

Q&A with

# NU President Dennis Smith

**Editor's note: Members of the Daily Nebraskan editorial board interviewed NU President Dennis Smith Tuesday about his first week in office and his plans for the University of Nebraska. This dialogue has been compiled and edited.**

**B**efore you took office, you frequently said the University of Nebraska could have only one president at a time. Now that you are the president, what are your goals for the university?

There are a variety of ways to answer that question. I guess you make the assumption that one has to have a specific set of goals or you can't move forward. I think the goals are generalized goals. Can we improve the quality of the education which is delivered to the undergraduate and graduate students? How does one do that? Are we in a growth mode? Or is it likely we are going to be a rather constant size for the next 10 years? And how does that influence the kinds of plan one develops? How do you bring the four campuses closer together so they really function as one University of Nebraska? These are a number of questions I have become concerned with and will be looking at early on. But if you want more specific goals, I don't think it is reasonable at this point to really articulate those. To some extent the specific goals on each campus, or perhaps to a large extent, are under the province of the chancellors and their administrative staffs on each of the campuses.

**W**hat has come from conversations with regents in the past week?

I think again we've discussed the kinds of things I've mentioned at the outset; their views on the one university with four campuses of the University of Nebraska system, their views on the quality of the undergraduate and graduate education, whether that can be improved, whether it needs to be improved — a number of topics along this line. I think at the outset it's important for me to understand what their views are and for them to understand what my views are. I think quality is essential if you are going to have a university. I think you want to provide and you want to receive the best education you can possibly get. So I think that is always a goal.

**W**ith respect to the engineering college, how important has that been during your first week, and what things have you discussed about that?

It's obviously been brought up by a number of people. My view has been quite straightforward when I was being interviewed before I became official president. I think it's important to let the process continue. This is an academic question. In order to provide advice on that issue, Provost Lee Jones established what I view as a prestigious external committee to come in and try and look at the whole situation in an objective evaluation of the needs for engineering in the city of Omaha. I think it's premature to speculate until I see what that report says. I'm sorry I don't have the report, but that's not under my control at this point.

**Y**ou described this as an academic issue, but it also becomes a political issue because of the budget. Obviously the university system has been subject to proposed cuts in recent years. Any time money is allocated here, it can't be allocated somewhere else in a tight budgetary situation. Do you feel it's a political issue between campuses? Regents have described it that way.

I didn't hesitate when I said I think it's an academic issue. I don't view it as a political issue. I think it involves the ability of the University of Nebraska to deliver engineering courses to citizens of the state of Nebraska.

Those are academic issues, and I hope that's the way we can solve it.

**O**n Sunday, the president of the Greater Omaha Chamber of Commerce said economic efforts in Omaha were limited because UNO didn't have a separate engineering college. How much pressure have you felt from the business community in Omaha?

I don't feel pressure from any source at this point to create a new college or not to create a new college. What I've specified is we've initiated a process which involved bringing in four outside academicians to look at the engineering needs in the state of Nebraska, in the city of Omaha and in Lincoln. The process is under way. They've put together a report. It's in draft form. I'm told it should arrive at some point shortly, but I don't have a specific date. When that report comes I'll look at it and decide how to move forward from there. I don't think it's useful to speculate at this time as to what I might or might not do and interrupt the process which we've already put in place.

**I**s that report going to be made public?

Yes. I would like the ability to read it. I think it's important I have the opportunity to read it before it's released to anybody. I don't know how long it is. I would guess it would take somewhere between 30 minutes and two or three hours. After that it will be available. I do think I need to make sure there aren't any confidential things in there that shouldn't be made public. In other words, I don't think it would be appropriate if somebody is named and the reference to that individual is potentially viewed as derogatory or things of this type. But those would be minor reductions if you will.

**D**avid Kessleman, president of the Associated Students of the University of California-Irvine, said your direct style wasn't always well-received by students. Although your position here doesn't require daily contact with students, how do you plan to stay in touch with students at the University of Nebraska?

I think that is in part both up to the students as well as my office. I certainly will interact with the student regents. I tend to roam. I will appear on campus from time to time. I think it's important to meet with students and hear their viewpoints and find out what's going on. So I'm always accessible. So if students want to come meet with me individually or in small groups, I think we can make time available to engage in those opportunities.

**W**hen you had the protest at UCI with the Asian students who wanted the Asian Studies Program expanded, one of the criticisms written about you was that you were not accessible during that crisis.

I met with the students for an aggregate of 12 hours in several meetings to hear their viewpoints on what they wanted to have done and could have done. They didn't like my answers. I think that's what David refers to as direct. So I ask you a simple question: Would you prefer I lied to you or would you like the truth? Perhaps "lie" is too strong a word. It's easy to promise things, but if you don't have any intent or any ability to deliver those things, I don't really see that it's necessary to make those types of promises. Would you prefer it otherwise?

**S**andra Verdugo, assistant dean of biological sciences at UCI, said at first glance you might appear to be a little gruff, and therefore people might not be inclined to carry forth with their arguments. How would you describe your style of working with people?

I would describe my style as open, candid. I'm used to evaluating data based on the information I have at hand and making decisions. I don't consider myself gruff. Nobody around me considers me gruff. I think I get along very well with people.

**H**ow would you describe your role as the representative of the University of Nebraska?

The way we are organized, the four chancellors report to the president, the president reports to the board of regents. I do have administrative responsibility for oversight of the entire system. I view my role in the principal form as one of liaison with the community so I can continually explain the University of Nebraska to the community, not just in Lincoln but throughout the state, as a champion for the four campuses. But I also have a responsibility that the campuses operate efficiently and as a university. I interact on both sides.

**W**hy did you ask for the provision in your contract that would allow you to retire before 10 years of university service?

If you start here at age 55 up you have to be on campus for 10 years before you can retire. That affects anyone you hire who is younger than age 60. I couldn't, under those conditions, officially retire in my retirement program. I think in the long run it would be very difficult to recruit senior faculty if you want to really build the group if you believe senior is age 55 and up. To force me in my own specific case to remain either as president or as a member of faculty for 10 years before I could contemplate retiring doesn't seem to me a reasonable thing to do. There's no advantage in any other context. There's no money involved or anything else; it just provides me the ability to make personal decisions as I grow older.

**L**ast year the Nebraska Legislature proposed a \$13.98 million cut from the University of Nebraska budget, but extensive lobbying efforts helped to eliminate that cut. Next year is a budget year for the university. How do you plan to lobby the Legislature?

The first thing to do is figure out what we need. That's not been done yet. I think that involves not only putting numbers out on paper, but some vision, some kind of a plan so we all know where we are going for several years, not on a one- or two-year basis. I'm a firm believer in strategic planning and developing budgets around the context that is put down. That involves at some point making prioritized decisions. You can't simply go ask for money because we are good people. Everybody wants to know more frequently where we're spending the money, are we doing the best things we can do with the money, and can we do things more efficiently? If we have a product to sell, I think it's important to tell the Legislature and the individual senators what that product is and why we want it.

**W**hen do you plan to put this vision plan together?

I think it's important to emphasize that I don't do it. Everybody has to do it. What's important is for the chancellors to sit down with me and as a team decide where we're all going and decide how we make the University of Nebraska even better than it is now. In large respects the process is already under way.

**T**he University of Nebraska was founded in Lincoln, and UNL has since remained the center of higher education in Nebraska after the NU system expanded. State Sen. LaVon Crosby of Lincoln has said you would find out that UNL was the university, and the University of Nebraska at



Dennis Smith

Travis Heying/DN

**O**maha and at Kearney and the Medical Center are satellites. What is your opinion of UNL being the flagship campus of the University of Nebraska?

Flagships don't survive very long without substantial other forces from all sides. I don't know that it's useful at this point in time to discuss what happened in the late 1880s. I think it's far more useful to discuss what is going to happen in the next 10 to 15 years.

**I**s UNL the flagship campus?

UNL certainly has been around longer. We evolve. As we evolve, things change. That's one of the functions of evolution.

**S**o is UNL the flagship campus?

I think all four campuses provide to the citizens of the state a range of educational opportunities which are quite important. One can get a very good undergraduate education at other campuses beside UNL. You can also get one here. Now what distinguishes UNL from other campuses is the major effort in research and graduate studies through the doctoral level that aren't present on the other campuses. The state couldn't afford four research universities even if it wanted to.

**S**o are all four campuses equal?

Each campus has a distinct mission which is not necessarily overlapping. I always find it difficult to use words like equal and equality when considering different missions. They're not comparable. You can't compare them on a simple one-to-one basis.

**S**tudents and faculty haven't had many opportunities to get to know you. Describe Dennis Smith.

Oh, gee, I'm a great guy. I enjoy life. I enjoy myself when I have the opportunity. I play the trombone in a jazz band. Or I did. I have to find a new group of colleagues. I have two kids; they are 30 and 28.

**W**hat motivates you?

I have a strong desire to be as good as I can possibly be, and have

the areas in which I work as good as they can possibly be. So I really believe strongly in striving for excellence. That's why I think the university should move in that direction.

**W**hat's the first step in moving toward that direction?

The university in my view is the faculty. If you have excellent faculty and faculty who can achieve, then you have an excellent university. The faculty are the one group that stay around for the longest periods of time. Students graduate, administrators turn over. Faculty members invest, in many cases, their entire lifetime on a single campus and they really bring to that campus the years of dedication and expertise. As they grow they get better and better and over a period of time become far more effective teachers, far more effective scholars, and that's what really builds the reputation of an institution.

**I**f there is one thing to move the university in that direction, it would be improving faculty?

That makes two assumptions. It makes the assumption at the outset that the faculty need to be improved. That's not what I'm saying. I think if you want to build an excellent university as you hire new faculty, you have to bring in the best people you can possibly bring in. And the faculty who are in place, in turn, will always feel challenged to continue to set their sights at a higher level. If you all become content with what you have in place, that this is the best it can possibly be and you never want to make it any better, then you achieve a different kind of plateau.

**H**ow will this university be different because of Dennis Smith?

You'll have to ask me in two or three years. I can tell you what my goals are. To what extent one individual can have a major impact, I don't know yet. It's always difficult to predict ahead of time, and actually it's probably somewhat arrogant to say what will be accomplished under my supervision. The best I can do is try. If successful, we're all going to be better off; if not then we won't be.