

People, Programs and Points of Excellence (P³E) Report for July 17, 2026

The People, Programs and Points of Excellence (P3E) is a biweekly update from across all four campuses of the University of Nebraska System 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

President Gold joined by UNO's Adrian Dowell on new "Heart to Heart" podcast episode

On this new episode, Dr. Gold is joined by Adrian Dowell, vice chancellor and director of athletics at the University of Nebraska at Omaha. They discuss Adrian's background, athletics in the setting of a metropolitan university, the student-athlete experience and the future of Maverick athletics.

Related Media Item: <https://youtu.be/xSbp8WQ6KGQ>

University of Nebraska at Kearney

1. UNK graduate Ayami Sato earned her place – and GOAT status – in the NBA

University of Nebraska at Kearney graduate Ayami Sato has turned a lifelong dream into reality as an assistant athletic trainer, physical therapist and sports medicine administrator with the Indiana Pacers. A 2008 UNK graduate from Japan, Sato overcame language barriers and multiple setbacks before earning admission into UNK's athletic training program, launching a career that ultimately led to the NBA.

Her expertise, positivity and dedication have made her a valued member of the Pacers organization, earning praise from players, coaches and even "GOAT" recognition from stars Tyrese Haliburton and Caitlin Clark after an NBA-produced feature highlighted her impact. Sato credits the education, mentorship and support she received at UNK for helping make her career possible.

Related Media Item: <https://unknews.unk.edu/2026/06/17/unk-graduate-ayami-sato-earned-her-place-and-goat-status-in-the-nba/>

2. UNK students turn summer break into research opportunity

Twelve University of Nebraska at Kearney students are spending their summer conducting faculty-mentored research through the Summer Student Research Program (SSRP), which supports independent research and creative activity across all academic disciplines. Working one-on-one with faculty mentors, students are investigating real-world questions while gaining valuable hands-on experience and receiving a \$3,250 stipend. This year's projects span biology, psychology, physics and astronomy, chemistry, mathematics, communication disorders, political science, and art and design. The program strengthens critical thinking, problem-solving and research skills while preparing students for graduate education, professional careers and future scholarly opportunities.

Related Media Item: <https://unknews.unk.edu/2026/06/29/unk-students-turn-summer-break-into-research-opportunity/>

University of Nebraska–Lincoln

1. Nebraska, Iowa team up to turn agricultural strengths into industries of tomorrow

The University of Nebraska–Lincoln is a core partner in RuralSTAMINA, a new Nebraska-Iowa collaboration awarded \$15 million from the National Science Foundation to launch a regional bioeconomy innovation ecosystem. The initiative aims to accelerate biomanufacturing, strengthen rural economies and develop the workforce needed for future growth.

Related Media Item: <https://news.unl.edu/article/unl-partners-with-iowa-state-others-on-major-biomanufacturing-initiative>

2. Nebraska researchers link gut microbe to cancer-fighting immune response

Researchers have identified a gut bacterium with a surprising side hustle: helping the immune system fight cancer. The discovery, co-led by University of Nebraska-Lincoln scientists, could pave the way for microbiome- and diet-based approaches to boost the effectiveness of cancer immunotherapy.

Related Media Item: <https://news.unl.edu/article/nebraska-researchers-link-gut-microbe-to-cancer-fighting-immune-response>

University of Nebraska Medical Center

1. UNMC team studying neuroinflammation in people with HIV

UNMC researchers Dr. Shilpa Buch and Dr. Palsamy Periyasamy are leading a five-year, \$2.8 million R01 grant from the NIH to examine how residual HIV, long-term antiretroviral therapy and substance use contribute to brain inflammation and cognitive decline. The team also will test whether a novel small molecule, C381, can restore cellular function and reduce neuroinflammation in people living with HIV.

Related Media Item: <https://www.unmc.edu/newsroom/2026/06/30/unmc-team-studying-neuroinflammation-in-people-with-hiv/>

2. UNMC, Nebraska Medicine mark milestone as quarantine operation ends

UNMC and Nebraska Medicine successfully completed a six-week activation of the National Quarantine Unit, where 18 Americans exposed to hantavirus aboard the MV Hondius cruise ship were monitored and cared for before safely returning home. No cases were identified, and the operation brought together clinical, behavioral health, emergency preparedness and support teams (local, regional and national) while providing lessons that will strengthen future responses nationwide.

Related Media Item: <https://www.unmc.edu/newsroom/2026/06/24/unmc-nebraska-medicine-mark-milestone-as-quarantine-operation-ends/>

University of Nebraska at Omaha

1. UNO's OMA x AI Emphasizes Experimentation, Innovation, and Understanding

The University of Nebraska at Omaha hosted its second annual OMA x AI Conference, drawing a sold-out audience of more than 375 attendees. The conference brought together leaders from education, industry, and government to explore AI's impact on the workforce, innovation, and society. Through keynote presentations, expert panels, and interactive breakout sessions, attendees gained practical strategies for integrating AI into their organizations and careers. The event reflects UNO's continued leadership in AI education and community engagement, reinforcing its commitment to preparing learners and professionals to thrive in an AI-driven future.

Related Media Items:

- News Release: <https://www.unomaha.edu/news/2026/07/unos-oma-x-ai-conference-emphasizes-experimentation-innovation-and-understanding.php>
- WOWT: <https://www.wowt.com/2026/07/03/uno-ai-conference-sells-out-two-years-running-workers-seek-adapt/>

2. Building Stronger Bodies and Minds Through Inclusive Play

The University of Nebraska at Omaha's Young Athletes Program is creating meaningful opportunities for children of all abilities to develop motor, communication, and social skills through play. As part of the Special Olympics International Young Athletes Program, the eight-week summer initiative serves children ages two to seven with inclusive, game-based activities that help build confidence, coordination, and foundational life skills in a fun and supportive environment.

The program also provides valuable hands-on learning experiences for UNO students in kinesiology and, for the first time this year, speech-language pathology. Working together, students design activities that integrate physical movement with communication and social development, gaining practical experience collaborating across disciplines while preparing for careers in health, education, and human services.

Related Media Item: <https://www.unomaha.edu/news/2026/07/building-stronger-bodies-and-minds-through-inclusive-play.php>

Agriculture and Natural Resources

1. Mesonet crosses 100-station mark, serves wide range of Nebraska needs

The University of Nebraska–Lincoln’s Nebraska Mesonet has reached a major milestone with the installation of its 100th weather station, expanding a statewide network that delivers real-time weather and soil data to farmers, ranchers, communities and emergency managers. The growing network helps Nebraska producers make more informed decisions about irrigation, planting, harvesting and other weather-sensitive operations, while also supporting drought monitoring, water management, research and public safety. University leaders ultimately envision about 200 stations statewide to provide even more comprehensive coverage. The Mesonet is one of many weather and climate services offered by the University of Nebraska–Lincoln, reflecting the university’s commitment to providing science-based information that strengthens Nebraska agriculture, communities and natural resources.

Related Media Items:

- News Release: <https://ianrnews.unl.edu/article/mesonet-crosses-100-station-mark-serves-wide-range-of-nebraska-needs>
- Lincoln Journal Star: https://journalstar.com/news/state-regional/nebraska/article_70b907b0-4f1d-4c0e-9f5b-4d7bb0449ae4.html

2. Master Gardener program continues to benefit volunteers, communities

As the University of Nebraska-Lincoln's Nebraska Extension Master Gardener program celebrates its 50th anniversary, it continues to strengthen communities across the state by equipping volunteers with research-based horticultural knowledge and opportunities to serve. Since 1976, more than 4,000 Nebraskans have completed the program, contributing thousands of volunteer hours to projects ranging from public gardens and downtown beautification to community greenhouses and food donations for local pantries. Supported by University of Nebraska Extension educators, master gardeners help create healthier landscapes, promote sustainable practices and improve quality of life in communities statewide while building lasting connections through service and lifelong learning.

Related Media Item: <https://ianrnews.unl.edu/article/master-gardener-program-continues-to-benefit-volunteers-communities>

University of Nebraska Foundation

CLAAS Foundation, UNL partner to empower ag engineering students

The CLAAS Foundation commemorated the 100th birthday of its namesake, Helmut Claas, with two initiatives to support University of Nebraska–Lincoln students: the Helmut Claas Scholarship and the CLAAS Foundation Study Abroad Fund. The Helmut Claas Scholarship will support undergraduate students majoring in agricultural engineering or agricultural systems technology. Four scholarships, which may be renewed annually for four years, will be offered. In addition, the CLAAS Foundation has established a fund to support students in the Department of Biological Systems Engineering participating in a short-term study abroad program offered in collaboration with the Osnabrück University of Applied Sciences in Germany.

Related Media Item: <https://nufoundation.org/claas-foundation-unl-partner-to-empower-ag-engineering-students/>

Buffett Early Childhood Institute

Nebraska Public Media Covers Buffett Early Childhood Institute's Innovative AI Work

Nebraska Public Media recently profiled the Buffett Institute's cutting-edge work bringing innovative artificial intelligence (AI) and virtual reality (VR) professional learning tools to the early childhood workforce. Reporter Jolie Peal interviewed Dalhia Lloyd, director of digital education at the Buffett Institute, and Maurice Bailey, AI engineer at Boys Town, and highlighted the Reality Coach AI tool. Lloyd and her Institute team have been partnering with Boys Town to adapt the Reality Coach tool for early educators, allowing them to practice classroom management skills with AI-driven student avatars and receive instant feedback and coaching.

An audio version of the story ran on the Omaha editions of the All Things Considered and Morning Edition radio shows. The story originated from Lloyd and Bailey's breakout session providing a live Reality Coach demo at the OMA x AI conference at the University of Nebraska at Omaha on June 30. During their conference session, "Can AI Teach Human Skills? Practicing Real Conversations Through Live AI Simulations," Lloyd and Bailey showed how a teacher could practice responding to challenging student behavior using the Reality Coach platform.

Related Media Items:

- LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/feed/update/urn:li:activity:7478489134064451584>
- Nebraska Public Media: <https://nebraskapublicmedia.org/en/news/articles/nebraska-researchers-create-ai-tool-to-help-educators-practice-challenging-scenarios/>

Daugherty Water for Food Global Institute

Measuring the invisible: The science of carbon sequestration in agriculture

A five-year study led by DWFI Director of Research Christopher Neale, funded by the U.S. Department of Energy, investigates the science behind carbon sequestration in agriculture. By monitoring irrigated and rainfed corn and soybean fields across Nebraska, Iowa, and Minnesota, the research team utilized advanced measurement tools—including eddy covariance towers, gas analyzers, and deep soil core sampling—to track carbon, methane, and nitrous oxide fluxes. The study aims to verify whether agricultural practices can effectively capture and store carbon to support the growing carbon credit market.

Key findings revealed complex dynamics in crop rotations, such as carbon loss when rotating from high-yield corn to soybeans, and an unexpected discovery that irrigated corn fields actually captured methane rather than emitting it. Ultimately, this research provides crucial hard data to help understand which farming practices most efficiently sequester carbon while minimizing greenhouse gas emissions.

Related Media Item: <https://waterforfood.nebraska.edu/news-and-events/news/2026/07/measuring-the-invisible-the-science-of-carbon-sequestration-in-agriculture>

National Strategic Research Institute

NSRI advances strategic deterrence education at the 2026 Strategic Deterrence Coalition Symposium

The National Strategic Research Institute (NSRI) at the University of Nebraska strengthened the Nation's strategic deterrence enterprise by leading a high-impact training and tabletop exercise during a session for young professionals at the recently held Strategic Deterrence Coalition (SDC) Annual Symposium. The exercise placed participants in a 2028 crisis scenario involving a hypothetical Chinese invasion of Taiwan, tasking them to operate as an executive-level decision committee under conditions of uncertainty, compressed timelines and escalating risk. Even within limited time, gameplay generated intense debate on strategic-response options, escalation thresholds, alliance signaling and the friction inherent in high-stakes consensus building. Themes that emerged included the importance of credible force posture, the operational implications of modernization programs and the gap between theoretical deterrence constructs and the real-world pressures of strategic decision-making.

For NSRI, the event validated demand for a portable, scalable deterrence education capability — one that could reach wider audiences across government, industry and academia. It also supported workforce development by exposing early-career professionals to decision environments that cannot be replicated in a standard classroom. The session's integration of AI-generated media, operational decision frameworks and cross-sector engagement offered a model for next-generation strategic education.

Related Media Item: <https://www.linkedin.com/feed/update/urn:li:activity:7482917736067825664>