

People, Programs and Points of Excellence (P³E)

Report for September 12, 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 health science students gain invaluable experience through prestigious summer internships

Isabel Zaruba of Columbus and Hernan Vargas of Gibbon, both in UNK's pre-medical program, spent the summer in highly selective internships that advanced their preparation for medical careers. Zaruba, a sophomore health sciences major and Kearney Health Opportunities Program scholar, joined the Stanford Medicine Clinical Summer Internship, where she participated in anatomy labs, clinical shadowing and lectures on health equity and chronic disease. She also completed a medical outreach trip to Guatemala and volunteers at Kearney's HelpCare Clinic.

Vargas, a junior biology major and first-generation college student, conducted 10 weeks of clinical research through the Mayo Clinic Summer Research Exploration Program, analyzing hearing outcomes after radiosurgery and presenting findings to Mayo faculty. He also shadowed physicians across multiple specialties and will present his research nationally next spring.

Both students credit these experiences with sharpening their career goals and their commitment to patient-centered care and service.

Related Media Item: <https://unknews.unk.edu/2025/09/09/unk-health-science-students-gain-invaluable-experience-through-prestigious-summer-internships/>

2. Coming Home to Build a Future: UNK grad Amanda Engell leads housing development efforts in McCook

Amanda Engell, a 2019 UNK interior and product design graduate with a construction management minor, is transforming her hometown region as director of housing development for the McCook Economic Development Corp.

After excelling in design - earning recognition as one of the National Kitchen and Bath Association's "30 Under 30" - she pivoted in 2022 to tackle a critical local shortage of new homes. Engell has overseen projects that include a

state-backed Rural Workforce Housing Fund grant, infrastructure for a 30-home subdivision and incentives spurring private construction.

She draws on her UNK training daily, from selecting design materials to coordinating contractors, and remains active with the university's interior and product design program as a mentor. Now raising two young children, Engell says investing in housing is about ensuring future generations can thrive in rural Nebraska.

Related Media Item: <https://unknews.unk.edu/2025/09/08/coming-home-to-build-a-future-unk-grad-amanda-engell-leads-housing-development-efforts-in-mccook/>

University of Nebraska–Lincoln

1. Button receives permanent nod as executive vice chancellor, chief academic officer

Mark Button has been named executive vice chancellor and chief academic officer for the University of Nebraska–Lincoln, a position he has held on an interim basis since January 2025. The appointment is pending approval by the University of Nebraska Board of Regents.

Related Media Item: <https://news.unl.edu/article/button-receives-permanent-nod-as-executive-vice-chancellor-chief-academic-officer>

2. Husker engineer seeks paradigm shift in wireless communications

Husker engineer Shubhendu Bhardwaj received a \$550,000 grant from NSF's Faculty Early Career Development program to develop a new, energy efficient approach to long-range wireless communication links that would represent a paradigm shift in the field. Though the use of waveguides for antennas is well established, Bhardwaj's approach is distinct for engineering them to generate vortex modes. His waveguide antennas will produce helical waves that can travel long distances without distortion.

Related Media Item: <https://news.unl.edu/article/husker-engineer-seeks-paradigm-shift-in-wireless-communications>

University of Nebraska Medical Center

1. UNMC enrollment rises for 25th straight year

UNMC's fall enrollment climbed for the 25th consecutive year – totaling 4,818 students, a 2% increase over last year's total. Enrollment increased across six colleges.

Related Media Item: <https://www.unmc.edu/newsroom/2025/09/08/unmc-enrollment-rises-for-25th-straight-year/>

2. UNMC researchers unveil ‘smart bandage’ that heals wounds faster

A groundbreaking new bandage developed by researchers at UNMC could transform wound care by accelerating healing and dramatically reducing scarring. The research now is progressing into larger preclinical models, with the aim of bringing this next-generation wound care solution closer to clinical use.

Related Media Item: <https://www.unmc.edu/newsroom/2025/09/10/unmc-researchers-unveil-smart-bandage-that-heals-wounds-faster/>

University of Nebraska at Omaha

1. NEW: OMA x AI Conference Keynote Speakers, Breakout Presenters Announced

OMA x AI will bring a full day of hands-on learning and networking to KANEKO in Downtown Omaha on Tuesday, Oct. 7. Keynotes from Mayor John W. Ewing, Jr., UNO Chancellor Joanne Li, Greater Omaha Chamber CEO Heath Mello, and cybersecurity expert Robin Gandhi will lead immersive breakout sessions, interactive exhibits, and community-driven discussions. The event, hosted by UNO with the Greater Omaha Chamber and City of Omaha, aims to make AI practical and accessible for entrepreneurs, professionals, and curious learners alike.

Related Media Item: <https://www.unomaha.edu/news/2025/09/new-oma-x-ai-conference-keynote-speakers-breakout-presenters-announced.php>

2. First student teacher from OPS-UNO partnership enters the classroom

Logan Ericson is the first teacher to enter the classroom through a new partnership between Omaha Public Schools and the University of Nebraska at Omaha’s Teacher Scholars Academy. The program provides scholarships, mentorship, and early classroom experience, preparing participants for full-time teaching roles after graduation. Ericson, who began as a student teacher at Belvedere Elementary, will officially graduate in December and continue with her first-grade class as a full-time teacher in the spring.

Related Media Items: https://omaha.com/news/local/education/article_d63c8200-1fd4-491d-a531-60ec237b8dd9.html

Agriculture and Natural Resources

1. Biochar field day to showcase Nebraska research, redcedar management

Researchers at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln are turning an invasive tree, eastern redcedar, into biochar, creating a solution that both manages the spread of the tree and benefits the soil. Biochar—a carbon-rich, porous material produced by heating organic matter in low-oxygen conditions—improves soil health, boosts crop yields, and has applications in agriculture, urban settings, concrete, and filtration.

The Nebraska Biochar Initiative, launched in 2024, supports education, partnerships, and new production facilities. A biochar field day will be held Sept. 22 near Seward, hosted by the Nebraska Forest Service and Blue Heron Tiospaye, with demonstrations and expert guidance. Participants must register in advance.

Related Media Items: <https://ianrnews.unl.edu/article/biochar-field-day-to-showcase-nebraska-research-redcedar-management-0>

2. NU faculty member leading explainable AI project in agriculture

University of Nebraska–Lincoln professor Sruti Das Choudhury is working on a new kind of artificial intelligence that doesn't just give farmers recommendations—it explains the “why” behind them. Today, farmers can see the data they put into an AI system and the answer it produces, but they can't always tell how the system reached that decision or if it's reliable.

Das Choudhury's research focuses on making AI more transparent, so if the system suggests planting a certain crop, it will also show which factors—like soil type, rainfall, or temperature—mattered most. This is important because it helps farmers check the AI's reasoning against their own knowledge, building trust in the technology. Ultimately, explainable AI could help farmers make smarter, more confident decisions that improve yields, sustainability, and long-term success.

Related Media Items: <https://ianrnews.unl.edu/article/choudhury-leading-explainable-ai-project-in-agriculture>

University of Nebraska Foundation

1. Maverick Supporters to Unite During 2025 Wear Black, Give Back: Oct. 8-9

The 2025 Wear Black, Give Back will begin at noon Oct. 8 and conclude at noon Oct. 9. The University of Nebraska at Omaha's sixth annual giving day will bring together Maverick supporters to provide resources for student scholarships, UNO colleges and programs, Omaha Athletics, and other important priorities. The goal for this year's Wear Black, Give Back is to receive 6,500 gifts from supporters.

Numerous challenges and matches have been established to encourage others to give, with those gifts only unlocked if certain giving goals are achieved. Wear Black, Give Back website: givingday.unomaha.edu

Related Media Items: <https://nufoundation.org/maverick-supporters-to-unite-during-2025-wear-black-give-back-oct-8-9/>

2. Leading the Charge Against Breast Cancer

The late Ken Cowan, MD, PhD, left an indelible mark on cancer care and research in Nebraska. For more than two decades, as director of the Fred & Pamela Buffett Cancer Center, he elevated cancer research in the state to its prominent place today at the forefront in the fight against the disease.

Following Dr. Cowan's death last year, the Fred & Pamela Buffett Cancer Center sees a new way to help extend his legacy — through the Kenneth Cowan, MD, PhD, Distinguished Chair in Breast Cancer Clinical Research at UNMC.

The University of Nebraska Foundation is in the final stages of fundraising toward a \$1 million goal to endow the Dr. Cowan Distinguished Chair. To donate, follow this link to the NU Foundation site for the fund:

<https://nufoundation.org/fund/01170550/>

Related Media Items: <https://nufoundation.org/leading-the-charge-against-breast-cancer/>

Buffett Early Childhood Institute

Buffett Early Childhood Institute Awarded \$1.295 Million Grant to Boost Early Literacy in Nebraska with Innovative Technology; Partners include UNK

A new \$1.295 million early literacy grant will allow the Buffett Institute and statewide partners to use cutting-edge technology to help early educators develop language-rich learning environments for infants, toddlers, and preschoolers.

With this funding, the Buffett Institute will partner with the University of Nebraska at Kearney, the Nebraska Head Start Association, and seven Head Start programs located across Nebraska, impacting 1,377 children in urban and rural settings in the first two years of the grant.

Alexandra Daro, the Buffett Institute's director of applied research, will serve as the principal investigator, with Paula Thompson from UNK acting as co-principal investigator.

The Head Start locations are:

- Community Action Partnership of Mid-Nebraska
- Community Action Partnership of Western Nebraska
- Central Nebraska Community Action Partnership, Inc.
- Educare Lincoln
- Educational Service Unit #13
- Head Start Child and Family Development Program, Inc. in central Nebraska
- Sarpy County/Educational Service Unit #3 Head Start

Using the LENA Grow professional development program, children, ages 0 to 5, will wear "talk pedometer" technology. These small, private, and secure devices are worn in a vest and will count the number of conversational turns, adult words, and child vocalizations between children and early educators.

Early educators can assess data from their own classrooms, receive tailored coaching, and learn new strategies to increase the back-and-forth interactions that build children's vocabularies and early literacy skills.

The Nebraska Department of Education recently approved the release of the first two years of funding, totaling \$518,000, to the Buffett Institute as part of a \$55 million Comprehensive Literacy State Development (CLSD) grant from the U.S. Department of Education.

The Institute's total grant award is expected to be \$1.295 million over the next five years.

Related Media Items:

- BECI blog post: <https://buffettinstitute.nebraska.edu/news-and-events/news/2025/08/buffett-early-childhood-institute-awarded-1295-million-grant-to-boost-early-literacy-in-nebraska>
- Lincoln Journal Star: <https://ct.moreover.com/?a=57679591095&p=7r4&v=1&x=7fDbvLW9dWR00gFHb2Ok0g>

Daugherty Water for Food Global Institute

New Water for Food Podcast episode explores the power of unexpected connections

Episode 45 of the Water for Food Podcast explores the valuable collaborations that can arise from in-person interactions, even in a digital age. Host Frances Hayes, DWFI director of communications and public relations, shares a story that perfectly illustrates the lasting impact of those face-to-face moments, which can lead to unexpected and valuable partnerships.

Adam Keough, program manager with Catholic Relief Services and Treaven Scheideler, a University of Nebraska student, discuss their cross-cultural collaboration, sparked by a chance meeting at a tractor museum during the 2023 Water for Food Global Conference. Adam's team in El Salvador needed hands-on training with mechanized equipment and Treaven, drawing on his own farming experience in Nebraska, provided assistance while taking advantage of a formative learning experience.

Related Media Item: <https://waterforfood.nebraska.edu/our-work/communication/podcast>

National Strategic Research Institute

Understanding NSRI's unique contracting mechanisms

In 2012, the University of Nebraska System (NU) and United States Strategic Command (USSTRATCOM) engaged in a long-term, strategic partnership by creating a University Affiliated Research Center (UARC) designated by the Department of Defense (DOD). NSRI was established to carry the UARC credential for NU.

The only UARC sponsored by a unified combatant command, NSRI provides mission-essential research and development capabilities for USSTRATCOM as well as other DOD components and federal agencies focused on strategic deterrence and countering weapons of mass destruction (CWMD).

As a UARC, NSRI accesses an Indefinite Delivery/Indefinite Quantity (IDIQ) contract vehicle through USSTRATCOM, which shortens the timeline from identification of need to contract award and creates trusted, collaborative relationships. NSRI also accepts funding from direct contracting vehicles, other transactions, cooperative agreements and grants. The institute has published a short overview tutorial to describe and share its unique contracting mechanism. View at <https://nsri.nebraska.edu/contract>.

Related Media Item: <https://www.linkedin.com/feed/update/urn:li:activity:7369460991107018753>