

Retirement, job offers draw six deans, chancellor from UNL

Moving On

by Kimberly Sweet

It all started with a couple retirements.

Then, there was a death in the university community.

There were some more retirements. One dean left for a better job in New Mexico. Another is leaving for a job in Houston to be closer to her family.

After that, even more announced they were leaving. It topped off with Chancellor James Moeser's announcement on April 14 that he would be taking the position as the next chancellor of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

At the end of the year, some look at the number of positions open, the

number being filled by interim personnel and the number of search committees being formed and ask one question: Where is everyone going?

But many administrators at UNL say they aren't worried about the current state of flux. They say it isn't a reflection of the state of the university, just a case of bad luck.

"I think we've had an unusual combination of circumstances," said Richard Edwards, senior vice chancellor for academic affairs.

Three deans who retired this year were no surprise, he said, because their retirements were planned. Irv Omtvedt, the vice chancellor of the Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources, also plans retirement on June 1.

The university unexpectedly lost its vice chancellor for business and finance, Melvin Jones, last October. He died of a heart attack while visiting Washington, D.C.

Another announcement came this week that a university official would be seeking interim status. Edwards announced he would be taking six months off to receive treatment for multiple myeloma, cancer of the blood plasma. He was diagnosed in September.

Edwards said he has been taking

radiation and chemotherapy treatments throughout the year. The third and final step in the treatment is a stem-cell transplant, which he will undergo at the University of Nebraska Medical Center in June. He said he expects a six-month recovery time.

"The regimen is quite taxing, and I need to spend some time away from the office," Edwards said. "But I'm very encouraged by the prospects."

On top of those positions, a number of people left the university for positions that represent personal career advancements. Moeser, Richard Durst, dean of fine and performing arts, and Brian Foster, former dean of arts and sciences, all fit that description, Edwards said.

A few weeks ago, Nancy Rapaport, dean of the law college, announced she would leave the university for the same position at the University of Houston. But Rapaport made it clear the reason she was leaving was to be closer to family.

Looking at all those numbers can give one the wrong impression, Edwards said.

"It makes it seem like we have a much larger turnover than we do," he said.

James Griesen, vice chancellor for student affairs, has been in his

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Harvey Perlman
future interim chancellor

position 14 years. This is the largest amount of turnover during his tenure.

"We've never seen in my 14 years as concentrated a period of executive turnover as we seem to be experiencing," he said.

But Griesen doesn't think it has anything to do with UNL. The average tenure at any university for an administrator is five to six years, he said.

Harvey Perlman, future interim chancellor, said UNL isn't the only school dealing with turnover.

"Turnover in higher education is a concern," said Perlman, formerly dean of NU's law school. "The average tenure for a law dean is only three years."

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Most administrators are mixed in their feelings about how the large

number of vacancies actually will affect UNL.

Griesen said the large pool of interim administrators running the university probably will affect the number of new initiatives instituted because of a lack of time in the office.

He gives the example of the Future of Nebraska Taskforce, launched in 1998 by Moeser to boost programs that had a chance to be the some of the best in the nation.

"It would be unusual," he said. "Something like that is not likely to be introduced."

He said the other work of the university goes on, however.

Cynthia Milligan, dean of the college of business administration, said she wasn't worried about the vacancies.

"We've got competent leadership at all levels of the university," she said.

Because administrators aren't the people teaching classes, Perlman said, the effects of the administrative vacancies won't be felt in the classrooms. What those in interim positions have to work on is reducing the effects felt externally.

"The turnover is felt more in the broader constituency," Perlman said. "A chancellor forms relationships."

When an administrator leaves, those relationships end and have to be rebuilt again, he said.

After the searches end and the vacancies are filled, the university might don a new appearance because of new faces.

But many administrators said it is doubtful that a change in personnel would lead to a change in the institution's direction.

"We've charted our future, and we're determined to realize that," Edwards said.

Search committees will look for candidates to take on the programs the university has just begun.

"We're not going to go back to a blank piece of paper and say, 'What's important now?'" Edwards said.

New administrators will bring their own ideas to positions, Milligan said. As long as the overriding goal is maintained, she said the university would stay on track.

"I think each new person brings a different leadership style," she said. "But we're striving for excellence, and that will continue."

Griesen said the real key to consistency amidst change in leadership is at the foundation. He said there isn't an unusual turnover for department chairmen and chairwomen at the university. He also noted that the university will have a normal number of new faculty hires next year.

As long as the people "delivering the products" remain stable, he said, the university will be able to continue in its prescribed direction.

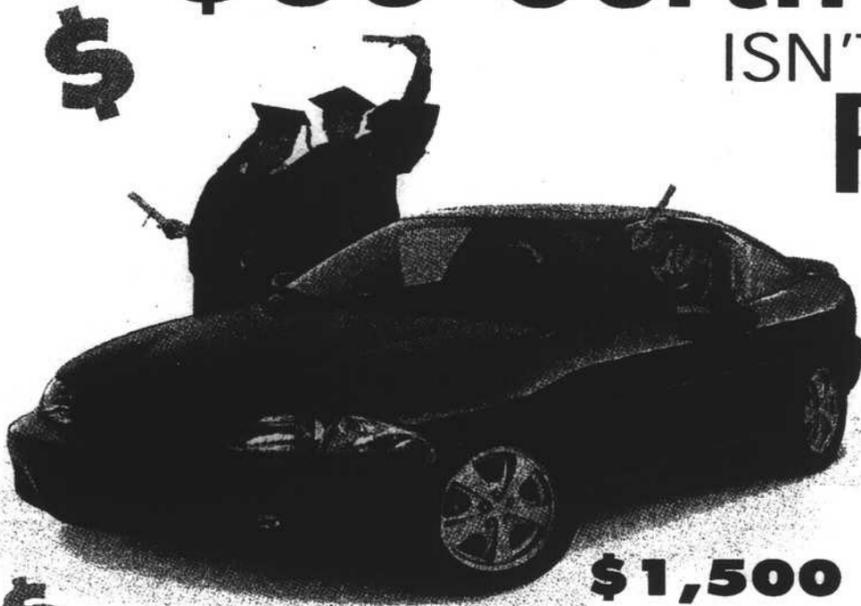
Edwards agreed, saying that faculty were the key to the advancement of all the initiatives that came out of the university this year—including the Future of Nebraska Taskforce, the Life Sciences Task Force and the Freshman Year Experience Task Force.

The next step will be to find someone who will permanently steer the vision of the university, Edwards said.

"I hope we will be able to attract a new chancellor and deans in searches who will be excited and attracted to the university because they see the accomplishments," he said. "The potential is here to continue the forward movement we've achieved."

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