

# Higher education bills flood Legislature

■ **Senators introduce bills to restructure the college system and add Wayne State and Chadron State to the NU system.**

BY JESSICA FARGEN  
Senior staff writer

In the last two days, legislators have introduced a series of bills geared at evaluating, changing and increasing the efficiency of higher education in Nebraska.

Chadron State and Wayne State colleges would join the University of Nebraska system under LB631, introduced Tuesday by Speaker Doug Kristensen of Minden. Under the bill, Peru State College would become a community college and the NU Board of Regents would merge with the state college's board of trustees.

Another bill introduced by Lincoln Sen. Ronald Raikes proposes closing the 131-year-old Peru State.

Still another bill, introduced by Table Rock Sen. Floyd Vrtiska, would keep Peru State open as a state college

## Legislature

and pump \$7 million into its renovation.

Kristensen said universities in the NU system would be largely unaffected by the addition of more colleges under his bill.

He cautioned against university students and administrators labeling state colleges as a lower class.

"That is generally said by people who have an elitist point of view," he said. "Their education is not going to be affected one bit. The quality of education will be the same."

Kristensen said adding state colleges to the university system and combining their governing boards is a result of a heightened pressure for efficient spending — fallout from the failed constitutional amendment, Initiative 413, that voters rejected in November.

"Higher education is the largest user of the general funds, so that's the first place you look for some inefficiency," Kristensen said.

The members of combined governing boards would be elected and appointed, he said.

Along with merging the boards, the

Coordinating Commission for Postsecondary Education would be eliminated under a constitutional amendment.

Omaha Sen. Pam Brown also is sponsoring a bill that would merge the two governing bodies. LB561 would create the Higher Education Board of Regents.

The board would have a hybrid membership of two appointed members from each congressional district, two elected from each district, one member elected at large and one appointed at large.

Brown said the members would not necessarily represent the university system or the state college system but represent higher education as a whole.

"You don't want each board to come with a perspective," Brown said. "You want people with a perspective for the whole system."

The last time the Legislature restructured the college system was 1989, when it passed a bill that added Kearney State College to the NU system.

But the benefits of a more streamlined governance come at the cost of Peru's state college status. Under Kristensen's bill, it would become a four-year community college.

Under Raikes' bill, Peru would be closed down.

Raikes said the goal of his bill was not necessarily to close the school, but to stimulate discussion on what to do with it after a coordinating commission report laid out three options for the struggling college: moving it; renovating it; or closing it.

Moving the college to Nebraska City would cost \$96 million. Total renovations for the college would cost about \$20 million.

Raikes said it appeared investing in Peru was not the best idea.

"I'm convinced that rebuilding buildings at Peru State is not going to be the best investment for southeast Nebraska," he said.

But Vrtiska said Peru was a valuable investment. Vrtiska feared that without Peru, working and nontraditional students in that area would never get a college education.

Vrtiska's bill, LB650, is co-signed by 25 senators and would provide \$7 million for renovations. Last year the Legislature appropriated \$4.2 million to Peru for renovations to a science building.

Vrtiska, whose two children graduated from Peru, said he is committed to keeping the college and has worked for

it for the last 18 months.

"I'm going to fight for its existence as long as I'm here," he said.

Omaha Sen. Ernie Chambers said when money is tight, tough decisions have to be made. Closing Peru is one of those, he said.

"When a state has limited resources some things are too high-priced a luxury to be afforded," Chambers said.

At a time when many senators are throwing their two cents into changing higher education, Hastings Sen. Ardyce Bohlke is recommending that the state first study the higher education system.

Bohlke, chairwoman of the Education Committee, introduced three bills Wednesday aimed at evaluating the coordinating commission and redefining its mission, as well as studying the educational needs in western, central and northeast Nebraska.

Bohlke said her bills would help determine possible inadequacies, while other bills are geared at eliminating them. Either way, she said, lawmakers are making a statement about how they feel higher education operates.

"People are recognizing that we need to take some kind of action."

## Professor praises state's ever-changing weather

BY DANE STICKNEY  
Staff writer

While many Nebraskans cringe at harsh winter winds and smoldering summer days, Ken Dewey thrives on the diverse Nebraska weather.

Though Nebraska's weather can be extreme, Dewey said, its citizens should appreciate the sunny days, winter nights and stormy afternoons he said couldn't be found anywhere else.

Dewey, a professor of climatology and meteorology at UNL, spoke about Nebraska's eclectic weather Wednesday at Love Library's Great Plains Art Collection Gallery. The program was presented by the Paul A. Olson Seminars in Great Plains Studies.

Dewey, who has taught at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln for 25 years, decided to come to Nebraska because of the diverse weather.

"Nebraska is a place that I think is great if you like weather and climate," he said. "Sure you can find extremes in Boston and Chicago, but not as extreme as it is here."

The Great Plains region is a revolving door for weather, Dewey said.

"Nebraska is one of the windiest states in the U.S.A.," he said. "It is also a hotbed for tornadoes in the summers and spectacular blizzards in the winter."

"What a neat place."

Nebraska's geographic location is a major contributor to its diverse weather, Dewey said.

"The Rocky Mountains are a barrier to the mild weather, and there are open doors to the cold north winds and the mild southern winds," he said.

Dewey also addressed certain myths about weather that have been caused by what he said was media hype.

He said El Niño and La Niña have been greatly blown out of proportion.

“If you don't like the weather in Nebraska, wait a few minutes.”

KEN DEWEY  
professor of climatology and meteorology

El Niño primarily affects weather patterns, but it is not responsible for freak weather events, Dewey said.

Dewey also explored the validity of global warming.

"Global warming is a sensitive issue that has become very political," he said. "However, in the geological time frame, it means nothing."

He said global weather has been following a steady pattern.

"Global warming is mainly a result of more people and more industry," Dewey said.

"The weather is not freaky. There is no upward or downward trend. It's just the same old same old."

Sheldon Drobot, a graduate geoscience major, said he enjoyed the program.

"I was really interested in the myths that Professor Dewey talked about," he said.

"I thought (the program) was good. Dewey kept everybody's interest while still getting across a lot of information."

Dewey urged all Nebraskans to be thankful for the diverse weather.

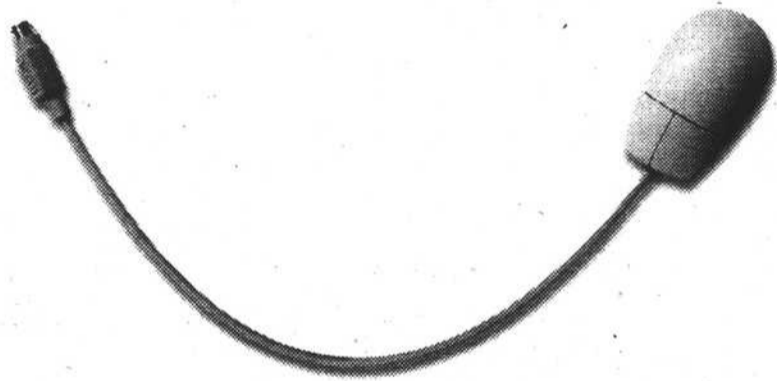
"If you don't like the weather in Nebraska, wait a few minutes," he said. "It can be hotter than Florida and colder than ... cold."

"There's no place like Nebraska."

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