

# Partnership to diversify UNL

By Kimberly Sweet  
Staff writer

An agreement with a university in New Mexico could be UNL's answer to recruiting more Hispanic graduate students.

A year and a half after the university signed an exchange agreement with New Mexico Highlands University in Las Vegas, N.M., UNL has recruited at least one new graduate student and has another on the way.

And as interchanges between the schools' faculty and students increase, officials in the school of graduate studies look for the University of Nebraska-Lincoln to benefit from contacts with the school's predominantly Hispanic population.

"The university has a rich heritage and excellent resources that it draws upon in the state," said Merlin Lawson, dean of graduate studies at UNL. "It also recognizes the increased importance of language in tomorrow's world."

The small, liberal arts college that sits in the northern half of New Mexico offers programs that are similar to UNL's in business, engineering and social work.

But because the school has a small number of graduate school programs, opportunities exist to recruit students to the University of Nebraska-Lincoln's graduate programs, Lawson said.

The program is one way to recruit minority students to the university in an affordable way, he said.

"Institutions struggle to meet the challenges of diversifying student bodies and faculty as federal and state dollars decline," Lawson said.

"By cooperating, we are able to capitalize on the strengths of both universities."

Lawson said the goal of the program is to create opportunities for faculty exchanges, undergraduate research programs and graduate school placement.

The greatest benefit of the program is the accessibility to potential graduate students, said Ricardo Garcia, a professor in the Teachers College who graduated from New Mexico Highlands University and worked to get the exchange.

But side benefits also have arisen. Both UNL and New Mexico Highlands University are encouraging undergraduate education majors to complete their student teaching in the exchange program, Garcia said.

Belinda Laumbach, an assistant professor in the school of education at New Mexico Highlands University, said university officials in Nebraska are interested in recruiting teachers to fill classrooms in the state that have an increasing number of Hispanic students.

"University officials have seen the need to bring people of Latino background to the state," Laumbach said.

"They need someone who can work with this population."

Just as UNL and the rest of the state benefits from the exposure of Hispanic students, the students at New Mexico Highlands also benefit from the viewpoint that comes from Nebraska students.

"(Our students) need exposure of other cultures as much as the students here need exposure of other backgrounds," Laumbach said.

The program agreement is scheduled for five years, Garcia said.

A similar exchange has been

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Merlin Lawson  
dean of graduate studies

launched with the University of Texas at Corpus Christi, another school with a predominantly Hispanic population, Garcia said.

Students and faculty members from New Mexico Highlands University were on UNL's campus last week for the undergraduate and graduate research symposium.

Students from the New Mexico campus toured UNL, and said they were impressed with both the campus and the treatment they received.

"They've been really, really receptive to us," said Christina Ortiz-Ortega, a senior from New Mexico Highlands University.

Russ Whiting, a graduate student from New Mexico Highlands University, won the award for best work at the conference. He read excerpts from a novel he wrote.

Garcia said these are signs the exchange is working and that over time, it will accomplish the main goal of bringing minorities to UNL.

"This isn't a quick fix - we have a hard time attracting minorities," Garcia said.

"But by having a relationship with New Mexico Highlands University, over time numbers will increase."

## LEGISLATURE

# Bill would increase funds to rural areas

■ Farmers, owners of small businesses could apply for grants.

By Veronica Daehn  
Staff writer

Senators voted to advance a bill Wednesday that would give money to farmers for them to grow, research or market specialty products.

LB1348 also allows interested owners of small businesses to apply for grants to help them get started.

The bill, introduced by Sen. Roger Wehrbein of Plattsmouth, was advanced to final reading.

Wehrbein's original bill adopted the Nebraska Agricultural and Rural Opportunities Act.

Senators passed an amendment Wednesday that added the Microenterprise Partnership Program to the bill. Wehrbein worked with Floyd Vrtiska, a senator from Table Rock, to add the measure.

If senators vote to pass the bill out of final reading, a total of \$1.25 million in state funds will be available for farmers and potential small businesses.

For the Rural Opportunities Act, \$250,000 would be set aside, and a matching amount would be set aside for the microenterprise fund.

The remaining \$500,000 would be split between the two programs, depending on demand.

The program would last for three years, ending Jan. 1, 2004.

"(This bill) meets the interests of everyone involved," Wehrbein said.

Sen. Merton Dierks of Ewing agreed.

"Both bills (which are now com-

bined) want to improve the economy of rural Nebraska," Dierks said. "We're on the right track now."

Vrtiska told the Legislature that a lot of work went into combining his bill with Wehrbein's. But Vrtiska said he was pleased with the results.

"We came up with a package, and we're sure it's workable," he said. "It's a compromise that seems to be in the best interest of everyone."

Sen. Shelley Kiel of Omaha introduced an amendment that she said would tie in well with Wehrbein's bill.

Wehrbein and Vrtiska disagreed, however, and, after about an hour of debate, the amendment failed.

Kiel's amendment would have taken \$50,000 away from the microenterprise fund and made it available for urban neighborhoods.

These grants would be for neighborhood betterment projects.

"The purpose is to revitalize declining neighborhoods in communities," Kiel said. "This would improve the nature of the community."

Both Wehrbein and Vrtiska said they had worked too long on LB1348 for a bill in the form of an amendment to be tacked on to it.

"I'm not opposing the urban communities," Vrtiska said. "I'm just asking you now to do something for rural Nebraska."

Another amendment was introduced by Lincoln Sen. Chris Beutler that would have switched the control of the grant program to the Department of Economic Development.

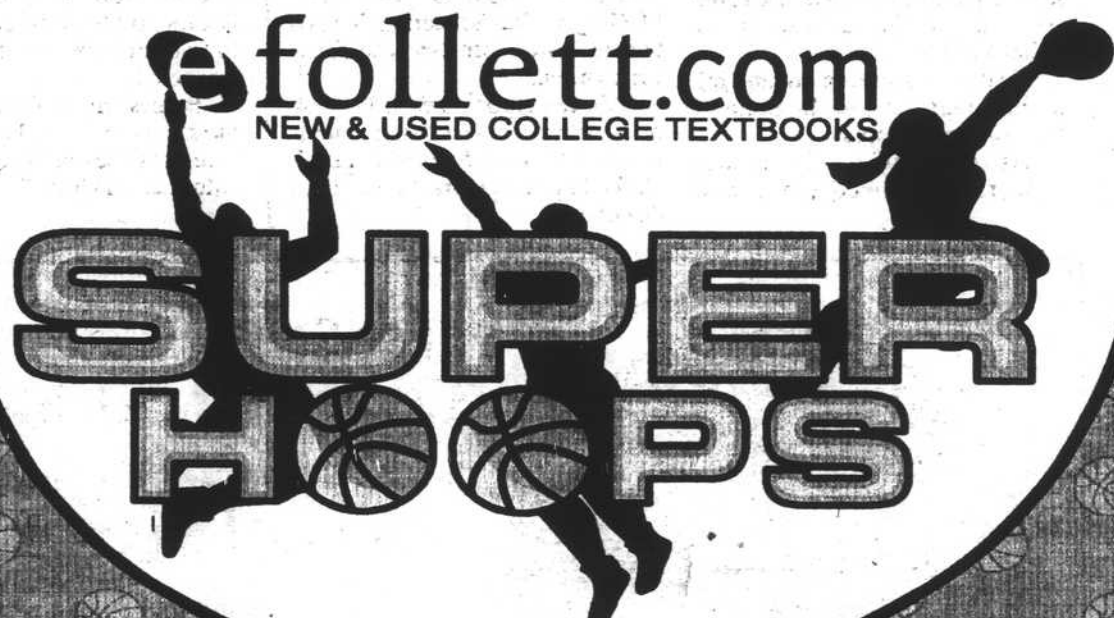
The amendment failed, and if the bill passes, control will remain in the Department of Agriculture.

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