

September 29, 2025

Dear Members of the Academic Planning Committee,

I am writing to express my concerns about the proposed budget reduction plan Chancellor Bennett advanced to the Academic Planning Committee on September 12, 2025. My concerns are several, including: (1) the poorly conceptualized, operationalized and measured evaluation metrics used to assess units' performance; (2) the plan's overreliance on thus-far unraised philanthropic funds to cover core university functions and tuition mandates; (3) the plan's silence on macro-level administrative adjustments to reduce executive-level duplication and administrative inefficiencies; and (4) the plan's reactionary nature that does nothing to address the root of our budget crisis, which is a persistent revenue shortfall. In the letter that follows, I elaborate on each of these points.

- 1. Evaluation Metrics.** As a social scientist who regularly constructs and evaluates composite indicators, I am dismayed by the metrics being used to evaluate programs during this budget reduction process. These metrics are inherently and irreparably flawed in their conceptualization, operationalization, and measurement. The inconsistent time frames across individual variables, the lack of weighting for different indicators, and discrepancies in the underlying data are just a few of the problems plaguing these metrics. These data are inadequate and misleading and should not be used for such high-stakes purposes, or, frankly, for any purpose.

Furthermore, this process has failed to engage experts on campus in identifying the individual metrics, operationalizing the variables, constructing the composite indicators, gathering the data, and analyzing and drawing conclusions from the data. This failure or unwillingness to engage with campus experts, including, most notably, faculty in the Department of Statistics who are now at risk of losing their jobs, is negligent. We all would take care to remember that quantitative metrics, if poorly conceived, are neither neutral nor "strategic."

- 2. Overreliance on Private, Philanthropic Support.** Part of the plan that Chancellor Bennett shared with the APC proposes moving \$3,350,000 from state-aided funding to other funding streams. This includes moving core functions and staff from Student Life (\$850,000) off of state-aided funds and covering \$2,500,000 of unfunded tuition mandates through philanthropic donations. This is not sustainable, as these are not discrete expenses. Student Life will need continuous funding, and the unfunded tuition mandates will reappear each year. While I appreciate the need to engage donors and welcome additional philanthropic giving, this is not a sustainable approach and will likely lead us back to yet another year of budget crises, low morale, and high attrition. Students and their families deserve to know that they will have the support and infrastructure that we promise(d) to them. This applies to

both the academic programs in which they are enrolled and the support services and tuition remission programs on which they rely.

3. **Silence on Macro-Level Adjustments.** In addition to eliminating academic programs, the proposed budget reduction plan identifies the merger of several units into schools, but it is silent on macro-level changes. There is no indication in the plan presented to the APC that the Chancellor's team considered merging smaller colleges into larger ones or reducing administrative duplication between UNL and IANR or between the Office of the Chancellor and the NU system. These are conspicuous absences.

I hope these options were at least considered and weighed against the elimination of programs and the attendant loss of faculty livelihoods and disruption in students' degree plans. Indeed, the campus community, including our students, their families, and our faculty and staff, deserves to know if these administrative efficiencies were considered and why UNL's leadership team chose to eliminate degree programs and put student progress and faculty careers at risk, rather than pursuing administrative efficiencies at all levels of the institution.

4. **The Plan's Reactionary Nature.** This budget plan, much like the budget reduction plans that have preceded it over the past decade, is reactionary in nature. It does nothing to address the true root of our financial challenges, which is a revenue shortfall. As an institution, we have been so focused on "doing more with less" over the past decade that we have overlooked productive and proactive ways to generate additional revenue. Instead, we cut and cut and cut. We have attempted, unsuccessfully, to circumvent our revenue shortfall through increased micromanagement of faculty and staff and the bureaucratization of the institution's core research and teaching missions.

What we need is curiosity and ingenuity. Without more proactive and creative thinking to spur revenue generation, we will inevitably end up here again in a year or two. Only next time, morale will already be at rock bottom, high-performing faculty will have already left for more stable institutions, students will have chosen to invest their time, money, and talents at other universities, and our reputation among our Big Ten and aspiring AAU peers will be tarnished.

To conclude, I understand that the University and the NU system face a significant budget shortfall. I also recognize, however, that exacting these cuts as proposed endangers the trust that students, faculty, staff, and the people of the State of Nebraska place in us. This plan is, at best, shortsighted. How can we, in an agriculture-based economy, dismiss the experts in the Department of Earth and Atmospheric Sciences? How can we ask families to trust us to prepare their children for the workforce when we cut programs with excellent job placement rates, such as Landscape Architecture? How can we build connections with the K-12 schools on whom we

rely for enrollment when we cut the faculty in Education Administration who train the vast majority of Nebraska's K-12 educators and administrators?

I encourage the APC to consider alternatives to the proposed budget reduction plan. In particular, I encourage members of the APC and the Office of the Chancellor to draft and seek solutions that rely on accurate and well-conceived data, minimize disruptions to students' degree completion and faculty members' career paths, and ultimately break us out of this vicious cycle of continued budget reductions.

Best,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Courtney J. Hillebrecht". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned above the printed name.

Courtney Hillebrecht, Ph.D.

Chair and Professor, Department of Political Science

Hitchcock Family Chair in Human Rights and Humanitarian Affairs

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