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RURAL OUTREACH
Presented to the Board of Regents at the
University of Nebraska Medical Center
January 17, 2003
John C. Owens

I think it comes as no surprise here when I say I am a very firm believer in the importance of engagement and outreach for Nebraska's land-grant university. We have a proud tradition of teaching, research, and engagement and outreach at the University of Nebraska. And each day we build on that tradition.

Today I have been asked to talk with you about University of Nebraska outreach to rural Nebraska. In doing that, I will touch briefly on four topics to get our discussion started, knowing there is much more being done across the university's four campuses than can be covered in the time we have today. Those four topics are:

1) What we can expect rural outreach to accomplish in the future;

2) the Rural Initiative as an example of systemwide outreach;

3) the strategic planning process we're undertaking in the Institute, with Cooperative Extension as an example of the university's educational engagement-and-outreach efforts; and

4) [redacted] President Smith asked me to work to determine if Cooperative Extension, Continuing Studies, Public Service, Distance Education, and

could become a single entity, systemwide

the Research and Extension Centers, ~~systemwide~~, can take on a major role in distance education and outreach for all of Nebraska. He asked that we eliminate any duplication and determine if we can restructure at the system level to make University of Nebraska outreach-and-engagement even more effective. State budget cuts have drastically impacted the units involved in the President's charge and have made this a challenging assignment.

UNMC - BOB BARTEE
UNO - B. J. Reed
UNK - Rudy Lewis
UNL - Elliot Dicks

Each Chancellor has designated a campus-representative for discussion of university-wide outreach, and we brought Dr. Weldon Sleight, Associate Vice President for University Extension and Associate Dean for Continuing Education at Utah State University, to Lincoln as a consultant to work with us in exploring the various land-grant university outreach models, and to determine what might work best for Nebraska.

I cannot tell you with absolute certainty today exactly what our university's outreach will look like in the future. I do think it will rely more upon new and emerging technologies. It will be a more ~~a~~ coordinated university-system model. And if we are wise, it will be a model with flexibility to change as change is needed for Nebraska.

I *can* tell you with absolute certainty what I think university engagement-and-outreach will accomplish. It will fulfill the great land grant university mission to which this university was called at its founding back in 1869, and it will remain true

to that mission which it has fulfilled so admirably over the years. It will take the resources of the university to the citizens of our state. It will engage with people in discussions of their priority issues and in the development of programs to address these issues. It will provide university knowledge and resources to help meet Nebraska's needs.

The Rural Initiative, with its mission of increasing economic opportunity in rural Nebraska's communities, businesses, and neighborhoods, is an example of a university-wide outreach effort. The Initiative works in partnership with university personnel, as well as with people outside the university who have resources that are addressing or could address rural problems or opportunities. Those involved with the Rural Initiative will work with rural Nebraskans to determine priority needs and support action plan development that draws primarily from existing programs and resources. The Initiative's first focus is to increase "ready access" to university knowledge, research results, and university personnel for the communities, businesses, and individuals seeking expertise on rural development issues. The Initiative will join and, when appropriate, organize effective collaborations to increase rural areas' economic well-being. To achieve its goal of increasing economic opportunity, the Rural Initiative is emphasizing increasing the use of technology and the retention of young people in our rural areas. Technologies Across Nebraska, led by our Cooperative Extension Division and the Nebraska Information

Technology Commission, will be the primary vehicle for technology activities.

I mentioned I'd like to talk briefly about the strategic planning process we in the Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources are undertaking to update our strategic plan. Dr. Alan Baquet, Associate Vice Chancellor for the Institute, will head this strategic planning effort. We are launching this effort now because the economic climate in which our current plan was developed has changed. And we want to gain Nebraskans' thinking, statewide, on their priority needs, and what they want and need the IANR of the future to be. This will guide our intertwined teaching, research, and extension education programming in the Institute. I think in these statewide listening sessions, we will gain both the information we are looking for for the Institute, and insights as to how NU outreach efforts might more efficiently collaborate to carry the university's resources to Nebraska. I will be glad to come back to future Board meeting to discuss our findings with you [redacted]

REGENTS — Regental districts — ELECTED OFFICIALS

In our last Institute strategic planning process, we held over 20 listening sessions throughout the state. Over 700 people contributed their views on what the Institute should be and should do for Nebraska. We look forward to engaging with the PEOPLE OF OUR state again in this process, and plan from now on to conduct yearly updates, to allow us to refresh and modify our plan more quickly as identified needs change.

I think it important to say today that Nebraska rural outreach is not broken. It

certainly can be enhanced, and there are things our university must do differently because of funding cuts. I mentioned earlier I'll use Cooperative Extension as an example of how we are taking the university's resources to Nebraska because it's an example with which I'm well-acquainted. For years Cooperative Extension has provided education that people can put to use in their lives – research-based knowledge that provides a basis for making decisions that contribute to both our citizens' economic well-being and their quality of life. Cooperative Extension has a university presence in all 93 Nebraska counties, with UNL extension offices in 83 of them. Extension education is available 24/7 via the Web, through such vehicles as learning modules, archived video, and publications.

We are proud of Cooperative Extension's strong roots, presence, and tradition in rural Nebraska, in agriculture, in families, and in communities. We intend to keep those roots strong. Because our land-grant university mission is to take the university's resources to the people of the state to meet Nebraska's needs, it is natural that extension education programming migrates, also, to towns and cities just as Nebraskans migrated to urban areas. We work where Nebraskans are; we develop our educational programming in response to priority needs. Extension works across academic departments to link needed university expertise to those citizens needing that expertise. We think strength in rural extension education bolsters strength in urban programming, and vice versa.

SOMETIMES [redacted] at present, we have some folks so frustrated over university budget cuts that occurred in or near their communities that they CONTEND [redacted] the university is losing its commitment to rural Nebraska. It is both regrettable and understandable that someone might see a university-cut in their own community as a lessening of interest in them. It also is erroneous. There is no lessening of interest. There is only the cold, hard reality that with the significant cuts we have suffered in the university budget, we cannot provide everything we have provided before. We are doing all we can with the resources available to us. Some things, however, we must do differently than before.

The strengths of current university rural outreach are that we have a very real commitment to it, and a well-established network by which we can deliver it. We have experts skilled in and dedicated to doing just that. We have experience in working with rural Nebraskans to determine the issues most critical to people there, and the ways to provide education to meet those needs. In the Institute, we have an established strategic planning process through which we work to identify important needs and ways to meet them.

As to challenges – certainly funding is a challenge for us. Funding has decreased; demand has not. We must determine ways to prioritize those needs, and we must meet some needs in ways different than we have met them before. This can be extremely troubling to our constituents. That, too, is a challenge for us.

~~Another challenge is that while we are doing our level best to meet as many engagement and outreach needs as we can, given the significant cuts, we face the feelings of abandonment felt by constituents who have seen cuts in their communities. We must realize that sometimes, when people say all the university's resources are being moved to the university campuses and nothing is being left out in the state, they are not necessarily talking about whether or not education is available to them. In many instances they are reacting to a change in methodology, which may feel like a loss.~~ The fact that we can and we do provide excellent education via technology may not alter someone's perception that the university has pulled back from them because the program or the person they used to go to no longer is in their neighborhood. This is a challenge.

I hope my comments today will serve as a springboard to discussion. It is both our privilege and our responsibility as Nebraska's land-grant university for us to engage with the citizens of our state and to provide educational programming statewide, by taking the resources of the university to them.

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