

People, Programs and Points of Excellence (P³E) Report for May 8, 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

State and national leaders convene in Nebraska to align agriculture, research and industry for the next era of U.S. innovation

Hosted by the University of Nebraska System in partnership with the Council on Competitiveness, the convening marked the 12th stop in the national Competitiveness Conversations Across America series, and the second held in 2026. The series brings together leaders from industry, academia, labor, the U.S. Department of Energy national laboratories to identify strategies that strengthen U.S. competitiveness and expand the innovation economy beyond traditional hubs.

Related Media Item: <https://nebraska.edu/news-and-events/news/2026/05/state-and-national-leaders-convene-in-nebraska-to-align-agriculture-research-and-industry-for-the-next-era-of-us-innovation>

University of Nebraska at Kearney

1. From UNK to DFW: Kellen Skarka oversees operations at one of world's largest airports

University of Nebraska at Kearney alumnus Kellen Skarka is helping oversee airfield operations at Dallas Fort Worth International Airport, one of the busiest airports in the world. As manager of airfield operations, the 2009 UNK aviation systems management graduate leads efforts to ensure the airport's runways, taxiways and infrastructure meet strict FAA safety standards while supporting more than 86 million passengers annually. Skarka credits UNK's aviation program for preparing him for a career that has included military service in the U.S. Marine Corps and leadership roles in civilian aviation. He also uses his experience to highlight the wide range of career opportunities available in the aviation industry beyond becoming a pilot.

Related Media Item: <https://unknews.unk.edu/2026/04/19/from-unk-to-dfw-kellen-skarka-oversees-operations-at-one-of-worlds-largest-airports/>

2. Carpenters receive UNK's highest honor for transformational impact on students

The University of Nebraska at Kearney honored longtime supporters Keith and Eileen Carpenter with the Ron and Carol Cope Cornerstone of Excellence Award during spring commencement, recognizing a philanthropic commitment approaching \$10 million. Their support has funded scholarships and emergency assistance for students in programs including business education, interior and product design, nursing and graduate studies. Both Lexington natives, the Carpenters have maintained strong ties to UNK since their college years. Keith graduated from the university in 1962 and later built a career as a business education teacher. Eileen attended UNK while working to support herself, but financial difficulties forced her to leave school before completing her degree. Now living in Parker, Colorado, the couple has used successful investments and a passion for restoring and selling rare classic cars to help fuel their philanthropy and support future generations of UNK students.

Related Media Item: <https://unknews.unk.edu/2026/05/08/carpenters-receive-unks-highest-honor-for-their-life-changing-impact-on-students/>

University of Nebraska–Lincoln

1. Record 3,885 degrees awarded as Huskers encouraged to lead with purpose

The University of Nebraska–Lincoln conferred a record 3,885 degrees during commencement exercises May 8-9. The 3,762 graduates — also a record — are from 61 countries; 46 U.S. states, the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico; and 230-plus Nebraska communities.

Related Media Item: <https://news.unl.edu/tag/may-2026-commencement>

2. Nelson selected as vice chancellor for research and innovation

Jennifer Mize Nelson has been named the vice chancellor for research and innovation following a rigorous internal search. The appointment, announced May 6 by Interim Chancellor Katherine S. Ankerson, is pending approval by the NU Board of Regents.

Related Media Item: <https://news.unl.edu/article/nelson-selected-as-vice-chancellor-for-research-and-innovation>

University of Nebraska Medical Center

1. Pathology lab reveals new research into HPV

A team of researchers from UNMC's Department of Pathology, Microbiology and Immunology has discovered a critical strategy human papillomavirus (HPV) uses to establish infection after entering cells. Published in Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, the study shows how HPV reprograms a host protein to help virus-containing compartments move and fuse with early endosomes — a key step in successful infection.

Related Media Item: <https://www.unmc.edu/newsroom/2026/04/27/pathology-lab-reveals-new-research-into-hpv-infection/>

2. Nursing continues building pathways to the profession

UNMC College of Nursing has signed a new memorandum of understanding with McCook Senior High School to create an early pathway for students interested in earning a BSN. The agreement is the fourth such partnership with Nebraska high schools and is part of a broader effort to build nursing pipelines to the UNMC College of Nursing's Western Nebraska, Norfolk and Kearney divisions for Nebraska students in the rural part of the state who want to become nurses.

Related Media Item: <https://www.unmc.edu/newsroom/2026/05/06/college-of-nursing-continues-building-pathways-to-the-profession/>

University of Nebraska at Omaha

1. For Graduating Student Isaac Barchus, UNO Has Been Much More Than a 4-Year Journey

Isaac Barchus's connection to the University of Nebraska at Omaha began long before he became a student, starting as a "Miracle Kid" in UNO Dance Marathon while battling the rare disease CANDLE syndrome. Through his involvement with UNO hockey, Dance Marathon, and fraternity philanthropy efforts, Barchus found opportunities to give back to the community that supported him throughout his life. As he prepares to graduate, he credits UNO with helping him grow personally and professionally while inspiring his passion for nonprofit and sports operations work. His story reflects the lasting impact of UNO's culture of community, support, and belonging.

Related Media Item: <https://www.unomaha.edu/news/2026/04/for-graduating-student-isaac-barchus-uno-has-been-much-more-than-a-four-year-journey.php>

2. Students Give Back to the Omaha Community through Mavs Make a Difference

UNO's new Mavs Make a Difference program is helping students connect with the community through flexible, off-site volunteer opportunities designed to make service more accessible and approachable. Created by the Office of Engagement during the Spring 2026 semester, the program partners with local organizations to provide hands-on experiences that fit easily into students' schedules.

Through projects like organizing supplies at the Nebraska Diaper Bank and assembling backpacks for children in the welfare system, students are building community connections while making a meaningful impact. Program leaders say the initiative not only encourages service but also helps students develop relationships, life skills, and a stronger sense of belonging both on and off campus.

Related Media Item: <https://www.unomaha.edu/news/2026/04/students-give-back-to-the-omaha-community-through-mavs-make-a-difference.php>

Agriculture and Natural Resources

1. Soil Judging Team takes runner-up at national contest

The University of Nebraska–Lincoln Soil Judging Team earned second place at the North American Colleges and Teachers of Agriculture Soil Judging Contest held April 22–25 at Illinois State University. Competing against 15 universities, the team included six students, with Adrian Cox placing third individually among 90 participants. Seniors Cox and Anna Newcome, both longtime team members and student organization leaders, will graduate this May. Soil judging competitions involve analyzing soil properties and making land-use recommendations, providing valuable hands-on training. The team is coached by faculty and graduate students, and will compete next at a regional contest in Missouri this fall.

Related Media Items:

- IANR News Release: <https://ianrnews.unl.edu/article/soil-judging-team-takes-runner-up-at-national-contest-0>
- Tri-State Livestock News: <https://www.tsln.com/news/unl-soil-judging-team-takes-home-runner-up-award-at-the-national-soil-judging-contest/>

2. Desaulniers, McFee earn national NACTA awards for excellence in teaching

Amy Desaulniers and Renee McFee, educators at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln’s Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources, have received prestigious honors from the North American Colleges and Teachers of Agriculture. Desaulniers earned the 2026 NACTA Educator Award, while McFee received the NACTA Teaching Scholar Award, recognizing their excellence in agricultural education. Both contribute significantly to teaching in the School of Veterinary Medicine & Biomedical Sciences, co-instructing key physiology courses. Selected through a national review, they were honored for innovation, student engagement, and impact beyond campus. The awards highlight their dedication to preparing future leaders and advancing agricultural education.

Related Media Item: <https://ianrnews.unl.edu/article/desaulniers-mcfree-earn-national-nacta-awards-for-excellence-in-teaching>

University of Nebraska Foundation

1. Bedford Falls Foundation commits \$1.5 million to create scholarships for 100 UNMC nursing students

The Bedford Falls Foundation–DAF committed \$1.5 million to establish scholarships for 100 students each year in the University of Nebraska Medical Center College of Nursing.

The Joanne and William Conway Nursing Scholarship will be awarded to Nebraska residents pursuing a Bachelor of Science in Nursing at UNMC who are in good academic standing and demonstrate financial need. Students may be enrolled in any College of Nursing division — Omaha, Lincoln, Scottsbluff, Kearney and Norfolk. The scholarship will be awarded for the next three years, beginning in fall 2026. Scholarship recipients will be known as Conway Scholars and receive an average award of \$5,000 per year.

Related Media Item: <https://nufoundation.org/bedford-falls-foundation-commits-1-5-million-for-unmc-nursing-scholarships/>

2. Methane-Powered Tractors Will Bolster Ag Research at Nebraska U

Faculty and students in the University of Nebraska–Lincoln’s Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources will have new agriculture research and education opportunities because of the gift of two New Holland methane-powered tractors.

CNH donated the tractors through the University of Nebraska Foundation. The New Holland T6.180 is the world’s first 100% methane-powered production tractor. Each tractor has a retail value of \$287,240.

The two tractors will be used at the university’s Eastern Nebraska Research, Extension and Education Center (ENREEC), a research and education facility near Mead, Nebraska.

Related Media Item: <https://nufoundation.org/methane-powered-tractors-will-bolster-ag-research/>

Buffett Early Childhood Institute

The Buffett Early Childhood Institute Deepens Its Work on Military Families and Child Care

The Buffett Institute is building on its research and policy work in the military and early childhood space.

In February, Gilliam and University of Nebraska System President Jeffrey P. Gold, M.D., met with Adm. Rich Correll, USSTRATCOM Commander, and Col. Aaron Gray, Commander, 55th Wing at Offutt, at the Davis Global Center at the University of Nebraska Medical Center, to see how our work aligns and how the university can support Offutt and STRATCOM needs.

Gilliam met again in April, the national Month of the Military Child, with military support leaders at the Offutt 55th Force Support Squadron.

Recently, the Institute hired Patty Barron as a trusted consultant to help further shape and deepen the Institute’s military research and policy work. Barron previously spent four years as the deputy assistant secretary of defense for military community and family policy and served as the director of outreach for military family projects at the national ZERO TO THREE organization.

She and two leaders from the National Military Family Association visited the Institute in April and participated in a data camp with the Institute’s Applied Research team.

Future areas of research could include:

- Military child care supply and where shortages exist
- The early childhood workforce in and around military bases
- How workforce development for military spouses could help build the early childhood workforce
- How to better support the physical, mental, emotional, and financial well-being of military families and child care providers serving military families

Related Media Item: <https://www.linkedin.com/feed/update/urn:li:activity:7457496503381614592/>

Daugherty Water for Food Global Institute

Workshop connection secures future of Nebraska kids fitness program

DWFI played a critical role in securing the future of the Nebraska Kids Fitness and Nutrition Day program by hosting the Water, Ag and Nutrition Workshop. This cross-sector gathering, specifically designed to surface connections between researchers, public health officials and community practitioners, created the exact conditions for a vital partnership. Program co-founder Kaiti George attended the workshop and candidly shared that the 20-year-old initiative, which reaches fourth graders with nutrition and physical activity lessons, was facing discontinued funding. State Epidemiologist Sydney Stein, who was actively seeking proven programs to address statewide obesity, met George during a break. This connection, facilitated by DWFI's unique convening power, allowed Stein to include the program in Nebraska's successful proposal for the federal Rural Health Transformation Program (RHTP). As a result, the program has been allocated \$500,000 per year for the next five years, enabling it to expand its scope, update its curriculum, replace decades-old equipment and add new site locations across the state. The outcome demonstrates the value of in-person, multi-disciplinary convenings that put the right people in the same room at the right time.

Related Media Item: <https://waterforfood.nebraska.edu/news-and-events/news/2026/04/workshop-connection-secures-future-of-nebraska-kids-fitness-and-nutrition-program>

National Strategic Research Institute

NSRI welcomes USSTRATCOM deputy commander to HQ for operational update

NSRI recently welcomed U.S. Air Force Lt. Gen. Michael J. Lutton, Deputy Commander, United States Strategic Command, to its headquarters in Omaha, Nebraska, for an operational update briefing and tour of the Scott Data Center.

Led by Maj. Gen., USAF (Ret.) Rick Evans, NSRI executive director, the briefing featured a historical account of the creation, growth and evolution of the institute into the premier academic partner for strategic deterrence research and development it is today.

The new 10-year, \$500 million IDIQ contract through USSTRATCOM positions the institute to continue critical research projects such as the development of a therapeutic for acute radiation syndrome and support for joint electromagnetic spectrum operations while also catalyzing innovative solutions for other mission-critical areas — keeping U.S. forces safe and maintaining America's technological edge.

Related Media Item: <https://www.linkedin.com/feed/update/urn:li:activity:7454984858579361793>