

Wanted: merit scholars.

By Ad Hudler

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anted: Merit scholars. Large land-grant institution looking to improve its image wants to recruit young bright students. Natives. Out-of-state folk. Black or white. We NEED merit scholars.

Despite a growing competition between universities for merit scholars, Lisa Schmidt sits calmly in her 207 Administration Building office. On the coffee table in front of her rests a scattered pile of promotional booklets for UNL that would answer just about any question a prospective student could muster.

This is mission control for merit scholar recruiting at UNL.

It's an important room for UNL nowadays. Schools nationwide are increasingly competing for the country's few merit scholars. And while UNL ranks 44th out of about 400 universities nationwide, new figures from the National Merit Scholarship Corp. shed some light on the subject — UNL is losing out on some of the smarts. UNL officials say they know it, and have been taking steps to attract more scholars.

UNL had a 13 percent decrease in merit scholars for 1985, compared to 1983-84 figures. This year about 140 merit scholars are enrolled in freshman through senior classes. That's a decrease from the 1983-84 peak of 162. The numbers have caught Schmidt's and other administrators' attention:

Schmidt and some high school counselors attribute this 13 percent decrease to two things — increasing competition between universities for merit scholars and students' beliefs that they can get a better education elsewhere.

Schmidt says competition tops the list.

The new surge to draw merit

scholars began about five years ago when Trinity University in Texas decided to start actively recruiting merit scholars, Schmidt said. Several schools followed suit. But UNL, long been the number-one choice for most Nebraska merit scholars, just started actively recruiting about five years ago, Schmidt said.

"We've been trying to play catch-up," she said. "We took a lot of students for granted that we can't anymore."

Nancy Giles, director of public affairs in the National Merit Scholarship office in Evanston, Ill., also says universities are "very competitive" in luring students, and that the number of schools competing in the merit scholars program grows every day. UNL joined the program in 1981-82.

Planning for UNL's merit recruiting program began about two years ago, but won't take root until this fall when a new honors program begins. It's too early to gauge how effective the recruiting will be, Schmidt said.

That program will try to create a sense of academic atmosphere that Lincoln East High School senior-merit scholar Robert Chen says he can't find at UNL. He says he and some of his other merit-scholar friends think it's a good school but that it lacks the academic seriousness found at more "prestigious, selective" universities like Stanford or Harvard. UNL offered Chen a four-year Regents' scholarship, all tuition paid. Stanford has offered to pay him \$11,000 a year, meaning he'll have to cough up an extra \$8,000 himself. He's willing to do it.

Schmidt said the new honors program should help create a community of scholars and stimulate students' minds.

In addition, UNL used to wait for a list of merit scholar finalists before



sending out information about the university. Today they start earlier and buy a list of *potential* merit scholars from Nebraska and nine surrounding states.

Then the mail barrage begins.

Merit hopefuls are sent undergraduate class bulletins, a UNL information booklet, a letter from the honors program and separate letters from various college deans. Finalists get a hand-signed letter from UNL Chancellor Martin Mas-sengale, a banquet, and an engraved dictionary, compliments of the Alumni Association, Schmidt said.

Still, the competition is tough. Iowa State University and the University of Kansas have been strong recruiters in the Lincoln-Omaha area, she said. Even schools like