



NU President D.B. Varner reviews the status of the University

Photos by Steve Boerner

Varner: The State of the University is good

By John Kalkowski

Flying to Indianapolis on Wednesday, to Denver Friday night, and to Chicago on Sunday of last week, NU President Durward B. Varner's life revolves around his main charge — the University of Nebraska system.

Varner heads the administration of a university which he said has a close partnership and mutual dependency with the people of Nebraska.

It was this unique relationship between the people of the state and the University which intrigued Varner enough to draw him away from a "contented" life at Michigan State University-Oakland (MSU-O) five years ago.

In 1969, when he headed MSU-O, Varner was contacted by the NU Board of Regents.

When he received the board's first call, Varner told them he was not interested and that they might have a case of mistaken identity. When the Board of Regents called again, Varner agreed to come to Chicago to discuss the position. Again he told the Board he was not interested.

But after talking to the Board of Regents, he said he was intrigued with the opportunity to make a contribution to the whole state.

"Our belief was that if we did well enough, we could make a difference in the lives of a lot of people in this state," Varner said.

He traveled to Nebraska with his wife and daughter to look at the University and the state. "After pondering the question mightily for two weeks," the Varners decided to move to Nebraska.

Varner plunged into his newest challenge. Immediately he faced what he called "the most discouraging time we have spent in this state."

He said he recommended a sizable budget increase to move the University toward academic excellence, but was faced with a new governor, J.J. Exon, who had campaigned for reduced state spending and lessening of taxes.

If the governor's recommendations had been implemented, it would have been a major disaster for the University, he said.

Coming to Nebraska with very high aspirations for moving the University along, Varner said the first budget was a hard prospect to confront.

Being continuously in the public eye has become a part of his lifestyle, he said. There are many immediate issues needing to be addressed that pile up, creating a sense of frustration at times, Varner said.

In a soft voice, he added that he tends to thrive on such pressures. "I enjoy working at problems, trying to find solutions, trying to make things happen that can help us achieve our total goals," he said.

Again, Varner and the whole University face difficult budget appropriations from the Unicameral.

According to Varner, the governor has recommended a University of Nebraska budget of \$71.6 million, \$14 million less than his staff's recommendations.

He said there are two basic components to the NU budget: continuation and enrichment.

The continuation component would allow the University to operate without expansion, Varner said. If the University is to continue on the present basis, he said it will need anywhere from \$2.7 million to \$4.2 million more than the governor's recommendations. That does not include funds for the enrichment areas: agricultural research, efforts to provide health care for rural Nebraska, and further funding of the Programs of Excellence at the University.

"We have tried not to make any inflammatory statement or push panic buttons which is indeed a temptation," Varner said. "If the budget is cut," he

said, "something will have to give."

According to Varner, the University, which is "a single citadel around which the state is surrounded," must be a cultural catalyst for the whole state.

Using the resources of the University, Nebraska should further develop agriculture, its major industry, expand the arts, and further diversify its industries.

"With all the vigor we can muster, we must keep Nebraska's agricultural economy bolstered and highly competitive with expanded research," Varner said.

The University also should provide a base of encouragement to expand the arts in Nebraska by bringing in major orchestras, ballets and theater, he said.

Allowing students to express themselves in the best art forms is part of their total education, he said.

Varner said Nebraska also must be concerned about diversifying its economic base by bringing in new industry. He emphasized that any new industry should be "clean" industry. "I do not want to see smoke stacks spewing black smoke," he said.

In his five years at NU, Varner said the University of Nebraska system has made major improvements.

Varner came to the University when the merging of UN-L, UNO and UNMC was in its embryonic stages. He said his most important single achievement and concern is the merging of the colleges.

Varner: "I enjoy working at problems, trying to find solutions, trying to make things happen that can help us achieve our total goals."

Since he has come to the University, a system wide office, a capital construction office and a new accounting system have been established.

A major obstacle to overcome is the tensions existing between the campuses, Varner said. There was a strong feeling on the Omaha campus that Lincoln had the best of all worlds and the Omaha campus was just a second cousin, he said. Of major concern on the Lincoln campus was the apprehension that UNO was an intruder taking away funds, Varner said.

The tensions still exist and always will, Varner said. But the tensions have been greatly reduced, he added.

Varner also had established a new system-administration "with no preconceived notions," and has clearly fixed the lines of authority on each campus to the chancellors' offices.

In ten years, Varner predicted NU will be a nationally recognized, academically strong University. It will be more aggressive in reaching out to the people of the state, he said.

"Too long education has been restricted only to the young," he said. The University will have a more diverse student population because of increased interest of the state's adults, according to Varner.

His demanding existence at the University has made it difficult to work in any kind of family and private life, he said. "We always hope to carve out some fraction of time we can devote to our family life," Varner said.

The Varners try to reserve Sundays for themselves, but he said staff meetings, traveling on Sundays and being an elder at Westminster Presbyterian Church often infringe.

The Varners also entertain at their home on the average of once a week, he said. Last Saturday, they had 40 persons at their home for dinner.

Many organizations, such as the Legislative Ladies League and Lincoln Symphony Guild meet at their home.

Behind his office desk, Varner appears to be the understanding, yet firm administrator, clad in a businessman's suit. In a low voice, he explained the working of the University of Nebraska system and his personal involvements in it.

Later, at home, in a red and white checked shirt and red cardigan sweater, he relaxed his tall Texan frame, again talking in a low voice about his family and his job.

A typical day for Varner begins at 6:20 a.m. As soon as he wakes he rides his stationary bicycle four miles before a light breakfast. He said he is usually at his office by 8 a.m.

The day is filled with phone calls, appointments with staff members, the chancellors and people from across the state, Varner said. Invariably, Mrs. Varner added, he has a luncheon or breakfast to attend.

He said he works until 6 p.m. and that three or four nights a week he must attend meetings. At other times he travels for the University, dictating to his dictaphone and catching catnaps between cities, he said.

"No day is really a typical day," Varner said.

Varner said he has three hobbies he enjoys when he can.

His "first and foremost hobby" is his family, he said.

"A farm boy at heart," Varner also enjoys gardening. He bought a vacant lot a few blocks from their home in the Knolls. There he grows flowers and vegetables.

Both Varner and his wife enjoy golfing, he said.

Varner grew up on a Texas farm about 200 miles west of Dallas. He attended Texas A & M where he received his bachelor's degree.

While at Texas A & M, Varner said, he had a blind date with the "Baylor University Sweetheart." That sweetheart later became Mrs. Paula Varner.

"I think he liked me because I liked chocolate ice cream," Mrs. Varner said.

With a hint of a smile, Varner said, "That's not the only reason."

Varner did post-graduate work at the University of Chicago. Although he had finished his work on a doctoral degree, he never received the degree. When he finished his doctoral dissertation, his review committee was scattered around the world.

Before his committee got back, he was plunged into a major role of administering the agricultural cooperative extension service at Michigan State University.

"The excitement of restructuring and giving a sense of new direction to the extension service was so interesting, I never really went back and paid any attention," he said. The dissertation still sits where it sat 20 years ago, he said.

At age 32, Varner was leaptfrogged from assistant professor to a full professor and became vice president at MSU.

Editor's Note

D.B. Varner and James Zumberge are familiar names on the NU campus. But what is the nature of their jobs and duties of other campus administrators?

To answer this question Midweek this week features interviews with four of seven University officials and their views and ideas about the NU system.

Part two next week will explore responsibilities of administrators Ken Bader, James Zumberge and Steven Sample.