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Varner: Excellence Areas need money to reach goals

Though all departments in the Areas of Excellence (AOE) program have undergone observation by visitation committees, sweeping judgments cannot be made yet, said two University of Nebraska administrators Tuesday.

AOE, which was initiated last fall by the university administration, is a program in which various UNL and UNO departments receive more funds from the Legislature than appropriated in the regular university budget.

Six UNL departments were designated by last year's appropriations bill to receive a total of \$458,630 to develop educational programs defined as an AOE.

Areas designated in the program are life sciences, chemistry, journalism, education, architecture and business administration.

Monitored progress

NU president D.B. Varner said visitation committee members helped department heads monitor progress in each field designated in the AOE program.

Visitation committees comprised university faculty, faculty members from other universities, state officials and students.

"The visitation committees helped us to set our sights on reasonable goals for each of the areas identified in the AOE program," UNL Chancellor James Zumberge said.

Visitation committee members field reports to help department heads, Zumberge said.

Modified goals

Alan T. Seagren, assistant vice-chancellor for academic affairs, added that visiting faculty members made reports that helped modify the initial goals outlined by UNL department chairpersons.

"A typical report made general observations about the faculty, curriculums and goals for each area (in the AOE program)," Seagren said. "These reports were followed with specific recommendations for each department to consider."

Seagren said an example of a recommendation to department personnel in the Teacher's College was how the field of adult education relates to non-traditional education. Non-traditional education is the education program for students who work while attending school part-time or who take extension courses, Seagren explained.

Problems occurred

Although the reports made by visitation committee members were helpful to UNL faculty members, some problems did occur during the first stages of the AOE program, Seagren said.

One problem was how to define excellence, Seagren said. A visitation committee report to the UNL administration defined excellence as "comparatively examining standards of the past

with the performance of the present," the report states.

Another problem was scheduling the activities for members of the visitation committees after they came to UNL, Seagren said. The visiting faculty members met with students, UNL instructors and department directors.

New model

"The concept for the AOE program presents a new model for departmental budgeting and planning," Seagren said. "This concept has been difficult to communicate to faculty members (at UNL)," he said.

A final problem involved with the AOE program Seagren said, was that some long-range goals were identified for some areas that did not always reflect short-term achievement in the AOE program.

Varner said additional state financing is necessary to achieve the objectives established for the AOE program by the university administration.

"A one-year injection of funds isn't enough to help us accomplish what we have set forth in the program," he said. "We hope and assume that the Legislature will continue to finance the program during the entire period of its existence."



Photo by Tod Kirk
 NU President D.B. Varner, who says that additional money is needed if the Areas of Excellence program is to achieve its objectives.

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Interviews: 3:30 Friday
 March 14