

# OPINION PAGE

## Our VIEW

### Somebody pinch us \$125 million gift is an unexpected boon

This gift really got us. As students at a Nebraska public university, we are used to writing about scratching for money, not about accepting an Ivy League-type windfall.

In past years, we have simultaneously covered news about a state surplus and about NU President Dennis Smith begging legislators for a decent share of state funds.

We have covered annual tuition increases and \$30 raises in student fees so the university can afford to update technology on campus.

We also have reported that some alumni will spend millions on Memorial Stadium skyboxes before they donate money to Love Library.

But today is different.

Today, we cover news about how our campus may use a \$125 million endowment for academics and academic buildings.

It's an endowment from a University of Nebraska alumna who cared enough about students to allocate a quarter of her estate to furthering their education after her death, when she could no longer reap rewards of good press.

Her gift won't enhance any corporation's image or change the brand of our beverages.

Nor will it pass over existing academic departments to build swanky new buildings and programs in Omaha.

Instead, the interest that accrues should knock two items off the NU wish list for its flagship campus.

It will beef up chemical engineering here in Lincoln, where most full-time NU students choose to study, and should build a new wing onto Walter Scott Engineering Center.

It also could build a new wing of Love Library, the often-neglected heart of undergraduate study and research. The gift promises technology upgrades for all NU libraries.

Regents and central administrators will get 12.5 percent of the interest to enhance their own facilities and functions. As students, we would rather see that amount used to update and renovate classrooms and laboratories, but we're pleased that another 12.5 percent or more will go to UNL academic programs each year.

Some peril does exist with a gift of this magnitude: The Legislature might cite its great sum to help justify state funding cuts in the future.

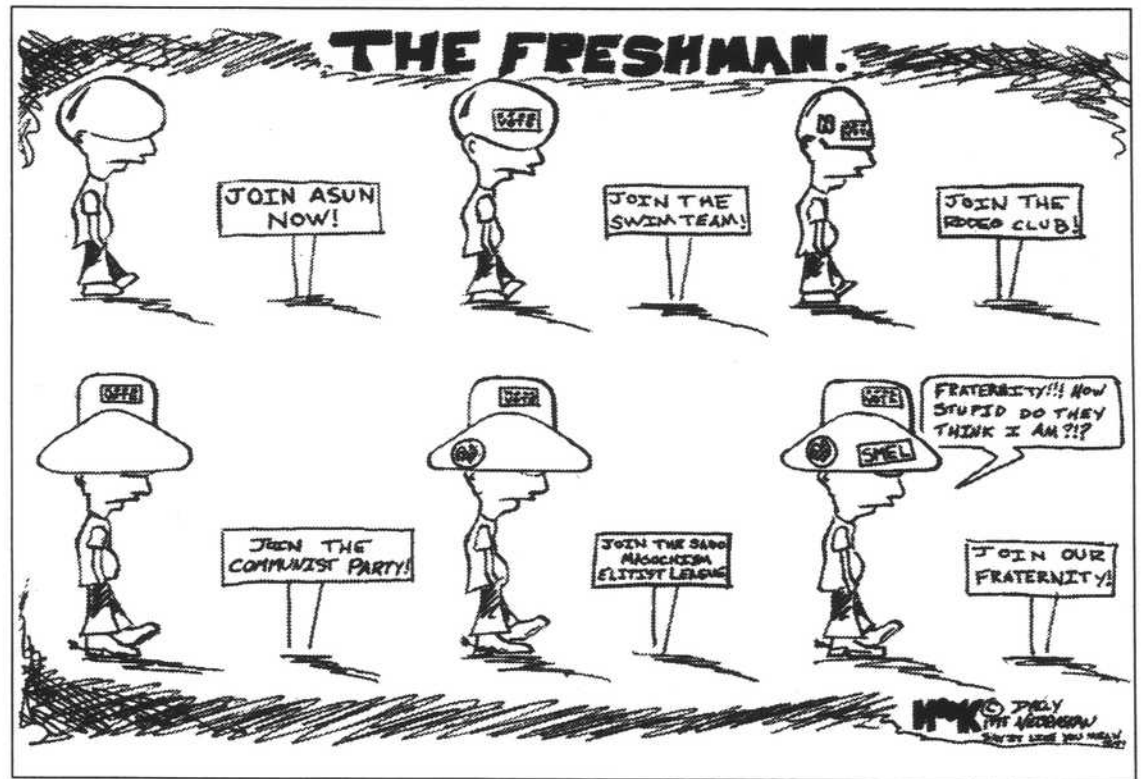
Therefore, it's essential to spend the endowment's interest on only the most pertinent academic matters, and the university must loudly disclose exactly how it spends each dollar.

Despite our cautions, the very idea of a \$125 million endowment to this public university hits us like an icy cold cola at the first home football game.

It's nice. It's unbelievably nice.

And unlike that gameday drink, students a century from now still will reap its rewards.

## Mook's VIEW



### Ivory tower no more Important changes make UNL less comfortable



**ERIN GIBSON is a senior news-editorial major and Daily Nebraskan editor in chief.**

Welcome to campus.

Don't get comfortable.

Not because the university hopes to see a good portion of students fail and return home within the semester. On the contrary, it has increased admissions standards so freshmen are better prepared to succeed.

The reason no person on campus is free to rest in relative comfort and relaxation is simple: This is no longer a comfortable and relaxing place.

By nature, it shouldn't be.

A university exists for change and seeks to challenge and expand minds, not to foster complacency.

But change at UNL this year means more than eliminating the inflated grades and the easy classes that could make an average student feel downright comfy.

The term "change" this year accompanies a long-term vision of a grander university, and it will benefit the next generation of Cornhuskers. Today's generation of faculty and students, however, must sacrifice and embrace change.

It's a formidable task. Plenty of change exists.

Any casual observer can note the most obvious symbol of change on campus: construction.

It riddles campus' most-used structures with unfinished space and torn-up sidewalks. It's rotten for now, but good for later.

Cosmetic changes aside, the university's funding, academic and research priorities have changed along with goals for the prestige of the entire university.

UNL administrators no longer feel content to lead the little Midwestern school with the big football team. They have decided the university must contend nationally in research and academics.

Administrators are accomplishing this by fashioning new jewels for UNL's crown called areas of excellence, which they hope will draw top scholars and research grants.

While "areas of excellence" sounds positively charming, much of

the process is dastardly, and it directly effects both faculty and students.

The push to move funding from dusty old programs to shining new ones is championed by Chancellor James Moeser. His vision is noble, but support wanes when talk arises about how he ripped 4 percent of all departments' budgets from their hands during the past two years.

The \$6.9 million collected was reallocated to a list of priority programs and initiatives including distance education, plant science and a humanities research center. A couple million of that went to recruiting top students, recruiting a more diverse faculty and student body and updating campus technology.

It all sounds like a giant boon to students now on campus. On paper, we're brighter and more culturally diverse than ever. Funding is in the right places to continue that trend, and we could soon reap the benefits of these changes.

Or will we?

This summer, Karen Griess of the Lincoln Journal Star wrote a significant report on low faculty morale on campus. The faculty interviewed cited reallocation of funding as a main reason for low morale.

It seems financial uncertainty — the No. 1 cause of marital stress — is obliterating the historically rocky relationship between faculty and administration. Faculty members feel powerless against the reallocation and feel it is dictated by administrators. In other words, they feel powerless in the face of change.

Not only is reallocation change, it's the worst kind of change. It's ongoing, and it toys with pocket-books.

It freed up money for programs that should improve UNL's overall quality in the future.

But for now, faculty morale remains low, and many faculty members could carry their low morale into the classroom, whether they intend to or not. As a result, the quality of students' classroom experiences will suffer this year.

Low faculty morale also could cause more minority faculty members to leave campus, where feeling welcome and comfortable is a daily struggle without campuswide morale problems. Each time a minority faculty member leaves campus this year, students' overall quality of education will sustain a blow, because we will have considered fewer perspectives in our course work.

Another change, which began more than a year ago, is Chancellor Moeser's push for greater academic rigor. It's a complicated push, when

faculty evaluations depend upon students' course evaluations, and students typically give low ratings to difficult courses.

The push means confusion and a bit of resentment from faculty members who believe they already teach rigorous, engaging courses. Again, this confusion could spill over into the classroom with negative results in the short run.

No matter how smart students look on paper this year or how UNL showcases new programs financed through budget reallocation, the benefits of sweeping academic and financial changes will not arrive quickly.

We will not reap any significant benefits soon.

Instead, we must wait an unpredictable number of years until changes mature into greater institutional prestige, until a higher caliber of students converge with a faculty teaching more rigorous material and until folks get used to a new UNL.

And just when students, faculty and administrators start to feel a little more comfortable around here ...

Just when their self-image starts to improve with their national prestige ...

They again must relinquish comfort and face the only thing that hasn't changed: public opinion in their own backyard.

The Nebraska public likes the NU football team, but they mistrust the rest of the institution and view it as an enigma akin to a "tax-and-spend" Congress and Social Security.

Many Nebraskans still call UNL an "ivory tower," a term adopted in 1911 that means a secluded place of learning marked by an escapist attitude and disregard for practical matters.

But UNL's ivory tower fell years ago. It crumbled with increased public scrutiny, accountability and pressure to develop and fund programs that serve all state citizens, not just those attending one small, centralized campus.

In other words, those who came here looking for an escape from work or home, for a job with tenure or for a simple diploma — they have no place here anymore.

At each turn, university members will find a new challenge. It is an exciting time to study and work on this campus, but it is no longer a comfortable time.

If we keep striving to improve our campus and its image, it never will be.

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