

2006

Regents Outreach and Economic Development Task Force Meeting

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Regents Outreach and Economic Development Task Force
Meeting
Thursday, January 19, 2006
Varner Hall
John C. Owens
NU Vice President and Harlan Vice Chancellor, IANR

Let me begin today by thanking you, Regent Hassebrook, as Task Force Chair, and each of you who is a member of this Task Force, for focusing on outreach and economic development at the University as we work on behalf of Nebraska. We thank Regent Chair Howard Hawks for appointing this task force. The level of commitment this shows for the university's role in outreach and economic development is very important both to us in the university and to Nebraskans.

Programs panel members will discuss today and issues they will identify, as well as recommendations I expect will grow out of this task force's work, are in keeping with the university's strategic plan. In the Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources, rural economic development and community vitality is a focus area in our strategic plan, as well. That focus grows out

of listening sessions we held throughout the state as part of our strategic planning process. In over 30 listening sessions we held from north to south and east to west in Nebraska, we heard two themes echoed repeatedly as Nebraskans' concerns. One was water, also an Institute priority. The other is economic development and community vitality. Because of that emphasis, each of the units within the Institute has been asked to address the topic this year in their budget planning process. As we review their plans with the units in the next few months, we'll summarize their goals and look for ways to coordinate what each is doing to sum individual parts into a greater whole. As we review impacts and accomplishments over time we will do so with an eye to where programmatic changes can be made to best meet current and emerging needs.

We have three panels to hear from today and, because we want the time we have together to focus there, I want to keep my introductory remarks brief. There are a few thoughts I do want to share in this first meeting, however, and I want to be

very clear that I always am available to answer questions and to work with you on this topic of such importance to Nebraska. We in the Institute are big believers in the future of Nebraska, both its rural and metropolitan areas. To those who say the demise of rural Nebraska is inevitable, we take a page from Anthony McAuliffe, acting commander of the 101st Airborne Division during the Battle of the Bulge in World War II, who, when called upon by advancing German forces to surrender, replied simply: "Nuts."

His one-word reply exemplified the courage and fierce determination of a people with absolutely no intention of surrendering. We feel the same way about Nebraska, and I am very happy to tell you the Nebraskans we work with – and as the state's land-grant university, we work with Nebraskans every day – those Nebraskans agree. We recognize the dramatic changes that affect our rural areas today; we understand a global marketplace and changing technology affects us all. We know there are no easy fixes to the economic concerns our state's communities face, but we believe there are possibilities and

opportunities we must explore. That takes coordination and collaboration and real commitment to working together from all of us here in the university and all of our partners throughout the state, including government and private industry. We have made real efforts to work together and integrate the work of what each of us is doing to provide the maximum amount of effect for Nebraska, and we continue to do so every day. It is important both because we want to make the best possible use of our finite resources, and because we believe the work of all of us as a whole provides the state greater benefits than the individual work of our various parts is likely to do. Here at the University of Nebraska I believe we also must continually ask ourselves, “what is the best role the state’s land-grant university can play in helping Nebraska reach its goal?”

I have heard people argue that land-grant university’s heyday was in the last century, but I am a firm believer that, as our world grows ever more complex and issues and concerns come toward us at an ever-greater clip, the need for land-grants

and the skills and resources they bring their states is greater than ever. One question we must address, I think, deals with the reality of our situation: Our resources are finite. Budget cuts are part of our reality. How do we best allocate our resources between competing needs – needs that are very real, both in the short and the long-term. How do we balance the demands of current stakeholders with what we owe future Nebraskans so that neither present nor future so fills our vision that we shortchange the other?

Today you will by no means hear all that is occurring for outreach and economic development in the state. Today we begin with specific programs you requested, and we will go from there. It is apparent in what you will hear today that we make a difference in Nebraska. Sometimes we can put a quantifiable dollar amount to that difference, such as when we can say extensive muscle profiling research conducted by our scientists laid the groundwork for the beef industry to develop exciting new products, such as the popular flat iron steak, that have increased

demand and added \$50 to \$70 in value per head in the past seven years. More than 26 million cattle are fed and marketed in the U.S. each year. That represents \$1.3 *billion* to \$1.8 *billion* in added value annually. That's a tremendous contribution in a state where beef is big business, and we are pleased to be able to quantify it and offer it as an example of how we are at work for Nebraska.

Other contributions are not as easily quantified. Some are great contributors to quality of life, which we all recognize but can find elusive to associate with dollar figures. Some are building blocks for the future, with results that are measured over the long, not the short-term. It is part of our strategic planning to seek ways we can best identify relevant and realistic indicators of success, because we realize the importance of reporting to our stakeholders the return they receive on their dollars invested with us. We welcome your strategic thinking on how this can best be accomplished, as well. We value your ideas and insights as we move forward in our work for Nebraska.

Before our panels begin today I do want to note for you that we have just hired Rolando Flores as head of our Food Science and Technology department, and director of our Food Processing Center, which we see as a key program for improving Nebraska's economic competitiveness. Thank you for your focus on and interest in outreach and economic development for our state. Thank you for this opportunity to discuss with you today. Let's move on to our panels now. Thank you.