



GOVERNMENT BILL #6
1988-89

WHEREAS, the Nebraska Legislature is currently discussing the issue of the structure of higher education in the state of Nebraska, and,

WHEREAS, such decisions are of extreme importance to the future of the University of Nebraska and the future economic situation in the state, and,

WHEREAS, any decisions made in this area would have a significant impact on the students at the University of Nebraska and students throughout the state.

BE IT ENACTED, that the Association of Students of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln hereby express their opposition to the passage of Legislative Bill 160 during the current Legislative session, and,

BE IT FURTHER ENACTED, that the Association of Students of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln express their opposition to any legislation calling for structural changes in higher education in the current Legislative session, and,

BE IT FINALLY ENACTED, that the Association of Students of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln urge the Governor and the Nebraska Legislature to form a task force with the specific intent of studying the expansion of the University of Nebraska system and with the general purpose of thoroughly examining the entire structure of higher education in the State of Nebraska. These examinations should include but not necessarily be limited to the following issues:

- The governance of higher education in this state, including the current governance of the University of Nebraska system, the state college system, and the community and technical college system.
- The coordination of all state supported institutions of higher education in this state.
- The feasibility of or need for increased state supported university campuses in the state of Nebraska.
- The academic standards of all institutions of higher education in this state.
- And the economic ramifications of any changes to the current higher education structures.

SUBMITTED BY PRESIDENT PETERSEN DATE 2-09-89

AUTHORS SENATOR DURBIN & PRESIDENT PETERSEN DATE 2-09-89

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE _____ DATE _____

COMMITTEE ACTION _____ DATE _____

FLOOR ACTION PASSED UNANIMOUSLY DATE 2-15-89

PRESIDENTIAL ACTION *Jeffrey Paul Petersen* DATE 2-16-89

TO: The Education Committee, Nebraska Legislature
FROM: Jeff Petersen, UNL Student Body President
RE: Legislative Bill 160
DATE: February 21, 1989

Chairman Withem and other distinguished Senators, my name is Jeff Petersen and I am the Student Body President at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. I greatly appreciate your giving me the opportunity to discuss this most important issue facing our state.

The issue of including Kearney State College in the University of Nebraska system is, in my opinion, an extremely complex question. When I first started hearing about such an idea I thought that it seemed like a natural thing to do. After all, Kearney State has shown growth in both enrollment and academic programs. So why not just change their name and call them a "university". In addition, I strongly believe there is considerable need for better coordination of higher education in this state. Consequently, I decided I should take a further look at the concept. My first question was a most obvious one. Why should we make a change?

It has been stated to me that this is a good idea because Kearney State has grown and deserves such status. In addition, proponents argue that such a move would strengthen the University by allowing for better control over finances and duplication of program. This change would also help obtain some of Kearney's goals for expansion. These goals were made quite evident in their President's Planning Council study entitled "The Possible Dream". This study outlines a number of expansionistic goals. Among them are: increasing financial support, strengthening expanded campus programs (particularly in Grand Island), substantially strengthening the Graduate Program, increasing support to faculty for research, offering the Master of Arts and the Master of Science degrees, obtaining resources necessary to accomplish maintenance of adequate facilities and new construction, increasing financial aid to students, improving athletic programs, and expanding Kearney State's role as a cultural and intellectual center. These goals make it quite obvious that Kearney State College is not simply looking to change their name, but rather, to greatly expand the scope of their institution. And a college or university should always be striving to improve itself. Obviously, these goals, if fully implemented, would undoubtedly broaden the strength and influence of Kearney State College and give the state of Nebraska another comprehensive institution of higher learning. However, I believe that before any institution even contemplates expansion they must be working to ensure that they provide the greatest possible excellence in their current programs. This is, and should be, true of the University of Nebraska, Kearney State College, and any other institution. Consequently, it is my opinion that the state of Nebraska must first examine our current programs before we suggest any expansion or change.

I believe this is particularly true in the case at hand. A simple examination of the financial picture facing Nebraska's public post-secondary institutions reveals a number of problems. These budgetary difficulties are being seen by all institutions in the state, but let me just talk about a few specifics at UNL and Kearney State.

The NU Board of Regents, last year, established as their top priority the strengthening of faculty and staff salaries across the NU system. Consequently, the Board established a three year plan to help alleviate what is a crisis situation. Prior to last year, faculty salaries at UNL were so low that the institution was losing its ability to remain competitive on a national level. The plan proposed by the Regents would have, in three years, brought UNL to the midpoint, not the top just the middle, of its peer institutions. Last year the Governor and the Legislature recognized this great need and helped fund the first year of the plan. This year the Governor has again recommended higher increases in salaries. However, the Governor's request is still almost 4% less than needed to fully fund our plan and raise salaries to our peer group midpoint. If the Governor's request is passed by the Legislature pay for the average University of Nebraska faculty member will still be over 10% behind the average of most of our peer institutions.

UNL faces similar funding shortfalls in many other areas as well. During the current academic year students in UNL's College of Engineering are being forced to pay a tuition surcharge of nearly 20% per credit hour due to lack of funding for instructional equipment. Following numerous mid-year budget cuts the University found itself with sorely outdated equipment and no money to replace it. Nonetheless, purchases of new equipment were mandatory in order for the Engineering College to keep its essential national accreditation. Even worse is the fact that what was originally billed as a one-time charge may prove to be a hauntingly on-going burden for these students. That is if the Appropriations committee follows the Governor's budget recommendation and does not allocate the much needed funds requested by the UNL Administration and the Board of Regents. And even more frightening is the fact that similar crises are quite possible in many other campus departments. UNL's ability to remain competitive may be jeopardized without the budget allocations needed to purchase such essential new instructional equipment. Consequently, it would either not be purchased or if it is the burden for paying for this equipment may very well fall on the students.

These are only a couple of examples of the problem. There are many others. Nebraska's ability to attract economically beneficial major companies such as U.S. West Direct has been definitely and directly hindered by our limited research capabilities. Steps such as the Governor's research initiative will be quite helpful but much more is needed. Things such as underfunding of the University's libraries, Graduate Assistantships, and the Food Processing Center have directly hindered the University's research capability and, thereby, stunted economic development in the state. Consequently, it is quite evident that the ability of the University of Nebraska to maximize its effectiveness is being harmed by budgetary shortfalls. This same fact applies to Kearney State College.

Although I am not as familiar with the specific problems at Kearney, the overall picture is quite evident. The greatest showing of Kearney's current underfunding can be seen in their 1989-90 budget request. Kearney State has asked the Legislature to appropriate to them a 49% budget increase, this shows a tragic problem with funding their current programming level. This request reflects the tremendous budgetary problems outlined in at least one national study. I'm quite sure that representatives from Kearney could give great detail about the need for better funding of their institution. But the point is clear, Kearney State College is not receiving enough money to fully fund their institution at its current programming level.

These facts all show a serious problem facing higher education in our state: Our ability to provide the best possible education for the people of Nebraska and our ability to enhance economic development through excellence in researching new technology are both being significantly hindered due to our inability to fully and comprehensively fund the academic and research programs which currently exist at the University of Nebraska, Kearney State College, and the many other public post-secondary institutions in this state. Consequently, I believe that our goal must be to work to maximize effectiveness in the programs which now exist...not to expand and start new programs. A simple, old theory puts it well: "It's better to strive for excellence in a few areas than to struggle to maintain mediocrity in a great many." There's another simple old principle which I regard in high esteem, it says, "don't put the cart before the horse."

I believe that before any individual, group, or especially a powerful governing body takes any action on an issue it is critical that they first consider every possible ramification of such action. It has become quite apparent to me that this issue involves much more than a simple name change. The ramifications of this change could be broad and extensive. Consequently, I feel it is essential that this issue be carefully studied before any action is taken. At the conclusion of my testimony I will be presenting to you a bill unanimously passed by the UNL Student Body Senate. This bill expresses opposition to the passage, during this legislative session, of Legislative Bill 160 or any other legislation calling for structural changes in higher education. Furthermore, the bill suggests the formation of an independent task force to study possible expansion of the University of Nebraska system and the entire structure of higher education in the State of Nebraska. We believe that such a task force should not only study the Kearney State issue, but also, a number of other important issues which would help the Legislature devise beneficial structure for all institutions of higher education in the state.

I believe, quite strongly, that such a study is not only justified but imperative. I know that there have been many studies of higher education, and some people will argue we've studied enough and it's time to put what we've learned to the test. Nonetheless, there still seem to be a number of unanswered questions. A task force, such as the one we suggest, could put these questions in the proper context and suggest a proposal for specific action. Many times in the past we have studied for the sake of studying. However, as all college students know, true learning only comes under the pressure of implementing what we've learned. This task force would be compelled to contend with just such pressure.

The issues we've outlined in our bill are all in need of action. The proposed study should thoroughly examine five areas of concern in regard to higher education. Almost everyone agrees that there are currently problems in the first two proposed areas of study: both the governance structure and the coordination of the various post-secondary institutions in this state. Furthermore, as I've already discussed, the third issue of whether or not this state should expand its higher education programs and establish another university campus needs to be evaluated. The fourth purpose of this task force is also very important and as a student I am quite concerned that this issue is taking a backseat to political pressures and power struggles. This is the issue of academic quality at our institutions of higher education. After all, isn't this most important? We must put as our highest priority working to provide the best possible education for the people of this state. Consequently, I strongly believe that such a task force should thoroughly examine the quality of education being provided by all post-secondary institutions in the state. Particular

university. In light of L.B. 160, particular attention should be given to comparing the academic standards of the University of Nebraska and Kearney State College. It is my belief that both the University and Kearney State are working diligently to provide the best education they can with the resources they have been given. And although, I have great respect for Kearney State College, I believe important questions have been raised regarding its ability, under current funding levels and faculty pay scales, to compare to the University. This points to the fifth issue and a major cause for concern in restructuring higher education...the economic ramifications. This should be very thoroughly studied. Obviously, if the University of Nebraska, Kearney State College, or any other institution want to improve their standards of excellence or to expand their program offerings they must have more money.

It is this factor which is the number one reason why I come before you today in opposition to the passage of L.B. 160. I firmly believe that such legislation or any legislation calling for the creation of more universities in the State of Nebraska would be an expansionistic move toward increased program offerings. I do not believe that this issue is simply a matter of a name change. Kearney State College's Presidential Planning Council has specifically outlined their desires for great expansion. Forming another university campus would simply be a step toward the justification of such plans. Do not misinterpret me though, I think it is admirable of Kearney State, UNL, or any college to want to offer more and better programs. However, it is simply not realistic or practical to do so in the State of Nebraska under current economic and demographic conditions.

It has become quite apparent to me that we must come to grips with the bottom line. And I believe that if we decide to greatly expand the programs of any post-secondary institution in this state we must face a difficult choice on how to pay for such expansion. In my opinion there are only three choices: The first choice is to increase the amount of state funding going to higher education. However, to do this the Legislature would probably be forced to make a decision which would not be popular with anyone. That decision would be to raise taxes to generate more revenue which could be directed toward higher education and pay for these new programs. Or the Legislature could redistribute current revenues which are being allocated to other areas of concern in the state. However, neither of these seems to be a very likely possibility. In addition, Nebraska is already in the upper half of states in per capita expenditures on higher education. Which says we simply do not have a large enough population base to generate revenues to support several comprehensive institutions of higher education. This means the money to pay for expansion probably wouldn't come from the state.

So the second choice is to significantly raise tuition rates at our public post-secondary institutions. Again, not a very popular move and in my opinion, not a very wise one. Large jumps in tuition will soon begin to price many potential students out of the market and prevent many citizens from obtaining an education. If this occurs, the entire state will lose. This is another problem with incorporating Kearney State into the University system. Currently, Kearney provides a good education at a cost which is considerably lower than the University's. If Kearney is to expand and become a part of the NU system, their tuition rates will most assuredly experience dramatic increases. I hope that any Kearney State students supporting this bill are well aware of this fact.

The third choice is the most unattractive of all. All post-secondary institutions would be required to cut other education programs to make funds available for these expansions. In light of the budgetary problems already facing higher education this does not seem like an advantageous option for Nebraska's students or a wise move for any post-secondary institution.

It is simply a matter of available or potential resources. Chairman Withem and distinguished Senators, I firmly believe that the State of Nebraska simply cannot afford to expand higher education. I hope that you will all take a positive stand for the University of Nebraska, for Kearney State College and for every other public post-secondary institution in this state, by reaffirming your commitment to excellence in our current program offerings. I strongly encourage you to recommend that all these issues be thoroughly examined and that all these questions be fully and accurately answered before any changes in structure are made. Senators, I hope you will put any political considerations aside and simply consider two very important factors: (1) What is best for the students and potential students of this state, and (2) how can Nebraska provide an affordable quality education while still being mindful of our budgetary limitations. With the highest respect for Senator Warner, I am firmly convinced that L.B. 160 is not in the best interests of the State of Nebraska. Thank you very much for your attentiveness and your serious consideration.