

People, Programs and Points of Excellence (P³E)

Report for September 11, 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

1. NU System sees growth in first-time freshmen

Enrollment among first-time freshmen is up across the University of Nebraska System for the 2026-27 academic year, according to data collected on the sixth day of classes across the NU System. According to the data, collected annually as part of the university's six-day census, enrollment of first-time freshman across the NU System was 7,987 as the fall 2026 semester began, from 7,824 in 2025 – an increase of 163 students.

Related Media Item: <https://nebraska.edu/news-and-events/news/2026/09/nu-system-sees-growth-in-first-time-freshmen>

2. State of the University address highlights momentum of past year

The state of the University of Nebraska System is strong, President Jeffrey P. Gold, M.D., said during his second annual State of the University Address. Even so, continued investment is critical to ensuring that the state's only public university system can continue to serve Nebraskans through teaching, research and statewide engagement.

Related Media Items:

- News release: <https://nebraska.edu/news-and-events/news/2026/09/state-of-the-university-address-highlights-momentum-of-past-year>
 - Remarks: <https://nebraska.edu/president/speeches-communications/speeches/2026/2026-state-of-the-university-address>
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University of Nebraska at Kearney

1. Paying It Forward: UNK grad Erick Leiva Lopez starts school counseling career in hometown

First-generation college graduate Erick Leiva Lopez is returning to his hometown as the newest counselor at Lexington High School, where he hopes to provide students with the same guidance and support he received from educators and mentors growing up. At UNK, the Thompson Scholars Learning Community helped him develop from a self-described shy and uncertain freshman into a student leader, peer mentor and honors graduate in social science education. He later worked as a bilingual UNK admissions recruiter, helping students and families navigate the college process, before enrolling in UNK's school counseling graduate program. Leiva Lopez will continue working toward his master's degree while serving Lexington students, with a particular interest in supporting first-generation students and helping them recognize their own potential.

Related Media Item: <https://unknews.unk.edu/2026/07/24/paying-it-forward-unk-grad-erick-leiva-lopez-starts-school-counseling-career-in-hometown>

2. Must Love Dogs: UNK degree opens another door for NCTA instructor and coach

Leighlynn Towne earned her master's degree in biology from UNK while working full time as a veterinary technology instructor and head coach of the stock dog team at the Nebraska College of Technical Agriculture. The online program allowed Towne to continue her education while teaching, coaching, training working dogs, helping on her family's fifth-generation ranch and raising a young family. With more than 50 electives available, she tailored her coursework to strengthen both her scientific knowledge and teaching methods, with classes directly applicable to veterinary technology and dog training. Her UNK degree has already advanced her career, allowing her to move from lecturer to assistant professor at NCTA.

Related Media Item: <https://unknews.unk.edu/2026/05/14/must-love-dogs-unk-degree-opens-another-door-for-ncta-instructor-and-coach/>

University of Nebraska–Lincoln

1. More than 400 climb Memorial Stadium steps to remember 9/11

Before sunrise, more than 400 people filled Memorial Stadium for a powerful tribute to the 25th anniversary of 9/11. Students, cadets, faculty, staff, first responders and community members climbed more than 2,000 steps, honoring those who died and carrying the promise to remember into the next generation.

Related Media Items:

- News Release: <https://news.unl.edu/article/more-than-400-climb-memorial-stadium-steps-to-remember-911>
- Lincoln Journal Star: https://journalstar.com/news/local/article_31f4568b-d6c8-4ffa-b4e0-f2a77ee96429.html
- 1011: <https://www.1011now.com/2026/09/11/hundreds-climb-memorial-stadium-steps-honor-911-first-responders/>
- KETV: <https://www.ketv.com/article/nebraska-911-memorial-stadium-stair-climb/73688542>

2. Thousands stitched grief into 9/11 memorial now housed at quilt museum

The university's International Quilt Museum is home to the United in Memory 9/11 Quilt Project, a memorial consisting of 142 massive panels containing an individual block for each victim of the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. "It really does tell and illustrate the entire story and the scope of 9/11," said Leslie Levy, executive director of the museum.

Related Media Item: <https://news.unl.edu/article/thousands-stitched-grief-into-911-memorial-now-housed-at-quilt-museum>

University of Nebraska Medical Center

1. Research-specific funding awards jump 35% for UNMC

UNMC research-specific funding awards increased 35% in fiscal year 2025-26, reaching more than \$230 million — the largest increase in UNMC history. The growth reflects a deliberate effort to diversify the research portfolio, including increases in federal funding and a significant rise in industry-sponsored funding from \$33 million to \$56.4 million.

Related Media Item: <https://www.unmc.edu/newsroom/2026/08/27/research-specific-funding-awards-jump-35-for-unmc/>

2. Regents approve resolution authorizing new shared governance structure for Nebraska Medicine

The NU Board of Regents unanimously approved a new shared governance structure for Nebraska Medicine that adds the Omaha Community Foundation as a governing member alongside the University of Nebraska System. The structure is designed to preserve Nebraska Medicine's close connection to UNMC's academic mission while bringing the perspective and resources of Nebraska's philanthropic community to help guide the health system's future.

Related Media Item: <https://www.unmc.edu/newsroom/2026/09/02/regents-approve-resolution-authorizing-new-shared-governance-structure-for-nebraska-medicine/>

University of Nebraska at Omaha

1. On Capitol Hill, NCITE Demonstrates Dangerous Side of AI Ahead of 9/11 Anniversary

The University of Nebraska at Omaha's NCITE researchers demonstrated to members of Congress how unrestricted AI models can provide detailed guidance for planning terrorist attacks, highlighting a rapidly emerging national security threat. The demonstration showed that thousands of "abliterated" AI models now exist without safety guardrails or traceability, underscoring the need for research, awareness and policies to address their potential misuse.

Related Media Item: <https://www.unomaha.edu/ncite/news/2026/09/dc-demo-day2.php>

2. UNO Welcomes Nearly 15,000 Mavericks for Fall 2026

UNO is reporting another year of relatively stable enrollment, with 14,810 students enrolled this fall and notable growth among first-time freshmen (1.4%), transfer students (7.2%) and new graduate students (0.4%). The increases reflect UNO's continued focus on workforce development, transfer pathways and strategic recruitment, with particularly strong graduate growth in the College of Education, Health and Human Sciences and the College of Public Affairs and Community Service.

Related Media Item: <https://www.unomaha.edu/news/2026/08/uno-welcomes-nearly-15,000-mavericks-for-fall-2026.php>

Agriculture and Natural Resources

1. Global organization awards Winn highest honor for student advising

Sara Winn, student success coordinator for the School of Natural Resources at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln, has received NACADA's national Outstanding Advisor Award, recognizing excellence in academic advising. Winn, who has spent 20 years at UNL, helps students navigate academic planning, degree requirements, career goals and opportunities beyond the classroom. Students describe her as attentive, compassionate and responsive. The national honor follows two additional awards Winn received this year: UNL's Dr. Charles Riedesel Outstanding Academic Advising Award and the School of Natural Resources' student-nominated Staff Inspiration Award.

Related Media Item: <https://ianrnews.unl.edu/article/global-organization-awards-winn-highest-honor-for-student-advising>

2. Community pride is strong in rural Nebraska, poll shows

The 2026 Nebraska Rural Poll finds that most rural Nebraskans remain strongly connected to their communities and generally positive about where they live. Conducted annually by the University of Nebraska–Lincoln's Rural Prosperity Nebraska with funding from Nebraska Extension, the poll is the nation's largest and longest-running survey of its kind. Now in its 31st year, it provides valuable long-term insight into rural Nebraskans' views on quality of life, community services and the future. This year's results underscore the pride and sense of belonging rural Nebraskans feel in the places they call home. Most respondents say they have strong bonds with others in their communities, feel they belong and are connected to where they live, and half say it would be difficult to leave. Most also believe their communities have the ability to shape their own futures, reflecting a strong sense of commitment to rural Nebraska even amid some uncertainty about the years ahead.

Related Media Item: <https://ianrnews.unl.edu/article/community-pride-is-strong-in-rural-nebraska-poll-shows>

University of Nebraska Foundation

1. Lied Center Celebrates Milestone in Expansion, Renovation

The Lied Center for Performing Arts celebrated a major milestone in its Building the Future expansion and renovation project Sept. 8 as the final steel beam was placed atop the expanded building structure. The "topping off" marks the completion of the structural steel framework for the Lied Center's new addition and represents a

significant step toward the project's anticipated completion in fall 2027. The project has been made possible largely through private support. The addition and renovation are designed to ensure Nebraska's performing arts center continues to meet the needs of its growing audiences and expanding programs. Lied Center programming and events will continue throughout construction, including one of the biggest seasons in the venue's history.

Related Media Item: <https://news.unl.edu/article/lied-center-celebrates-milestone-in-expansion-renovation>

2. Wear Black, Give Back Set for Oct. 7-8

The 2026 Wear Black, Give Back, UNO's 24-hour day of giving, will begin at noon Oct. 7 and continue through noon Oct. 8. Supporters can make a gift at givingday.unomaha.edu. Gifts support student scholarships, UNO colleges and programs, student organizations, Omaha Athletics and other priorities. To encourage others to give, alumni, donors and other supporters have pledged matches and challenge gifts. This year's goal is to receive 7,000 gifts. Any donor who gives at least \$75 will receive a limited-edition Durango building block set.

Related Media Item: <https://nufoundation.org/save-the-date-wear-black-give-back-set-for-oct-7-8/>

Buffett Early Childhood Institute

Buffett Early Childhood Institute Awarded NU Research Grant to Support Nebraska Early Literacy Work

In Head Start classrooms across Nebraska, the Buffett Early Childhood Institute, University of Nebraska at Kearney, and educational technology nonprofit LENA are using cutting-edge LENA Grow technology to measure the back-and-forth verbal interactions between early educators and infants, toddlers, and preschoolers. These "conversational turns" are key to children's early language formation. A \$98,850 University of Nebraska System Collaboration Initiative grant will allow researchers from the Institute, UNK, and University of Nebraska-Lincoln to conduct a deeper examination of data generated from the LENA Grow project, part of a five-year, \$1.295 million Comprehensive Literacy State Development Grant awarded to the Buffett Institute in 2025. That project has reached approximately 100 children in 15 Head Start classrooms across rural and urban Nebraska to date. It was recently profiled in a national news story by education outlet The 74. This type of cross-campus research reflects the Institute's core mission of bringing together skills and assets from across the university system to advance a more cohesive approach to early childhood research on behalf of young children.

The Collaboration grant principal investigators are: Alexandra Daro, director of applied research, Buffett Early Childhood Institute Paula Thompson, Buffett Institute Community Chair and associate professor of teacher education, University of Nebraska at Kearney Philip Lai, Buffett Institute Community Chair and associate professor of communication disorders, UNK Myung-Jin Kim, assistant professor of early childhood education, UNK Clariebel Gabas, research assistant professor in the Department of Child, Youth, and Family Studies, University of Nebraska-Lincoln. These researchers will conduct a deeper examination of data generated from the LENA Grow project, including quantitative and qualitative analyses that will, among other questions, explore how teachers respond to coaching and classroom data. A pilot study will involve 40 Head Start teachers and approximately 320 children.

Related Media Item: <https://buffettinstitute.nebraska.edu/news-and-events/news/2026/08/buffett-early-childhood-institute-awarded-nu-research-grant-to-support-nebraska-early-literacy-work>

Daugherty Water for Food Global Institute

The hidden cost of water: Energy use in agricultural irrigation

A new DWFI article by Harshanee Jayasekera, Jude Cobbing, and Taro Mieno examines the critical yet often overlooked relationship between energy use and agricultural irrigation. Highlighting that groundwater pumping constitutes the largest share of energy demand in irrigation systems, the authors explain how declining aquifer levels and system inefficiencies significantly drive up operational costs for producers. The article emphasizes that enhancing pump efficiency, optimizing system design and establishing effective energy pricing structures are vital strategies to lower farm production expenses, curb groundwater depletion and bolster long-term agricultural resilience.

Related Media Item: <https://waterforfood.nebraska.edu/news-and-events/news/2026/08/the-hidden-cost-of-water-energy-use-in-agricultural-irrigation>

National Strategic Research Institute

NSRI elevates Nebraska expertise at the intersection of food and national security

Food and agriculture are essential to U.S. national security, and the University of Nebraska is uniquely positioned to help strengthen the resilience of the systems that move food from the farm to the table. Meghan Jackson, director for Food, Agriculture and Environment Security at the National Strategic Research Institute (NSRI) at the University of Nebraska, recently joined the Daugherty Water for Food Global Institute's Water for Food Podcast to discuss the connections among agriculture, water, infrastructure resilience and national security. Jackson highlighted risks to the nation's food and agriculture systems from animal and crop disease, severe weather, water scarcity, cyberattacks and other disruptions. She also discussed how University of Nebraska capabilities in areas such as precision agriculture, remote sensing, water management, plant and animal health and biosecurity can help strengthen resilience. As a Department of War-designated University Affiliated Research Center, NSRI connects this breadth of University expertise with federal agencies working to protect the nation from strategic threats. Through its Food, Agriculture and Environment Security focus area, NSRI helps bring multidisciplinary Nebraska capabilities to national security challenges across the agricultural system.

Related Media Item: <https://waterforfood.nebraska.edu/news-and-events/news/2026/08/food-security-and-national-security-protecting-agriculture-from-the-farm-to-the-table>