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Panhandle Spring Conference

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PANHANDLE SPRING CONFERENCE
MARCH 13, 2001
GERING, NEBRASKA
JOHN C. OWENS
NU VICE PRESIDENT AND IANR VICE CHANCELLOR

I am so pleased to be here with you today.

I've been asked to visit with you a bit about the future of IANR and its role in rural Nebraska, and that is exactly what I want to do – to visit with you. I want to hear what you have to say.

I'll begin today with some prepared remarks, to help you better understand how I view the work we do, but because I only have been in Nebraska since just before the Christmas holidays, and at IANR since January 2, I think it would be presumptuous of me to speak to you today as an expert on the needs of ~~the~~ Nebraska and the role of IANR in meeting those needs.

You, however – I think it's safe to assume the majority of you have been in the state and the Institute much longer than I have. How many native Nebraskans do we have here – could I see a show of hands? How many people have been in Nebraska five years or

longer? How many have been with the Institute at least 10 years?

Fifteen years or more?

You're the ones with expertise. You're the ones who work in rural areas every day. You're the ones who I need to help me identify the needs of rural Nebraska that IANR can best help meet. I want to know what you think our role in rural Nebraska is now, and what you think it should be. I want to hear what you think IANR's future should be, and after I've completed my remarks, we will have time to discuss that future if you wish to do so.

Albert Einstein once said that, "the problems that exist in the world today cannot be solved by the level of thinking that created them."

I look to you for new and creative thinking to help solve the problems Nebraskans face today and are likely to face in the future, and I look forward to hearing what you have to say. In the next few months I plan to visit many parts of Nebraska to talk with decision makers, constituents, IANR personnel, and others to hear what people

across the state think Nebraska needs and what they think IANR can do to help meet those needs. I also expect to explore the needs and dreams of those who are not our traditional clients, because the land-grant university mission to take the resources of the University across the state to serve Nebraska applies to them also, and we must grow our constituent base to best serve the Nebraska.

If you were in Lincoln for the IANR Day Conference last week you heard me say that I am a big believer in the public service mission of the land-grant University of Nebraska. If you were not present, you need to know that, because it influences my vision of the role of IANR. I see service as a key land-grant university responsibility, and I am a true believer in the land-grant university mission. I also am a huge admirer of Justin Smith Morrill, author of the 1862 Morrill Act creating land-grants, and of President Abraham Lincoln, who signed the act into law.

There is a phrase in the Morrill Act that I think of often. The phrase is "*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 order to promote the liberal and practical education of the industrial classes in the several pursuits and professions of life."

The leading object of land-grant universities, true when they were first created and still as true today, is to work with the people we serve, and to take the resources, riches, and technologies of the University to the citizens of the state. That is our role, and I thank each of you for your part in fulfilling that role.

It is our land-grant university mission to discover knowledge through research, and to transfer that new knowledge in our classrooms and teaching laboratories, along with the learning and living skills necessary to 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. Besides our classroom teaching we also transfer knowledge through our

statewide extension education programs, as you all know better than anyone. I personally think extension is the best "out-of-classroom" educational opportunity ever devised, and extension education is a key component of the land-grant university mission.

I also think we must always include our clients in the process of helping set the direction of our extension education and research programs. I think those land-grant universities that disenfranchise their local partners are on the road to a meaningless and irrelevant existence. I think any land-grant university that pursues prestige or exclusivity to the detriment of service to every day, ordinary people is in big trouble. I feel very strongly about this.

The Institute is a partner with Nebraska in our priority areas of food, agriculture, agribusiness, natural resources, people, and communities. Our product is knowledge. We discover it through research and, once discovered, we share that new knowledge with the world. This is what land-grant universities do best. We provide solid, research-based information people can use to make choices and

decisions in their lives.

Rural Nebraska and agriculture, with one in four Nebraska jobs related to agriculture, are important to this state. Yet I think it understandable that some of our rural constituents, watching the state's urban economy hum merrily along while the rural economy struggles, may feel forgotten. They are not forgotten.

Rural Nebraska's importance to our state is a key reason the University has launched a multi-year Rural Initiative to place University resources at the disposal of people and communities in rural Nebraska.

I'm going to talk a little about the University's Rural Initiative today. I'm excited about this initiative because it steps up and expands efforts already under way throughout all campuses of the University to provide rural Nebraska with specific programs, services, and assistance in the areas of business development and entrepreneurship, e-commerce for small businesses, expansion of distance education, telehealth and telemedicine, and value-added agriculture focused on

rural Nebraska needs.

This Initiative is our response to the economic and social challenges facing rural Nebraska. We're working with people in rural Nebraska and Nebraska's various institutional resources to address rural Nebraska concerns. We know very well that the university can't solve all problems, but we have great faith in the tenacity, resiliency and determination of rural Nebraskans, and we hope that, working with them, we can all do our part to strengthen rural areas.

You all know that we're doing our best at the University to answer calls to help rural communities' businesses, families, farms, ranches, and local institutions find solutions – and because you're involved, you know we in IANR are in the midst of that – but we need to do more and move faster than our already stretched-thin resources allow. We know there is so much to do.

To further what the university is already doing, the first specific program thrust of the University's Rural Initiative is a public service/engagement piece included in the University's budget request to

the legislature for the next two years. Funding for that public service/engagement work is one of the University's three priorities this biennium, in addition to needed funds for salaries and restoration of the university's health insurance trust fund. If the legislature approves that public service/engagement request, it will fund three endeavors. The first focuses on rural economic viability and entrepreneurship through connectivity; the second focuses on building on a proven track record in health care; and the third focuses on collaboration with K-12 education.

We in the Institute already are at work on efforts to focus on rural economic viability and entrepreneurship through connectivity. Additional funding requested in this year's biennium budget will place four new full-time University faculty at our Research and Extension Centers across the state to serve as resource providers, educators, and facilitators, and as "point persons" for rural economic development for communities and businesses. Small and medium-sized farms are considered part of the business community.

A fifth new faculty member in IANR in Lincoln will work with those at the Research and Extension Centers. This person would focus on enhancing the viability of small and medium-sized farms and ranches with emphasis on family farms.

Our "entrepreneurship through connectivity" endeavor would expand our existing Technologies Across Nebraska work, which is an outgrowth of a research study requested by Senators Bromm and Wickersham, in support of discussions taking place around the study resolution LR330 in the 2000 legislative session. It would add four new Cooperative Extension educators specifically skilled in the areas of information technologies and community education to eight faculty members whose responsibilities already have been shifted to work in this area. The goal is to help overcome the digital divide that rural communities face by providing communities with opportunities to study advanced telecommunications options and determine and implement those that best meet their needs. We also would like to help grow the knowledge, skills, and abilities necessary for individuals and

businesses to make the most of their communities' telecommunications connections. Existing and new staff members will partner with agencies to provide a local leadership role in assisting communities.

To address the critical need for high quality, accessible health care in Nebraska's rural communities, the "building on a proven record in health care" endeavor will add six new physician residencies in Scottsbluff and North Platte, and two in the Lincoln Medical Educational Foundation. The University of Nebraska Medical Center has the most graduates of rural residencies of any similar program in the nation; its Primary Care Rural Training Track offers students experiences living and practicing in rural areas.

Because we in the University believe enhanced collaboration between NU teacher-education colleges and K-12 schools is key in continuing to make certain Nebraskans are well-served by their K-12 schools, the third endeavor of the public service/engagement proposal requests funds to enhance existing collaborative efforts and add several programs, including such things as a mentoring program in

which Master Teachers assist beginning teachers, and support for the School at the Center Program, working with 25 rural Nebraska communities to enhance education quality.

The University is requesting \$750,000 in each year of the biennium to address these rural Nebraska needs. As I said earlier, we already are at work on these issues, in the land-grant university tradition of being of service to the citizens of the state – I would expect there are people in this room who are highly involved in them – but our resources are stretched so thin. We cannot begin to meet all the requests for help NOW, the need is so great.

Senator Cap Dierks has introduced LB588 in this legislative session to create the Rural Initiative Act stating a legislative intent to appropriate funds to the university for this purpose and putting the legislature on record as supporting university involvement in improving the economic and social viability of rural Nebraska.

Yes, Rural Nebraska is important – to the state, to the Institute, to the University. You are important, in meeting the needs of rural

Nebraska, in representing the University and IANR, in taking the resources of the University to the people you serve. What you do – and the enthusiasm with which you do it – matters.

I look to each of you to help lead all that needs to be done here, and I plan to work with you each step of the way. You certainly are not alone in this work, because when it comes to this sort of service to Nebraska, I expect everyone in this room to be going down a service path established by our land-grant university mission. And I hope you will do it with enthusiasm.

Ralph Waldo Emerson said once that, "Every great and commanding moment in the annals of the world is the triumph of somebody's enthusiasm."

So also are many of the quiet and less visible, but no less enduring, triumphs.

We will do our best to meet the needs of rural Nebraska working individually and collectively. I expect that we will do our best to support each other, and to focus on what is important – which

sometimes we must differentiate from what is in our face.

I think that ever since land-grant universities were established, they have made a difference. A big difference. I also think that each of you make a big difference – a positive, needed difference – everyday.

As we begin our work together, you and I, we must seize the opportunities that present themselves, and we also must do our best to make opportunities where we need them. We must constantly scan the horizon for future needs; we must do our very best to meet those opportunities that come our way to be of service to the citizens of Nebraska. While we cannot do all things, we can do some things very well – and with enthusiasm. I look forward to the adventure.

Now. Let's discuss what you think rural Nebraska's chief needs are, the role IANR should play in them, and what you think the future of IANR should be.