

People, Programs and Points of Excellence (P³E)

Report for November 7, 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 Office of the President

1. Mayor John Ewing joins President Gold on “Heart to Heart” podcast

In a new episode of his “Heart to Heart” podcast, Dr. Gold is joined by John Ewing, mayor of the City of Omaha. The conversation includes a reflection on Mayor Ewing's background and experience, some of the key issues facing the City of Omaha and why strong city-university partnerships are critical to Omaha's future.

Related Media Item: <https://youtu.be/l16r3mRIP3A>

2. President Gold showcases excellence across NU on Huskers Radio Network halftime show

At halftime of the Nebraska-USC football game, President Gold joined Matt Coatney on the Huskers Radio Network to showcase examples of excellence across the University of Nebraska's campuses—on the field, in research and in the classroom.

Related Media Item: <https://youtu.be/Lb9zCp0Haag>

University of Nebraska at Kearney

1. Kearney Canal project gives UNK students real-world training in fisheries biology

On a chilly fall morning, UNK biology students waded into the Kearney Canal with professor Melissa Wuellner, launching another season of hands-on fieldwork that blends classroom learning with real-world research. Since 2018, Wuellner has partnered with Nebraska Game and Parks Commission to monitor fish populations at three local sites, identifying more than 30 species and documenting changes in biodiversity over time. The long-term study helps track invasive species, assess ecosystem health and provide valuable data for conservation.

Graduate student Oliver Dunbar, who earned his bachelor's in biology from UNK and now studies fisheries management, calls the project "a dataset that allows us to compare the fish community over time."

Undergraduate Hayley Blackstone said the experience "makes it click" by connecting class lessons to live fieldwork. Wuellner describes the project as a model of UNK's commitment to experiential learning and preparing the next generation of biologists.

Related Media Item: <https://unknews.unk.edu/2025/11/05/kearney-canal-project-gives-unk-students-real-world-training-in-fisheries-biology/>

2. UNK faculty contribute to national security through NSRI

UNK faculty members are advancing national defense through research collaborations with the National Strategic Research Institute (NSRI), one of only 15 Department of Defense-designated University Affiliated Research Centers in the nation.

Chemistry professor Scott Darveau contributes to a project developing a modified hydrogel for chemical decontamination, working with colleagues from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and NSRI to neutralize deadly agents such as mustard gas and VX.

Psychology professor Krista Forrest studies decision-making and group dynamics in high-pressure environments, including military and wargame simulations, and recently mentored UNK student Logan Muirhead, the first to present research at the NSRI Fellows Conference.

Agribusiness professor Jody Herchenbach examines agriculture's role in national security, focusing on issues such as food system protection and cybersecurity for rural producers. Together, their work reflects UNK's expanding research footprint and its impact on national safety and preparedness.

Related Media Item: <https://unknews.unk.edu/2025/11/04/unk-faculty-contribute-to-national-security-through-nsri/>

University of Nebraska–Lincoln

1. Blood drive victory fuels projects to enhance health across Nebraska

The University of Nebraska–Lincoln has awarded \$400,000 in grants to seven faculty- and staff-led projects aimed at improving student and community health and well-being across the Cornhusker State. The awards are funded through the \$1 million Abbott We Give Blood prize.

Related Media Item: <https://news.unl.edu/article/blood-drive-victory-fuels-projects-to-enhance-health-across-nebraska>

2. Batelaan's quantum curiosity draws national recognition to Nebraska

Herman Batelaan, professor of physics and astronomy, has been awarded the 2026 American Physical Society's Davisson-Germer Prize. He is being recognized for pioneering work in free electron quantum optics, including the first demonstration of the Kapitza-Dirac effect. He is the first Husker to win the national honor.

Related Media Item: <https://news.unl.edu/article/batelaans-quantum-curiosity-draws-national-recognition-to-nebraska>

University of Nebraska Medical Center

1. UNMC creating Office of Industry Engagement

Seeing an opening to expand the research enterprise into exciting new areas, UNMC leaders are launching a new initiative to strengthen UNMC's connections to private industry – and grow research dollars. The new UNMC Office of Industry Engagement, under a new director of strategic partnerships for UNMC, will lead a more coordinated approach to interacting with the biomedical research industry.

Related Media Item: <https://www.unmc.edu/newsroom/2025/10/31/unmc-creating-office-of-industry-engagement/>

2. Process improvement initiative a 'game-changer'

UNMC Interim Chancellor Dele Davies, MD, announced a new initiative that will reduce waste, streamline workflows and maximize value. Officially named the UNMC Better Processes Initiative, the efficiency approach will rely on "Lean" and "Six Sigma" methods. At the heart will be several "M Teams," trained groups of employees from each unit that will work with areas to identify and solve workplace challenges.

Related Media Item: <https://www.unmc.edu/newsroom/2025/10/23/process-improvement-initiative-a-game-changer/>

University of Nebraska at Omaha

1. 10 UNO Faculty Rank Among World's Top Researchers

Ten current and emeritus faculty members from the University of Nebraska at Omaha have been recognized among the top two percent of most-cited researchers worldwide, according to a Stanford University and Elsevier study. The list highlights scholars who have made a significant global impact across 22 scientific fields and 174 subfields.

UNO leaders praised the honorees for advancing the university's mission through mentorship, innovation, and community-engaged research that addresses real-world challenges.

Related Media Items: <https://www.unomaha.edu/news/2025/10/10-uno-faculty-rank-among-worlds-top-researchers.php>

2. UNO Alumna Samantha Pastorino Makes Omaha her Newsroom

University of Nebraska at Omaha alumna Samantha Pastorino begins her day at 3 a.m. as the morning traffic anchor for KETV NewsWatch 7, helping thousands of commuters before sunrise. Her passion for journalism began in high school during the COVID-19 pandemic and grew through mentorship and hands-on experiences at UNO's School of Communication. After turning a KETV internship into a full-time job, Pastorino now uses her deep Omaha roots to tell meaningful stories that inform and uplift her community.

Related Media Items: <https://www.unomaha.edu/news/2025/10/uno-alumna-samantha-pastorino-makes-omaha-her-newsroom.php>

Agriculture and Natural Resources

1. Federal payments, cattle prices push Nebraska farm income higher in 2025

Nebraska net farm income is projected to rise 42% in 2025 to \$8.42 billion, according to the University of Nebraska–Lincoln's Center for Agricultural Profitability and its partner, the Rural and Farm Finance Policy Analysis Center at the University of Missouri. The increase mirrors national trends and is driven by higher livestock receipts and government payments, even as crop receipts fall. Livestock receipts are expected to grow 16%, led by strong cattle prices, while crop receipts decline 5%. Analysts note that the outlook "looks stronger on paper than many producers may feel," given rising expenses and ongoing tight margins across Nebraska agriculture.

Related Media Items: <https://ianrnews.unl.edu/article/federal-payments-cattle-prices-push-nebraska-farm-income-higher-in-2025>

2. Funding allows expansion of Nebraska Mesonet

The University of Nebraska–Lincoln is leading the expansion of the Nebraska Mesonet, adding 21 new weather stations this year through \$1.48 million in funding from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, USDA Farm Service Agency, and local Natural Resources Districts. Managed by UNL's Ruben Behnke and housed in the School of Natural Resources, the Mesonet now includes 94 stations statewide that deliver critical, real-time data on temperature, precipitation, wind, soil moisture, and more. Farmers, agencies, and emergency managers use this information for irrigation, wildfire response, and disaster relief. UNL aims to grow the network to 200 stations and secure sustainable funding for long-term operation.

Related Media Items: <https://ianrnews.unl.edu/article/funding-allows-expansion-of-nebraska-mesonet>

University of Nebraska Foundation

1. Alumni to lead University of Nebraska Foundation Board of Directors

Two University of Nebraska alumni have been named to lead the University of Nebraska Foundation's Board of Directors. Jane E. Miller of Omaha will serve as chair, and William Lester of Lincoln will serve as chair-elect. Miller retired in 2022 as president and chief operating officer of Gallup. She earned a bachelor's degree in business education from the University of Nebraska–Lincoln. Lester retired in 2024 as president and CEO of Ameritas Mutual Holding Company and Ameritas Life Insurance Corp. He earned a bachelor's degree from the UNL College of Business.

Related Media Items: <https://nufoundation.org/new-board-leadership-at-university-of-nebraska-foundation/>

2. Keli Books named vice president for advancement for UNK

Keli Books will join the University of Nebraska Foundation as the vice president for advancement for the University of Nebraska at Kearney.

Books, who has an extensive background in higher education fundraising leadership, will work in partnership with UNK Chancellor Neal Schnoor, Ph.D., and other university leaders, the UNK Alumni Association, Loper Athletics and the foundation's UNK development team to advance the university's fundraising goals. Books currently serves as the associate vice president for philanthropy at the South Dakota State University Foundation.

Related Media Items: <https://nufoundation.org/keli-books-named-vice-president-for-advancement-for-unk/>

Buffett Early Childhood Institute

Cross-Campus Partnerships Celebrated at UNO, UNK Community Chair Events

The Buffett Early Childhood Institute celebrated its strong connections to the University of Nebraska campuses with two receptions in October that honored the endowed Community Chairs from the University of Nebraska at Omaha and the University of Nebraska at Kearney.

Approximately 200 campus and community leaders attended the events in Omaha and Kearney recognizing Debora Wisneski from UNO and Philip Lai and Paula Thompson from UNK.

NU President Jeffrey P. Gold, M.D. provided remarks via video messages at both events. Speakers included UNO Chancellor Joanne Li; UNK Chancellor Neal Schnoor; UNO College of Education, Health and Human Sciences Dean Neal Grandgenett; UNK College of Education Dean Mark Reid; and Buffett Institute Executive Director Walter Gilliam.

They praised the Community Chairs' community engagement, scholarship, and mentorship of students, especially aspiring teachers.

There are four endowed Community Chairs at the Buffett Institute. They are:

- Philip Lai, Cille and Ron Williams Community Chair for Early Childhood Education, UNK
- Paula Thompson, Cille and Ron Williams Community Chair for Early Childhood Education, UNK
- Julia Torquati, Community Chair in Infant and Child Mental Health, UNL
- Debora Wisneski, John T. Langan Community Chair in Early Childhood Education, UNO

Open to professors from the four campuses of the University of Nebraska System, the chairs provide campus leadership and connect with communities, serving, as Gold said, “to bridge the gap between academia and Nebraskans.”

Gilliam said the community chair positions demonstrate the University of Nebraska’s strong support of early childhood education and its care for children long before they set foot on any campus.

Torquati was honored at a similar reception in 2019.

Related Media Items: <https://buffettinstitute.nebraska.edu/blog/2025/11/play-your-part-honoring-a-uno-community-chair-and-early-childhood-champion>

Daugherty Water for Food Global Institute

DWFI Annual Report highlights 15 years of global strides in water and food security

Amidst today’s global challenges—including the escalated need for food and nutrition security under mounting population pressure—the mission of the Daugherty Water for Food Global Institute (DWFI) at the University of Nebraska has never been more vital. The institute’s recent annual report marks a year of critical research, capacity building and global thought leadership, and details significant progress across the Institute’s three core focus areas.

“Throughout its 15-year history, the institute has leveraged world-class University of Nebraska research; state expertise in agricultural and water resource management; and private sector partnerships to make real progress toward a water- and food-secure future for all,” said DWFI Executive Director Peter McCornick. The report also honors the nearly decade-long leadership of Dr. McCornick, who will retire from the University of Nebraska at the end of this year.

Related Media Item: <https://waterforfood.nebraska.edu/resources/annual-report-2025>

National Strategic Research Institute

NSRI brings perspective, insights of defense research funding to campus events

Within the last week, the National Strategic Research Institute (NSRI) at the University of Nebraska has supported campus events to recognize faculty expertise and provide insights into conducting research funded by the U.S. Department of Defense.

The University of Nebraska Medical Center Office of Research hosted a forum entitled "Exploring Defense Research Opportunities" where NSRI Director for Medical Countermeasures Dr. Terry Thiem provided an overview of the institute as a University Affiliated Research Center (UARC) designated by the United States Department of War. He also described the thrust areas of his portfolio and some of the projects that have delivered critical research and development to agencies such as the Defense Health Agency.

NSRI stands ready to bridge the gap between cutting-edge medical research and urgent defense needs. From drug discovery to clinical trials, the institute is leveraging the capabilities and expertise of the University of Nebraska System to deliver what our Nation requires. Get details at <https://nsri.nebraska.edu/medical>.

Meghan Jackson, who directs the food, agricultural and environment security program for NSRI and the Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources, supported an Agricultural Research Division workshop, highlighting NSRI's UARC designation and its indefinite delivery, indefinite quantity contract vehicle. She also showcased innovative national security research already occurring at the university and provided insights to attendees to continue to enhance protections of the Nation's critical infrastructure in this space. Learn more about this focus area at <https://nsri.nebraska.edu/faes>.

In recognition of the faculty who contribute to the NSRI Academic Network, Dr. Neal Woollen, NSRI associate executive director for countering weapons of mass destruction allied programs, participated in the University of Nebraska at Kearney's (UNK) New Frontiers Magazine celebration, expressing his gratitude for their effort to contribute to DOD research. Read the UNK Frontiers Magazine story at <https://unknews.unk.edu/2025/11/04/unk-faculty-contribute-to-national-security-through-nsri/>.

Related Media Item:

- Feature of UNK: <https://www.linkedin.com/feed/update/urn:li:activity:7391944296863625216>
- Feature of IANR: <https://nsri.nebraska.edu/innovative-capabilities/food-agriculture-environment-security>