. Kuss prioritizes skill development over competition, ensuring a balanced, sustainable learning environment.

By reviewing and sharing knowledge weekly, team members gain a deeper understanding of agronomy. Kuss believes this experience provides the best preparation for careers in the field, helping students transition from academic learning to professional success.

Related Media Item: <https://ianrnews.unl.edu/article/crops-judging-team-stands-out-for-student-focused-instructional-approach>

2. Op-Ed: Nebraska's Wildfire Crisis — A Call for Caution After Pile Burning

In light of recent wildfires in Nebraska, John Erixon, director of the Nebraska Forest Service, along with Laura Field of the Nebraska Cattlemen, and Rob Robertson of the Nebraska Farm Bureau and Ag 40, authored and shared a joint op-ed distributed to media outlets across Nebraska containing practical steps that producers and landowners can take to prevent wildfire.

A summary of the information contained in the op-ed follows: Nebraska is facing an alarming surge in wildfires, with over two dozen reported in the past five days. While extreme weather conditions—high winds, warm temperatures, and low humidity—are key factors, the op-ed highlights the dangers of pile burning. This land management practice, meant to reduce excess vegetation, can unintentionally spark destructive wildfires, especially under dry and windy conditions.

A major concern is “holdover heat,” where smoldering burns reignite days or weeks later, contributing to the state’s escalating wildfire crisis. Nebraska has already seen three consecutive years of intense fire seasons, with 100,000 acres burned annually from 2022 to 2024.

To mitigate risks, the authors urge extreme caution with pile burning, careful weather monitoring, and support for volunteer firefighters, who face grave dangers. With wildfires threatening lives, ecosystems, and communities, Nebraskans must remain vigilant, ensuring fires are fully extinguished and working together to prevent further destruction.

Related Media Item:

- **Tri-state Livestock News:** <https://www.tsln.com/news/op-ed-nebraskas-wildfire-crisis-a-call-for-caution-after-pile-burning/>
- **Custer County Chief:** https://www.custercountychief.com/news/op-ed-nebraskas-wildfire-crisis---a-call-for-caution-after-pile-burning/article_7e6f2470-f627-11ef-a17f-1ffdc1ec81d6.html

University of Nebraska Foundation

Olsson Commits \$1 Million to Create Endowed Engineering Chair

Olsson, a national engineering and design firm based in Lincoln, has pledged \$1 million to establish an endowed chair for the University of Nebraska–Lincoln College of Engineering.

The Olsson Chair of Engineering will be awarded based on teaching and research ability, with a preference for a faculty member in the Department of Civil and Environmental Engineering. The endowed chair will support an annual salary stipend and provide funds for scholarly research.

Olsson is the first corporation to establish and fully fund a chair in the College of Engineering. The company also supports numerous student engineering organizations and offers internship, mentoring and professional opportunities to College of Engineering students and graduates. Olsson employs 250 graduates of the college.

Related Media Item: <https://nufoundation.org/olsson-commits-1-million-to-create-endowed-engineering-chair/>

Buffett Early Childhood Institute

NU graduate students can now apply for \$25,000 fellowships from the Buffett Early Childhood Institute to support innovative early childhood research projects

Since 2016, the Buffett Institute has invested nearly \$700,000 through its Graduate Scholars program to support the research of 27 doctoral students from University of Nebraska campuses related to early childhood education and development.

Each year, up to four Ph.D. students receive one-year fellowships worth up to \$25,000 each. The benefits aren't just monetary—the program offers students the opportunity to network with and learn from Institute experts and university leaders across the early childhood field. This fosters the growth of ambitious researchers and provides opportunities to communicate, network, and collaborate across campuses, breaking down silos and promoting cross-disciplinary work.

These students further the university's research priorities by engaging in in-depth explorations of vital early childhood issues, including childhood allergies, the development of early math skills, microplastics in baby food and products, and depression and anxiety in mothers of premature babies.

Past Graduate Scholars and their faculty mentors have leveraged this investment to generate additional external funding, and several Scholars have gone onto faculty positions with the University of Nebraska System—allowing NU to truly “grow its own” by investing in students and keeping them in-state.

Related Media Item: <https://buffettinstitute.nebraska.edu/blog/2025/02/meet-three-emerging-early-childhood-scholars-and-apply-for-next-round-of-funding>

Daugherty Water for Food Global Institute

Water, Climate and Health Program releases 2024 Annual Report

The Water, Climate and Health Program at the University of Nebraska Medical Center recently released its 2024 annual report.

Highlights include:

- Improving Disaster Response and Resilience
- Connecting Environmental Health Experts Across the Nation with NASA Earth Data
- Improving Air Quality Monitoring in Nebraska
- Educating on Water Quality Issues to Protect the Health of Nebraskans
- Training Public Health Professionals for Drought and Health Preparedness

The Water, Climate and Health Program is a joint effort between the College of Public Health at the University of Nebraska Medical Center, the Daugherty Water for Food Global Institute at the University of Nebraska, and the Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln. The initiative pioneers interdisciplinary research, education, and collaborative solutions to public health challenges associated with water and climate in Nebraska and around the world.

Related Media Item: <https://www.unmc.edu/publichealth/documents/research/multi-disciplinary-programs/wchp/wchp2024annualreport.pdf>

National Strategic Research Institute

NSRI delivers \$35-to-\$1 return on university investment

The University of Nebraska System’s recently released economic impact study reveals that the National Strategic Research Institute (NSRI) at the University of Nebraska generates \$35 in economic benefits for every \$1 invested by the university, demonstrating an exceptional return on investment.

The comprehensive analysis by national consulting firm Tripp Umbach highlights the university’s vital role in workforce development, research innovation and community prosperity. The full report is available at nebraska.edu/economic-impact and NSRI appears on page 15.

Established in 2012, NSRI is one of only 15 University Affiliated Research Centers (UARCs) in the Nation designated by the U.S. Department of Defense (DOD). It is sponsored by U.S. Strategic Command. Through this trusted long-term, strategic partnership, NSRI helps the DOD and other federal agencies meet national security objectives. Scientists, strategists and students from the NU System and NSRI deliver innovative research, develop the future workforce and support those who defend the United States and its allies.

Economic Impact of NSRI Operations in FY24 (July 1, 2023, through June 30, 2024):

- Total economic impact: \$64.0 million (\$23.7 million direct + \$40.3 million indirect/induced)
- Total employment impact: 205 total jobs (76 direct + 129 indirect/induced)
- Total state and local tax impact (operations): \$921,104

Related Media Item: <https://nebraska.edu/economic-impact>