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Nebraska Cooperative Council 56th Annual Meeting

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NEBRASKA COOPERATIVE COUNCIL 56TH ANNUAL MEETING
KEARNEY, NEBRASKA
NOVEMBER 19, 2001
JOHN C. OWENS
NU VICE PRESIDENT AND HARLAN VICE CHANCELLOR, IANR

What a pleasure it is to be with you this morning - thank you for inviting me. I am looking forward to visiting with as many of you as possible while I am here today, and hope to have the opportunity to visit with you more as we meet again at other times and other places. One of the things I am always interested in knowing is what you perceive as Nebraska's greatest needs, now and in the future, and which of those needs you think the University of Nebraska Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources can most efficiently and effectively address for our state. In the Institute we see ourselves as partners with Nebraska, and we seek ways we can work with Nebraska's residents to find the best solutions for our state's concerns.

I was asked to talk about three things today: first, to tell you a little bit about myself; second, to share my perspective on the role of the land-grant university system; and third, to highlight some of my thoughts on the future of the Institute. Any of you who might have heard me speak

before, already may know that I am a tremendous fan of, and believer in, the land-grant university system. And I welcome every opportunity to talk about land-grant universities, our mission, and our future. I am, of course, also always delighted to talk about the Institute, because I think there is so much the Institute does and will do to contribute to Nebraska.

By now, as you've listened to me talk, you've no doubt discerned that my accent is not that of either western or eastern Nebraska. It is, however, a High Plains accent. Just one developed on the High Plains three states south of here. My wife Virginia and I both were born and reared on the High Plains of Texas in the agricultural community of Plainview, which has prided itself for decades on being the county seat of the most agriculturally productive county in Texas. My mom still farms there. In fact, you may have seen my maternal great grandfather's farm on television in the past several months.

Great-grandpa Heinrich Englebrecht immigrated from Germany just as the Civil War broke out. He left Germany to escape military conscription and, with remarkably bad timing, was sworn, under gunpoint, into the Confederacy immediately after landing at the port of Galveston. After the civil war, he began farming and accumulated land both in

Central Texas where he lived, and on the High Plains, where no one in his family was willing to live. Those farms still exist today, and 1,600 acres of great-grandpa's Central Texas farm now is known as President George W. Bush's "Texas Ranch" near Crawford. Every time I see a story on President Bush "at his ranch," I smile. It only became a ranch after it left our family; it was great-grandpa's farm right up until the day it was sold in February of 2000!

To provide you with "a little more" on my background - I earned my baccalaureate degree in biology at West Texas State University, now West Texas A&M University, and my master's degree in entomology at Texas Tech. My doctorate in entomology is from Iowa State University, and I began my career as an assistant professor there in the Department of Zoology and Entomology.

I also served as an associate professor of entomology at Texas Tech and as an entomologist for Pioneer Hi-Bred International before going to New Mexico State University, where I became a full professor. I was "academic department head" of the Department of Entomology and Plant Pathology, and in 1985 became Dean and Chief Administrative Officer of

the College of Agriculture and Home Economics, the New Mexico Cooperative Extension Service, and the New Mexico Agricultural Experiment Station.

I did that work for 12 exciting years until, in 1997, I became NMSU's Executive Vice President and Chief Academic Officer, a position I held until retiring from NMSU as Executive Vice President Emeritus coming to Nebraska in December - and a cold and snowy December day it was, when we slid into Lincoln over icy roads. I think this long and lovely fall we've had this year has more than made up for last winter, however - or at least, I'm willing to think that until we see what *this* winter brings!

In January I started my new job as NU Vice President of Agriculture and Natural Resources and Harlan Vice Chancellor of the Institute, and what an exciting, challenging, fast-paced, and interesting year it has proved to be. It did not take Virginia and me any time at all to learn what you all mean when you say, "there is no place like Nebraska." We have been touched and gratified by the warmth and kindness shown us, and I am absolutely delighted to be here. As a matter of fact, both Virginia and I have become fond of the adage we first heard out in far western Nebraska: "We weren't born in Nebraska, but we got here as fast as we

could!" I am excited by all I think we in the Institute can do, working with you, our partners, and with other partners, as well, to fulfill our land-grant university mission and the Institute's vision to be, "*the premier provider of educational, research, and outreach programs essential for shaping Nebraska's future as a leader in the 21st Century in the areas of food, agriculture and agribusiness systems, natural resources, and human resources.*"

I am optimistic about what we can do, working together, for Nebraska.

As I said earlier, I am a true believer in the land grant university mission. I always am so pleased when someone asks me to talk about that mission, as I have been asked to do today, because land-grant universities are one of my all-time favorite topics. I am a great admirer of the 19th century Vermont Senator, Justin Smith Morrill, whose Morrill Act of 1862 created land grant universities. I also am a great admirer of Abraham Lincoln, who signed that act into law on July 2, 1862. I consider the Morrill Act one of the most far-sighted and far-reaching pieces of legislation ever passed by the United States Congress. Someone once asked the late historian James Michener what he considered the two most

all-time important pieces of legislation ever passed by Congress, and he named the Morrill Act and the GI Bill, both of which made higher education available to people for whom it might otherwise have been out-of-reach.

I like to quote the Morrill Act, and am particularly fond of the phrase "*the leading object*," as in "*the leading object shall be, without excluding other scientific and classical studies and including military tactics, to teach such branches of learning as are related to agriculture and the mechanic arts, in such manner as the legislatures of the States may respectively prescribe, in order to promote the liberal and practical education of the industrial classes in the several pursuits and professions in life.*"

When you visit the Institute on the University of Nebraska-Lincoln's east campus and at its statewide research and extension centers, you will find the words "The Leading Object" on the doors to Institute buildings. I think that each time we in the Institute, and those who visit us, see those signs we are reminded of the great land-grant university mission to which we are called, and the illustrious educational heritage that is ours to carry on and to further advance.

"To promote the liberal and practical education of the industrial classes," the Morrill Act said. I can't tell you how many times I've marveled at the vision behind that statement. In creating land-grant universities to deliver the knowledge of the university to those who need it, the Morrill Act democratized higher education.

The leading object of land-grant universities, true when they were first established and just as true today, is to work with the people we serve, and to take the resources, the riches, and the technologies of the University to the citizens of the state. I see service in the highest sense of the word as the distinctive land-grant university responsibility, and I consider both the concept of service and the act of serving to be highly honorable. When we take the University's resources to Nebraska's citizens, and when we participate with those citizens, and they with us, in a mutually respectful, "two-way street" approach to their local issues, we fulfill the land-grant university mission. When we work with you as partners with Nebraska - and being partners with Nebraska is important to us in the Institute - we are engaged with our state, involved in a give-and-take that spirals us all upward, building on the Institute's research and teaching strengths and the strengths brought-us by our partners to move

forward to meet the needs we've identified together.

In fulfilling our land-grant university mission, we in the Institute discover-knowledge through research in our focus areas of food, agriculture-and-agribusiness systems, natural resources, and human resources. Our Agricultural Research Division reminds us that our researchers are pioneering the future, and that truly is what research is all about. Pioneering. Discovery. That "eureka" moment when something new is found and known. Or, even more likely, that earlier moment when someone says in a musing voice, "that's odd..." and a search for-why-that-is begins.

Once new knowledge is discovered, we share it with the world. That is what land-grant universities do best. We provide solid, unbiased, research-based information people can use to make choices and decisions in their lives.

We transfer that knowledge in our classrooms and teaching laboratories, along with the learning-and-living skills that help people apply knowledge and build on it so they can participate in lifelong learning, and so they can be responsible community, state, national, and world citizens. We also transfer knowledge in another way when we

"extend knowledge to Nebraska through our statewide University of Nebraska Cooperative Extension programs. I consider Cooperative Extension to be the best "out of the classroom" educational opportunity ever-devised." Extension education is "a key component of the land-grant mission and of the university's scholarly activity."

Land-grant universities and colleges of agriculture have been "the topic of a great deal of study in the past few years - in fact, I can count at least 20 recent studies in the broad area of land-grant universities, agriculture, and related areas. Some of them carry titles such as "Rethinking the Outlook of Colleges whose Roots have been in Agriculture," and "Challenges Confronting Agricultural Research at Land Grant Universities."

As I've read and participated in those studies I've concluded that it is "when land grant universities move away from the precepts of the Morrill Act that they "drift" into trouble.

When a land grant university's service to everyday, ordinary people "gives way to pursuit of prestige or exclusivity, that land grant university is adrift. When clients "are excluded" from the process of helping set the direction of research and extension education programs, that land-grant

university is in trouble. I am totally convinced that land-grant universities that disenfranchise their local partners are on the road to a meaningless, irrelevant existence.

That's why I think it is so important that those of us who wish to successfully address the future of land-grant universities must embrace new needs and new audiences while meeting the needs and maintaining the support of those with whom we've traditionally worked.

We must identify our state's needs - something land-grant universities are positioned to do better than any other type of institution. We must further the understanding between our new and our traditional audiences, and we must respond to the concerns of each. We must understand how interdependent so many things - and so many of us - are in today's global economy.

If we in the Institute are to fulfill our vision we must be responsive to both traditional and new audiences in relevant ways that contribute to the future of Nebraska's citizens and the state in our focus areas.

That said, I can assure you that, working with people in this room and others across the state, I think the future of IANR must be and will be framed by our land-grant university heritage and mission.

Over 25 years ago people in Nebraska had the vision and the wisdom to recognize and reaffirm the importance of agriculture and natural resources in this state, and to strongly support the establishment of an Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources at the University. The Nebraska Legislature recognized both the importance of agriculture and natural resources in the lives and future of all Nebraskans, as well as the significance of these programs within the University, when it passed LB149 in 1973. The University of Nebraska Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources was formed the following year. Agriculture and natural resources are tremendously important in Nebraska, and the issues and concerns that arise around them are our issues and our concerns.

As you all know, the entire University system is facing a major-rescission because of the downturn in the state's tax revenues. Because we are partners with Nebraska, we in the University expect to carry our fair share of the state's budget rescissions, just as we hope to share in Nebraska's economic good times. We think investments in the University are investments in the state's development and success. I can assure you that we in the Institute will do all we can to continue to provide Nebraska

with the research, teaching, and extension education programs that meet the state's needs in our focus areas and contributes to the economic and environmental well-being, as well as the quality of life, of Nebraska and its citizens.

These are "challenging times" we find ourselves in. I'm sure each of us in this room has found ourselves in challenging times before. Needs of the state do not decrease with decreased state tax revenues; in fact, I would expect the opposite to be true. You and I know that agriculture faces complex issues today; issues I wish I had "easy answers" to, but I do not. What I do have is a firm belief that we in the Institute and at the University of Nebraska, working with you and our "other partners" in Nebraska, are up to the challenge, and will continue to work strongly for the good of the state and its people.

Thank you.

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