



2025 STATE OF THE UNIVERSITY ADDRESS DELIVERED BY PRESIDENT JEFFREY P. GOLD, M.D.

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Good afternoon.

It is a privilege to stand before you today, one year since my investiture as the ninth president of the University of Nebraska. I am honored to share with you my first State of the University address, a transparent update which I intend to establish as an annual tradition for Nebraskans. I recall standing in this very place, the house of the people of Nebraska, and inviting you to join us on what we framed an Odyssey to the Extraordinary. That phrase was not chosen lightly. It reflects a conviction that Nebraska's public university system—already very good, already excellent in so many ways—has the potential to become something more: a university that is truly extraordinary.

So, where are we today? What is the state of your university system?

As I answer this question, I want to begin by recognizing and thanking our Board of Regents, our chancellors, our vice presidents, as well as our elected officials, and particularly all those who are present here and those joining us online. I'd like to extend most profound gratitude for our faculty, staff and students and to our colleagues across the state and alumni across the globe—all of whom have placed their trust in us and joined hands on this odyssey. The work you do each day constitutes the very tightly woven fabric of our university family and is what makes Nebraska's university not just an institution of higher learning, but a foundational cornerstone of our state's prosperity and a source of pride for every Nebraskan.

I'd like also to thank my family, some of whom are here today, who have supported me as I work to support all of you. We have all become Huskers, Mavericks, Lopers and Labs, and I'm so glad my family has been able to experience the state and institution that I have come to love so much.

Like so many institutions of higher education across the country, the University of Nebraska is currently navigating a landscape where state appropriations have not kept pace with rising costs, where legislatively mandated, unfunded, tuition remissions require us to scale up our offerings without resources to do so, where federal support for research

and other initiatives is shifting and at a time that federal policy has created significant future uncertainties. These pressures are real; they are rapidly changing and they are serious.

Today, the day before our fall enrollment numbers are officially finalized, our systemwide enrollment numbers are projected to be similar to what they were last year. Our enrollment numbers of first-time freshman are up, as are the numbers of in-state students. And these numbers are despite a decrease in enrolled international and graduate students that our institutions and so many others have experienced.

We are also seeing ongoing shifts in the profile of today's undergraduate students. As recently reported national data reveals, more students are beginning their college journey in high school with dual credit courses and at community colleges before enrolling in four-year universities. Nationally, more than 10 million undergraduate students now take at least some of their classes online, and one in four now earn their college degree entirely online. Increasingly, with shifting demographics, undergraduate students are employed and are also more frequently parents themselves.

The University of Nebraska is committed to serving our current and future learners where they are at. That means new forward and reverse credit sharing agreements between our institutions and among community colleges, more online degree programs and a growing emphasis on individualized student support and success. This, too, is on-par with national trends.

These students nationally now carry more debt than ever—an average of \$19,000 at graduation—and female graduates hold nearly two-thirds of that debt burden. Nationally, more than one-third of all students rely on Pell Grants. Across the University of Nebraska System, nearly three out of four students are Pell-eligible; a striking reminder of how many of our students depend on federal taxpayer dollars to deliver access and affordability. Together, these statistics paint a picture far different from the traditional 18-year-old, recent high school graduates who have historically filled our classrooms as freshmen. They point to a new future for higher education that serves a new type of learner, creating new and different opportunities for the university system of the future and for our odyssey ahead.

What makes Nebraska different is our unique legacy and our unique people. We are the only public university system in this state. We are large enough that our work touches every county, every school district, every community, every industry, every family. Yet, we are small enough to be nimble, innovative and responsive to the needs of our students and all of the communities that we serve—both those who attend college immediately after high school and those who arrive on our campuses via less traditional routes. Those who choose to upskill, reskill and change the course of their lives through educational experiences. Those who share in the validated belief that higher education is the key factor to longer and more fulfilling lives, key to true social mobility for all learners, but particularly so for first-generation students such as myself.

And so, while the challenges are significant, I see this as a time of profound opportunity. An opportunity to actively reimagine our university. An opportunity to lead. An opportunity to help define what higher education in the next

decades must look like.

Last year, I introduced the Odyssey to the Extraordinary. Today, a full year later, I can say with confidence we are already well along on that journey. Across our campuses and programs, we see extraordinary teaching and learning, extraordinary research and creative activity, extraordinary partnerships and engagement, an extraordinary culture and extraordinary stewardship and effectiveness—the very pillars of our strategic plan. These five pillars, built in partnership with our Regents, are guiding our decisions, shaping our priorities and holding us accountable to the vision we set out together.

Let me share just several examples of how these foundational pillars of our odyssey are coming to life.

First, in early June, we welcomed representatives from the Higher Learning Commission to both UNMC and UNL to finalize the process of joint accreditation which began last fall. Bringing our flagship campus and our medical center together under a single accreditation framework will place us alongside our national peers, open the door to new efficiencies and dramatically increase opportunities for faculty and student collaboration. This is an ongoing process with multiple future steps. We are deeply grateful to our campus leads and our interim provost, Dr. David Jackson. Dr. Jackson, please stand.

At the same time, we are advancing Project Health, a bold and forward-looking effort to position Nebraska as a national leader in the academic health sciences. This is not only about buildings or programs—it is about solving Nebraska's most pressing healthcare challenges. It is about addressing rural workforce shortages. It is about harnessing technology to improve outcomes. And it is about ensuring that the next generation of physicians, nurses, therapists and health care innovators is trained and retained right here in Nebraska, for Nebraska. We are grateful to Governor Pillen and the legislature for sharing our vision for this project and for recognizing what it means to the state. I'd like to ask Jennifer Bartholomew to stand. Jen is UNMC's associate vice chancellor for facilities management and planning. Her team's ability to clearly conceptualize and operationalize this multidimensional project, the largest and most complex public private partnership ever planned in Nebraska, has set us on the path we are on today.

Nebraska Medicine and UNMC together also are leading a first-of-its-kind clinical trial exploring the use of allogeneic CAR T-cell therapy for the treatment of the life changing and disabling condition known as multiple sclerosis, or simply MS. This innovative approach, previously applied to blood cancers, uses donor T-cells that are genetically engineered to target and eliminate the immune cells driving MS. It represents a major advance in efforts to address the root causes of all autoimmune diseases and has great personal significance to me, as my mom tragically lost her decades-long battle to MS at the prime of her life more than fifty years ago.

Jan Janisch-Hanzlik became the very first individual in the world with MS to receive this therapy. She was treated successfully at UNMC under the care of Dr. Rana Zabad, professor and director of the multiple sclerosis program, and Dr. Matt Lunning, a national leader in CAR T-cellular therapy research, both faculty at UNMC. Building on

encouraging outcomes in related conditions such as lupus, this clinical trial demonstrates Nebraska's leadership in pioneering research and partnerships, in partnership with a pharmaceutical company, with the potential to transform treatment and improve the lives of patients in Nebraska and around the world. I'd like to ask Jan, along with Drs. Zabad and Lunning, to stand and be recognized.

As we know, advances in artificial intelligence are transforming every part of our lives, and the University of Nebraska is leading in this area, too. Across our campuses, faculty and staff are already leveraging this powerful technology to strengthen teaching and learning, prepare graduates for the jobs of tomorrow and create greater efficiency in how we work. We have established a systemwide AI task force of experts to guide a bold, forward-looking strategy for research, education and workforce development. Among those experts is David Arrendondo, a collection services librarian at the University of Nebraska at Kearney, who is using AI in his own work and to help colleagues and students across the university understand the capabilities and limits of both AI and the large language models on which AI tools are built. David, please stand.

We have new undergraduate and graduate degree programs in AI, jointly developed and launched through a UNL and UNO partnership, to build Nebraska's pipeline of talent. And today, I am proud to announce the creation of a new Center of Excellence for Artificial Intelligence—an academic hub that will harness our unique strengths, foster groundbreaking discovery and ensure Nebraska is at the forefront of this rapidly evolving resource—on every campus, in every college and for every member of our faculty, staff and student body.

In agriculture, the University of Nebraska has long been the place for digital and precision ag development. Today, our researchers are developing tools that conserve water, improve crop yields, enhance animal health and make farming and ranching safer. They are taking those tools from the lab to the field through platforms like N-Farms and into the marketplace through the Combine at Nebraska Innovation Campus. This cycle of discovery, application and commercialization is why Nebraska farmers rank among the very top in the nation in adopting precision technologies. It is a model of teaching, research, engagement and stewardship working hand in hand. Exemplifying this work is Dr. Joe Luck, professor of biological systems engineering and associate director of Eastern Nebraska Research, Extension and Education Center near Mead, who leads the N-Farms team in harnessing ag data and using it to create tools that add value for producers. As just one example, Dr. Luck's former graduate student, Jackson Stansell, created a tool that harnessed satellite data and other precision data to help farmers identify when to apply fertilizer through their irrigation systems. After testing this new technology utilizing Nebraska farmers' fields through the On-Farm Research Network, this grew into a nationwide company, Sentinel Ag. Dr. Luck, can you please stand?

We are also leveraging Nebraska Extension as an engagement nexus for connecting the people of our state to their land-grant university.

A recent example comes from Lynch, Nebraska—a town of fewer than 200 residents that had lost its only grocery store. With critical guidance from UNL's Nebraska Cooperative Development Center, led by Charlotte Narjes, the community came together to create the Valley Foods Cooperative. Less than three years after opening, the store has

surpassed \$1 million in sales. But its impact is greater than dollars. The cooperative has become a vital source of affordable groceries, a hub of community connection, a driver of local economic activity and a powerful reminder of the power of community. Extension professionals like Charlotte serve as a conduit between communities and the university, as a trusted resource, as a sounding board, problem-solver and voice of encouragement. Perhaps fittingly, Charlotte is unable to be here today because she is meeting with another group of community leaders, this time in Macy.

Now, in close partnership with the Nebraska Association of County Extension Boards, we are sharpening our focus to make sure our expertise is deeper, our reach is wider and our presence is felt in new ways—still in all 93 of our counties. That means new partnerships with the Fred and Pamela Buffett Cancer Center, the Buffett Early Childhood Institute and the Nebraska Business Development Center at UNO, among others.

As another example, across our campuses, we are always responding to new and different workforce needs in creative ways. We provide access for large and small employers to the systemwide Career Currency program. This has been a groundbreaking partnership between the university and local employers. It allows employees and their dependents to pursue new degrees or skills as part of their employee benefits, very similar to health care and other employment benefits. This enhanced system-wide coordinated approach will help our corporate partners, such as Union Pacific, recruit and retain talent to strengthen companies, recruit new businesses, build careers and create a more competitive workforce. This is an extraordinary partnership—and extraordinary stewardship—at work.

Exemplifying truly extraordinary teaching and learning is one of this year's Presidential Excellence honorees, Professor Timothy Schaffert. Professor Schaffert grew up right here in Nebraska, earned his undergraduate degree at UNL and now serves as the Adele Hall Chair of English and Director of Creative Writing on our Lincoln campus. He is the editor of *Prairie Schooner* and the author of numerous acclaimed books.

Perhaps more important than these accolades, Professor Schaffert is a champion for young writers. He is a voice of encouragement and support and an exemplar of what both extraordinary teaching and extraordinary creative activity mean. His story reminds us that the University of Nebraska not only nurtures homegrown talent but elevates Nebraska voices to the national stage. Professor Schaffert, can you please stand?

As our partnerships with state and federal leaders continue to grow, together we are advancing research in medicine, in agriculture, in defense and cybersecurity and in many other areas. These collaborations not only strengthen our university, but they also strengthen Nebraska's competitiveness on the national stage.

Perhaps two of the most powerful examples of the extraordinary partnerships that strengthen our university are our growing collaborations with the U.S. Department of Defense and the U.S. Department of Homeland Security. We are dramatically expanding our partnerships with the highest levels of the active military leadership as well as with the National Guard. Through the vital work of our Air Force C-STARS Omaha program at UNMC, we are preparing the military sector to both perform and receive the very highest quality of care in the domain of highly hazardous communicable diseases. This effort will save lives on the front lines and here at home. Through our

NCITE program, we are national leaders in homeland security. These programs not only advance military medical and national readiness, but they also further strengthen our reputation as a leader in both medical innovation and national terrorism defense. I want to especially recognize Major General Craig Strong, Colonel Elizabeth Schnaubelt and Dr. Gina Ligon, whose vision and championship of these partnerships have helped bring them to life. These capabilities at the University of Nebraska are truly unique, and through collaborations like this, we are building a healthier, safer and stronger future for Nebraska and our nation. Colonel Schnaubelt, Dr. Ligon and General Hargens, representing the Nebraska National Guard, can you please stand?

And of course, our culture of excellence is reflected in our athletic programs. The Husker fanbase was truly deafening last week at Arrowhead Stadium. Congratulations on a hard-fought win. But it's about so much more than winning. Athletics are a reflection of the values and culture that define the University of Nebraska. This year, the UNK Loper wrestling team captured the 2025 NCAA Division II National Championship under the leadership of Head Coach Dalton Jensen, a proud 2012 UNK graduate. UNO men's basketball earned a historic berth in the NCAA tournament under Coach Chris Crutchfeld. Meanwhile, Husker Volleyball continues to showcase why Nebraska is, unequivocally, a volleyball state—dare I say the volleyball state. The return of Coach Dani Busboom Kelly—a Nebraska native, former national champion and standout Husker—has elevated an already storied program, reinforcing a culture of discipline and leadership that resonates far beyond the court. From the grit of young girls learning to pass and serve in small-town gyms to the recent roar of the sold out AVCA competition in Pinnacle Bank Arena and the reverse sweep last Sunday in Nashville, we are reminded that culture matters—and that excellence is contagious. These programs, and others across our campuses, are products of an environment that celebrates hard work, genuine teamwork, integrity and pride in Nebraska—and their success inspires all of us to aim higher. Coach Busboom Kelly and Coach Jensen, can you please stand?

As we recognize the people—our faculty, students, staff and Nebraskans—who make this work possible, we must also recognize our hard-working chancellors and vice presidents, who through their vision, support and focus have made possible these examples of extraordinary work—as well as too many others to mention in our brief time together today. Thank you to our chancellors and system vice presidents; can you please stand?

We would also like to extend our most sincere thanks to the supporters of the University of Nebraska, including the donors, foundation staff and the incredible leadership who contributed to a record-setting year of giving to the University of Nebraska Foundation. While donor support cannot ever replace sustained state and federal support, it does drive innovation and progress in specific areas of high impact, and it signals the strong support our university enjoys from individuals across the state and the nation.

As we celebrate a remarkable year of many achievements, and as we chart a course to new extraordinary opportunities, we must also speak candidly about the current and future challenges we face.

It is no secret that we are facing a fundamentally challenged landscape for higher education. At the federal level, overall investment in research is tightening and competition for limited dollars is growing. Decreased funding for facilities and administrative costs—the backbone of university research infrastructure—means institutions like

ours will absorb more of the costs to support cutting-edge research, a non-sustainable change for the long-term. These dollars maintain the labs, technology, compliance structures and support personnel that make discovery possible. Fewer federal resources put this nationwide research enterprise at risk and crush the university-based creativity that fuels the most important long-term future for corporate America's productivity.

At the same time, our state support—while foundational and deeply appreciated—has not kept pace with the rising costs of delivering a world-class education across our 500-mile campus. Let's look at a few numbers over the past years. Over the past decade, beginning in 2016 with the combined changes in state funding, the University of Nebraska absorbed a loss as of this year of \$206 million per year, of which represents the inflation adjusted reductions of state support. In other words, state appropriations to the University is currently 74% short of keeping pace with the decade-long increase in the consumer price index, a national accepted metric for consumer inflation rate.

Similarly, over the past six years, our tuition increased 13.8 percent—approximately one half of the 26.1% national inflation rate over the same period. This was thoughtfully planned to maintain access and affordability for our students. Keeping us in the lowest tier of all of our benchmarked peer universities, keeping is accessible and affordable. Had we simply mirrored inflationary rates, tuition would have gone up an average of 4.3 percent per year over this interval, rather than the average of approximately 2.1 percent per year—approximately what would have been \$57 million of added revenue per year.

These long-standing changes represent a substantial reduction in funding—now exceeding approximately \$260 million per year—leaving us to operate on a much leaner budget as we enter this biennium and continually strive to keep higher education accessible and affordable. We certainly understand the state's fiscal constraints, however, without adequate investment, Nebraska's only public university system cannot continue to sustain the needs of our students, our economy, and our communities at the level they depend upon every day and deserve.

This year, all four campuses in our system are taking steps to address budget challenges. UNMC has overseen a \$9.1 million reduction, redirecting funding to sustain the university's research enterprise. UNK announced in August that campus leaders will identify \$4.5 million in cuts, and UNO outlined \$1.9 million in reductions. At UNL, processes are in place to reduce expenditures by \$27.5 million. These sums address both a structural deficit and projected annual shortfalls. Together, these reductions—along with cuts to the system office—total over \$40 million additional this year.

These ongoing budget cuts are all incredibly painful and will be felt across all of our campuses—by our faculty, staff and students—but unfortunately, they are necessary for a sustainable, viable future. By December, the Board of Regents will review and vote on proposed reductions and structural changes that reflect the academic and administrative financial realities we face today and allow us to maintain the quality and affordability of our academic programs.

These are not decisions we take lightly. They reflect months of careful analysis, consultation and reflection. They are rooted in our responsibility to be prudent data-driven stewards of taxpayer, tuition and philanthropic dollars. And

they are made with a deep commitment to protecting the core strengths that define the mission of the University of Nebraska.

But make no mistake: We cannot cut our way to excellence and certainly we cannot cut our way to our extraordinary destiny. This approach to stewardship alone will not carry us forward. For Nebraska to thrive in an increasingly complex and competitive world, our state must continue to invest boldly in its only land-grant university system.

Consider what ongoing investment in our institution means to economic prosperity for Nebraska: We generate \$6.4 billion in annual economic impact, returning ten dollars for each dollar invested. We educate one in seven working-age Nebraskans. Together with our academic medical center partners, we represent nearly nine percent of Nebraska's GDP. We fuel industries from agriculture to healthcare, from defense to education. In every corner of this state, the University of Nebraska is present, making a meaningful difference. We are the fastest growing and most secure opportunity for sustainability of the Nebraska economy.

While on this odyssey, as the path ahead twists and turns, I am reminded of the Stockdale Paradox. Admiral James Stockdale—shot down on a mission in Vietnam and a long-time prisoner in the Hanoi Hilton—taught us in his book titled “In Love and War” that true leadership requires the ability to confront the brutal facts of our reality, while maintaining an unwavering optimistic belief in ultimate success. That is exactly the mindset we must hold today. We must acknowledge the hard truths of our challenges, financial and others, but never lose faith in our ability to emerge stronger. Our Odyssey to the Extraordinary requires nothing less.

The University of Nebraska holds a unique place in higher education. We are more than of sufficient scale to shape our own future, yet we are operating and organized in ways to stay nimble and capable of making timely and wise decisions. We are rooted in our 155 year-long historic land-grant mission, yet innovative and bold enough to redefine what higher education can and should be in Nebraska.

Together, we will confront the challenges and we will embrace the opportunities. We will do so with integrity, transparency and a relentless focus on what is best for our students, best for the communities we serve and best for Nebraska. Together, we will keep faith in the extraordinary future we can achieve. Together, we will continue our Odyssey to the Extraordinary.

I remain honored and humbled to join you on this odyssey. Thank you.