

People, Programs and Points of Excellence (P³E)

Report for September 26, 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. Top 10 once again: UNK continues strong showing in annual ‘Best Colleges’ rankings

For the 18th straight year, the University of Nebraska at Kearney is ranked among the best public regional universities in the Midwest by U.S. News & World Report, placing No. 8 in its category and No. 24 among all Midwest regional universities. UNK also earned national recognition as No. 6 Best Value, No. 12 Best Colleges for Veterans and No. 18 in Social Mobility. Evaluating over 1,700 institutions, the rankings consider graduation and retention rates, faculty resources and graduate success. UNK’s affordability further strengthens its position, with the state’s lowest full-time undergraduate cost and generous programs such as Nebraska Promise and the New Nebraskan Scholarship making higher education more accessible.

Related Media Item: <https://unknews.unk.edu/2025/09/23/top-10-once-again-unk-continues-strong-showing-in-annual-best-colleges-rankings/>

2. ‘The opportunities are endless’: UNK agribusiness program supports state’s top industry

UNK’s agribusiness program prepares students for leadership in Nebraska’s largest industry by blending courses in economics, finance, marketing and farm and ranch management with extensive hands-on learning. About 80% of students complete internships, contributing to a 100% job placement rate and average starting salaries around \$55,000. Assistant professor Jody Herchenbach, who brings experience from Nebraska Extension and 4-H, emphasizes real-world exposure through case studies, field tours and industry partnerships. Students such as Kayten Flanagan, Agribusiness Club president, and alumnus Derek Johnson, now an area manager with SoilView, credit the program’s personal faculty connections and applied experiences for launching rewarding careers.

Related Media Item: <https://unknews.unk.edu/2025/09/18/the-opportunities-are-endless-unk-agribusiness-program-supports-states-top-industry/>

University of Nebraska–Lincoln

1. Nebraska's Abbott Prize fuels innovative support for students

After winning \$1 million in the Big Ten's Abbott blood drive, the University of Nebraska–Lincoln is putting the prize to work on new student-focused initiatives — funding everything from wellness programs to emergency funds. It's all about helping Huskers feel good, stress less and succeed.

Related Media Item: <https://news.unl.edu/article/nebraskas-abbott-prize-fuels-innovative-support-for-students>

2. Indigenous garden creates space for expanded teaching, learning

A new Indigenous garden at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln is growing into a place to honor Native presence, traditional ecological knowledge and community gathering. On Sept. 16, students from ethnic studies courses planted native species into dirt mounds within the circular bed northwest of Woods Hall, near the University Hall historical marker.

Related Media Item: <https://news.unl.edu/article/indigenous-garden-creates-space-for-expanded-teaching-learning>

University of Nebraska Medical Center

1. UNMC research awards hold steady as funding landscape shifts

Despite significant changes in the federal funding landscape, external awards and research funding held steady at UNMC in 2025, as UNMC concluded the fiscal year with \$223 million in sponsored awards, \$171 million of which was related to research.

Related Media Item: <https://www.unmc.edu/newsroom/2025/09/17/unmc-research-awards-hold-steady-as-funding-landscape-shifts/>

2. Virtual reality offers healthy challenge to HABIT Camp participants

The Hand Arm Bimanual Intensive Training Virtual Reality camp at the Munroe-Meyer Institute uses virtual reality gaming to work on using both hands to complete a task in the form of play. In addition to the normal camp, researchers are also studying the connection between the brain and muscles using a brain-computer interface (BCI), even delivering gentle stimulation to participants' weaker limbs, encouraging movement. This is a collaboration between UNO and UNMC.

Related Media Item: <https://www.unmc.edu/newsroom/2025/08/27/virtual-reality-offers-healthy-challenge-to-habit-camp-participants/>

University of Nebraska at Omaha

1. The Kid, the Scientists, and the Walk That Changed Everything

Nine-year-old Theo Brewer, who has cerebral palsy, spent years struggling with frequent falls and an unsteady gait. After traveling out of state for care, his family turned to the University of Nebraska at Omaha's Clinical Gait Analysis Lab, where researchers used advanced motion-capture technology to map his movement and pinpoint misfiring hamstrings as the source of his difficulties. This precise analysis gave his doctors the confidence to recommend a selective dorsal rhizotomy surgery, dramatically improving his mobility and independence. Today, Theo climbs stairs, rides his bike, and moves with new confidence while UNO's team continues to help hundreds of children gain life-changing insights close to home.

Related Media Item: <https://www.unomaha.edu/news/2025/09/the-kid-the-scientists-and-the-walk-that-changed-everything.php>

2. AI is an opportunity for higher education, not a threat

University of Nebraska at Omaha Chancellor Joanne Li argues that artificial intelligence should be seen as an opportunity, not a threat, to higher education. UNO is embracing AI through initiatives like an AI Learning Lab, a ChatGPT campus partnership, and an undergraduate AI degree to help students develop both technical skills and uniquely human strengths such as critical thinking and empathy. Chancellor Li emphasizes that universities must teach students to use AI responsibly while preparing them for a workforce where human judgment and creativity remain essential.

Related Media Items: <https://nebraskaexaminer.com/2025/09/24/ai-is-an-opportunity-for-higher-education-not-a-threat/>

Agriculture and Natural Resources

1. Rural Nebraskans remain confident in their local institutions, poll shows

Rural Nebraskans' confidence in institutions has shifted only modestly over the past eight years, according to the 2025 Nebraska Rural Poll. Confidence in the presidency and executive branch has increased since 2021, while fewer respondents expressed strong trust in local public safety agencies and K-12 schools.

Overall, rural Nebraskans continue to place greater confidence in the institutions closest to daily life, including libraries, community colleges, and county election systems, while national institutions like Congress and federal elections draw low trust. Now in its 30th year, the Nebraska Rural Poll is the nation's largest and longest-running survey of rural perspectives.

Related Media Items: <https://ianrnews.unl.edu/article/rural-nebraskans-remain-confident-in-their-local-institutions-poll-shows>

2. Waechter-Mead named director of Nebraska Beef Quality Assurance program

Dr. Lindsay Waechter-Mead has been appointed director of Nebraska's Beef Quality Assurance (BQA) program, a vital initiative that provides beef producers with science-based training and certification to ensure cattle are raised responsibly and sustainably.

As the nation's top commercial cattle feeding state and a leader in cow-calf production, Nebraska relies on BQA to maintain consumer trust and uphold rigorous standards for animal care and food safety.

Waechter-Mead, a veterinarian and extension educator, will lead statewide training efforts and industry collaborations. Her appointment strengthens a program that certifies thousands of producers annually and is essential to Nebraska's beef industry.

Related Media Items: <https://news.unl.edu/article/waechter-mead-named-director-of-nebraska-beef-quality-assurance-program>

University of Nebraska Foundation

Bringing engineering principles to life in Kiewit Hall

UNL engineering alumnus Tom Lauerman and his wife, Nancy, have provided a \$500,000 gift to equip the Tom and Nancy Lauerman Digital Fabrication Lab for College of Engineering students. The lab is a part of the Nebraska Engineering Design Hub, which also includes a woodshop and metal shop and is located on the lower level and first floor of Kiewit Hall. The Design Hub provides a place for students to bring their engineering principles to life.

Related Media Items: <https://nufoundation.org/bringing-engineering-principles-to-life-in-kiewit-hall/>

Buffett Early Childhood Institute

Buffett Early Childhood Institute Leads Congressional Briefing on Economics and Child Care in Washington, D.C.

On Sept. 10, the Buffett Early Childhood Institute and Child Care Aware of America hosted a bipartisan congressional briefing underscoring that access to affordable, high-quality child care is foundational to economic growth, workforce stability, and family well-being.

Inside the historic Kennedy Caucus Room in the Russell Senate Office Building at the U.S. Capitol, the briefing attracted nearly 50 attendees, including senior federal officials and congressional staff from both parties who work on child care, finance, and workforce development policy. Laurie Todd Smith, deputy assistant secretary for early childhood development at the U.S. Administration for Children and Families, was among those in attendance.

The discussion centered on findings from Economics & Child Care, a national report developed after a 2024 Omaha roundtable convened by the Buffett Institute and Child Care Aware. The report highlights the significant economic implications of child care and offers policy recommendations to reduce costs for parents, strengthen recruitment and retention of early educators, and support families through tax and parental leave policies.

These are issues that affect working families and employers everywhere, including Nebraska, where Buffett Institute data reveals a shortage of child care slots and 10 rural counties with no licensed child care providers.

The briefing was held at a pivotal moment: Congress is considering reauthorizing the Child Care Development Block Grant, and Nebraska U.S. Sen. Deb Fischer recently introduced the Child Care Modernization Act of 2025, which has received bipartisan support and endorsement from the Buffett Institute and other national early childhood organizations.

The panelists were:

- Linda Smith, director of policy, Buffett Institute (moderator)
- Susan Gale Perry, CEO, Child Care Aware of America
- Rupa Datta, vice president and distinguished senior fellow, NORC at the University of Chicago
- Jason Fichtner, executive director, the Retirement Income Institute, Alliance for Lifetime Income
- Chris Herbst, foundation professor, Arizona State University School of Public Affairs

Related Media Items: <https://www.childcareaware.org/economics-and-child-care/>

Daugherty Water for Food Global Institute

Thematic map depicts primary water rights systems in the U.S.

Water rights systems provide legal boundaries for water management and are essential to understand when developing and evaluating policies and practices around water governance (e.g., water transfers, irrigation limits, disputes among different water users, interstate water management, drought adaptation).

A new thematic map developed by a collaborative team from DWFI, the National Drought Mitigation Center, and the University of Nebraska—Lincoln's Department of Agricultural Economics highlights the variability of surface water and groundwater rights systems across the U.S. Generally, western states follow the prior appropriation system of water, which is usually based on water right's seniority and not connected to land ownership. Water rights systems for the eastern states, however, generally stem from common law, which gives landowners the right to use water that touches their land.

This tool is valuable for informing future research and providing a clearer understanding for researchers, policymakers, and landowners on how water rights systems influence decisions related to drought adaptation and water governance. The work was funded by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), Office of the Chief Economist (OCE).

Related Media Item: <https://go.unl.edu/water-rights>

National Strategic Research Institute

Dr. Thiem presents at Directed Energy Symposium

Dr. Terry Thiem, NSRI director of medical countermeasures, provided an overview of the medical effects that directed energy weapons — including high power microwaves, high power lasers and high energy radio frequency weapons — can have on the warfighter as well as some of the research that is being done to create medical countermeasures for these effects.

His presentation took place at the 8th Annual Directed Energy Symposium, which convenes leading experts, senior policymakers, industry innovators, and defense stakeholders from across the directed energy community to explore the most recent breakthroughs in DE systems, weapons and technologies.

With directed energy transitioning from the lab to the battlefield, this year's event has focused on how these rapidly maturing capabilities are enhancing warfighter readiness, strengthening offensive and defensive operations and advancing national security objectives.

Attendees are gaining timely insights into the evolving landscape of directed energy warfare — including operational deployments, integration challenges and emerging opportunities that are shaping the future of military power.

Learn more about NSRI medical countermeasures research at nsri.nebraska.edu/medical.

Related Media Item: <https://www.linkedin.com/feed/update/urn:li:activity:7374490957100085249>