

TO: Dr. Rodney D. Bennett, Chancellor

FROM: The Academic Planning Committee of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln

DATE: October 24, 2025

SUBJECT: Recommendations on Proposed Budget Reductions

Dear Chancellor Bennett:

As requested, we, the Academic Planning Committee (APC), are providing feedback on the budget reduction proposal you released on September 12, 2025. We want to acknowledge at the outset that we understand that the University is facing a significant budget deficit that must be addressed, and that this will necessitate hard decisions. However, we also agree with your statements on Sept. 12, and since, that this proposal has been necessitated by the underinvestment in the flagship, R1, land-grant campus of the NU system. **We do not have a spending problem on this campus: we have an investment problem.** This is evidenced by the fact that we have cut \$75M from our budget in the last six years, yet this has failed to prevent our budget deficit from growing. Our faculty, staff, and students, who fulfill and embody our mission to educate and train the citizens of our state, are paying for that underinvestment. We understand that everyone faces hard decisions during times of fiscal uncertainty, but **we believe that the citizens of our state want and deserve a strong, comprehensive, land-grant, R1 University that can compete, in every domain, with its peers in the Big 10.** We fear that without investment, UNL may struggle to maintain its status as an R1 University in the Big 10, not to mention rejoining the AAU.

The APC endeavored to conduct a humane, comprehensive review of the proposal, with extensive public feedback, in a very short time frame and in accordance with the document, *Procedures to be Invoked for Significant Budget Reallocations and Reductions*. We received a tremendous response to the proposal through the online feedback form (2938 unique comments, which you can read in the included files). We were humbled and overwhelmed by the response of our faculty, staff, students, and stakeholders to the proposal and their ability to come together to find creative, positive paths forward for the University to ensure that it is still capable of fulfilling its mission as a comprehensive, land-grant, R1 university. **It is clear to us that each of these units provides unique, valuable contributions to the research, creative, teaching, outreach, and Extension missions of the University.** Attaining the goals of the “Odyssey to the Extraordinary” laid out by President Gold requires the expertise, creativity, and collective spirit of the faculty, as embodied and evidenced by the testimony we heard during the public hearings.

Before we report our feedback on the proposal itself, we feel it is important to summarize the observations and concerns we heard and witnessed ourselves about this budget reduction process, and to provide you with some high-level recommendations.

*Metrics*

This is the first time that this approach to budget reduction has been taken. In the past, Deans were given financial reduction amounts and asked to come up with plans to achieve them. How each Dean went about that planning was likely quite variable across Colleges but represented a more “bottom-up” approach to shared governance. In the current process, metrics were used in a “top-down” approach to identify lower-performing units, and then a holistic review of those units was undertaken by upper administration. Although the metric definitions were confidentially shared with Deans and with the APC last Spring, no one was able to fully validate the metrics, either through confirming the accuracy of the underlying data or via analysis to confirm that the metrics were statistically valid ways to quantify the desired performance indicators.

Throughout our process, we heard concerns from units both about the validity of the metrics, especially via the detailed analysis done by members of the Statistics faculty, and the utility of the metrics to capture key aspects of the UNL mission, especially pertaining to creative activity, outreach and extension. We feel that while metrics are a potentially useful way to quantitatively assess academic programs, but we think that, in the future, the metrics need to be defined through a collaborative process in which every unit has the ability to understand how they fare in terms of the proposed metrics, to validate the data used in the metrics, and to propose alternative metrics that they feel better capture their contributions to the mission of the University.

In terms of metric validity, significant concerns have been raised that have not yet been addressed. These include issues with SRI Z-scores being used inappropriately to compare units from different disciplines; issues with metrics that cannot be meaningfully interpreted statistically; issues with how the metrics treated differential tuition; and issues with metrics being biased towards larger units with established undergraduate programs. Whether modifying the metrics to address these concerns would have altered the metrics enough to change the proposal is unclear, in part due to the consideration of qualitative metrics, but that lack of clarity is problematic when making decisions of this magnitude. Serious attempts to publicly and transparently address these concerns should have been undertaken to ensure that, to the greatest extent possible, the UNL community believes and understands that this process was fair and accurate.

In terms of metric utility, we heard concerns from many of the units that key aspects of their mission were poorly captured by the metrics. In particular, none of the metrics captured a unit’s investment in outreach and extension. Given that outreach and extension represent some of the most publicly visible contributions of UNL faculty to the State and were highlighted in President Gold’s State of the University address, future versions of the metrics need to be developed, using a collaborative process, that can adequately measure and weight a unit’s investment and contribution to this aspect of the University mission. In fact, in preparation for the hearings, several units presented data in formats that could guide future university-wide metrics related to outreach and extension.

More generally, there were concerns raised about the alignment of metrics with the goals and strategic plan for the University. For example, rejoining the AAU is an often-cited goal for the University, but some units that rated very highly compared to AAU peers were proposed for elimination. On the other hand, rejoining the AAU is not necessarily well-aligned with our responsibility as a land-grant university with a significant outreach mission. It will require the input of faculty, staff, and students to develop metrics that better reflect the comprehensive mission and strategic plan of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

### *Timeline*

The short timeline for this budget reduction process made key aspects of the program review challenging if not overwhelming. The APC has met every week since before the semester began, often multiple times per week, balancing our responsibilities to this committee with our responsibilities for teaching, research and creative activity, mentoring, and other service. Given that a budget deficit has been looming for years, it is unfortunate that the process was invoked with so little time to engage the creativity and collective intelligence of the full University community.

As noted above, the APC did not have time to validate the metrics structure or underlying data prior to decisions being made about programmatic cuts. Moreover, we lacked the critical expertise necessary to discern some of the problems identified by other faculty. This abbreviated timeline meant that potential problems with the metrics were only identified after the proposal was released, rather than before, when those issues might have altered the metrics and the proposal.

We also did not have time to consider the revenue side of the budget equation. Multiple units noted in their hearings that they are revenue-positive, meaning that elimination of those units may end up costing the University more than it would save. We were unable to fully investigate the budgetary implications of these eliminations, in terms of lost tuition and loss of research expenditures. It is essential that both the cost savings and the revenue loss are considered and balanced against the contributions each unit makes to the mission of the University.

Moreover, we were not given enough time to understand the scope of investment that the University and donors have already made to build these programs. Eliminations, by definition, throw away previous and current investments and alienate past and future donors. Should the University decide in the future that an eliminated program is critical, these eliminations will necessitate an equally significant investment to rebuild the critical mass of faculty needed for a robust program, without the goodwill of the stakeholders who might be asked to support such a reinvestment.

Although alternative proposals have been welcomed, the abbreviated timeline has made it impossible to fully realize those alternatives. As we saw again and again in the hearings, **when the energy of our faculty, staff, students, and stakeholders is unleashed on the problem of**

**the budget deficit, creative and selfless solutions can emerge**, such as the proposal put forward by the entire College of Architecture. Every unit had a draft of an idea to save costs and increase revenues, but those are plans that take months of concerted efforts to coordinate, not weeks. We are confident that, had they been given time, the campus would have come together to find creative, positive ways to eliminate the structural deficit without proposed program eliminations.

### *General Recommendations*

Although we provide specific feedback on the proposal itself below, we have two high-level recommendations to make regarding the budget reduction process.

First, **faculty and the academic programs they create and sustain are central to the University of Nebraska-Lincoln's mission**. This is clearly stated in the *Procedures* document: "Academic programs exist for the purpose of creating new knowledge, providing instruction, and extending service. Primacy should therefore be accorded to maintaining and enhancing the quality of academic programs through talented faculty, students, and staff." Every campus structure, from administration to support and service programs, is in service of the academic mission of the University. It follows that **cuts to academic programs should be undertaken only as an absolute last resort**. That is, we must be able to say that anything that remains on this campus after these cuts must be more critical to the mission of the University than any of the proposed academic programs. A useful standard is the AAUP *Recommended Institutional Regulations On Academic Freedom and Tenure* which states that, outside of a declaration of financial exigency,

The decision to discontinue formally a program or department of instruction will be based essentially upon educational considerations, as determined primarily by the faculty as a whole or an appropriate committee thereof. "Educational considerations" do not include cyclical or temporary variations in enrollment. They must reflect long-range judgments that the educational mission of the institution as a whole will be enhanced by the discontinuance.

We therefore urge you to consider whether this is absolutely the case, or whether alternative cuts could allow us to preserve these mission-critical academic programs. Although we have not had time to develop a consensus proposal for such an alternative, we are encouraged that many peer universities that have found alternatives to programmatic cuts this academic year and hope that similar outcomes can be achieved here.

Second, **we strongly recommend to the Chancellor, the President, and the Board of Regents that the approval of any budget cuts be delayed allowing time for units to identify creative alternative solutions that reduce or prevent the need for these cuts**. To provide additional time would allow every unit to attempt to find feasible budget solutions that do not require program eliminations, working alone or in collaboration with units that were not directly

impacted by the proposed eliminations and realignments. We were struck by the comment of Dr. John Ruberson of Entomology about how his department feels about merging to save \$1M:

“The University is great because of the diversity of people and the capacity to learn all kinds of things, expose our students to important ideas they never would have encountered. We value all those people. So, if we can do a little bit toward keeping those in the fold and keep the university a vibrant place where students can learn critical thinking, broad thinking, aesthetic thinking, then it’s worth it from our perspective.”

We heard similar sentiments echoed across the many letters that faculty in unaffected units wrote on behalf of their colleagues and in the feedback we received from the public. There is almost universal opposition to eliminations, but widespread support for finding cost savings through mergers either within UNL or across NU. **Most significantly, this process revealed the strong spirit of collaboration and shared mission across this campus.** It is what attracted many of us to come here in the first place! That spirit can be leveraged to find creative, positive alternative solutions to this proposal. Moreover, **to provide this delay for academic cuts costs nothing**, as the timeline for implementation of this process is at least 14 months, and much longer to accommodate teach-out plans. To delay the approval and then to shorten the implementation timeline, or, at the very least, to encourage units to keep working on alternatives, would give every unit a real opportunity to engage with administration in putting forward alternative proposals that either cut costs, increase revenues, or both. Such proposals were encouraged, but with the very short window that units were given, it is unrealistic to expect that fully formed and feasible proposals could be generated in such a short window of time.

This is especially true when some of those solutions may require coordination across Colleges, if not across campuses of the NU system. This, too, was a theme that came up repeatedly in the hearings. There is considerable redundancy, both academically and administratively, across campuses of the NU system. Addressing this redundancy may help preserve these programs, while ensuring that we are operating as efficiently as possible.

### *Specific Feedback*

Votes on each item of the budget proposal were conducted anonymously via an asynchronous poll. This was done because there are members of the committee who are directly impacted by the proposed eliminations, and members who played a role in helping to shape the proposal. Both create conflicts of interest that we felt made open voting problematic. No members of the Academic Planning Committee recused themselves from voting, so these votes represent the combined opinions of faculty, students, staff, and administrators, including the administrators who helped craft the plan. Each member was asked to vote in favor, opposed, or abstain on each item where our feedback was requested. There was also space for written explanations of each vote, although it was not required to provide an explanation. Thus, in addition to reporting the vote totals themselves, we provide a synthesis of the written explanations. We hope that this provides transparency to the UNL community and demonstrates the APC’s thoughtful

engagement with this challenging process, as past budget reduction processes have not provided this level of synthesis.

### Elimination of Community and Regional Planning

Votes: 19 opposed, 2 in favor

Synthesis of “opposed” explanations:

Opposition to the proposed elimination of the Community and Regional Planning (CRP) program focused on the vital role of CRP in supporting Nebraska’s rural communities and fulfilling statutory obligations related to infrastructure, environmental resilience, and public health. They highlighted that CRP is the only accredited planning program in the state, with a strong record of success, 100% job placement, high graduation rates, and substantial contributions to the land-grant mission through statewide engagement and external funding. APC members strongly support the alternative proposal developed by the College of Architecture: a One-Unit Model that merges CRP with Architecture, Interior Design, and Landscape Architecture. This plan retains accreditation, meets budget targets, and preserves the program’s service role. It was developed collaboratively with the Dean, includes a realistic cost-saving and revenue strategy, and reflects the unit’s growth and impact. Given the compelling evidence and broad support, including state legislators and citizens from across the state who have been directly impacted by CRP projects, the majority view of the APC is that the alternative proposal put forward by the College of Architecture should be accepted in lieu of elimination.

Synthesis of “in favor” explanations:

The only explanation given for an “in favor” vote was supportive of the One-Unit Model proposed by the College of Architecture.

### Elimination of Landscape Architecture

Votes: 19 opposed, 2 in favor

Synthesis of “opposed” explanations:

Opposition to the proposed elimination of the Landscape Architecture (LARC) program felt that elimination is both unnecessary and counterproductive, given its cost-neutral status and its essential contributions to Nebraska’s communities. As the only LAAB-accredited program in the state, LARC provides critical design and planning services to underserved areas, advancing sustainability, resilience, and equitable development. The program has demonstrated strong outcomes, 100% job placement, significant growth in student credit hours, and over \$1 million in community service value, while aligning with the university’s land-grant mission. APC members strongly support the One-Unit Model that merges LARC with Architecture, Interior Design, and Community & Regional Planning. This faculty-led plan preserves accreditation and licensure, meets budget targets, and enhances interdisciplinary collaboration. It reflects the kind of

innovative, responsible budgeting that should be encouraged across the university. Given the program's impact, community support, and the strength of the alternative proposal, the majority view of the APC is that the alternative proposal put forward by the College of Architecture should be accepted in lieu of elimination.

Synthesis of "in favor" explanations:

The only explanation given for an "in favor" vote was supportive of the One-Unit Model proposed by the College of Architecture.

#### Elimination of Educational Administration

Votes: 10 opposed; 11 in favor

Synthesis of "opposed" explanations:

Opposition to the proposal argued that EDAD plays a vital role in sustaining Nebraska's educational infrastructure by preparing school and higher education leaders, maintaining licensure and accreditation standards, and supporting statewide partnerships. Commenters emphasize that the program's elimination would create a leadership vacuum, force students to seek certification out of state, and damage UNL's reputation as a land-grant institution committed to public service. APC voters noted the excellent reputation of the unit and its SRI ranking compared to Big Ten and AAU peers, arguing that elimination would harm our case for rejoining the AAU. Several voters argued that when there is redundancy across the university system, programs at the flagship campus should have precedence. They suggested that this is an opportune moment to explore cross-campus collaboration and synergy to preserve a nationally recognized Educational Administration program within the NU system.

Synthesis of "in favor" explanations:

The comments reflected a complex and often conflicting set of perspectives on the Educational Administration (EDAD) program at UNL. On one hand, voters recognized the program's strategic importance and its role in preparing educational leaders for Nebraska. These commenters also called for better coordination across the NU System alongside a desire to retain essential pathways for educational administration credentials at UNL. On the other hand, some critiques noted the large number of other programs, not just within the NU system, but across the state, that provide very similar degree pathways. There were also concerns about the high graduate tuition remission rate and new leadership at the Dean or Unit level preventing a timely preparation of a viable alternative proposal from CEHS. Overall, the comments underscore the tension between financial constraints, institutional priorities, and the perceived impact of the program, highlighting the need for thoughtful deliberation before final decisions are made.

#### Elimination of Textiles, Merchandising, and Fashion Design

Votes: 9 opposed; 12 in favor

#### Synthesis of “opposed” explanations:

Opposition to the proposal emphasized the importance of preserving and improving TMFD, as a distinctive and innovative program that bridges art, science, business, and sustainability, offering unique educational and career pathways, especially for first-generation and rural students, and women in STEM. APC highlighted how TMFD contributes significantly to the university’s academic reputation and cultural identity through nationally recognized research and its connection to the International Quilt Museum. Concerns were raised that the uniqueness of the program may cause current and future students to look elsewhere for college. It was noted that the program is financially viable, aligns with employment trends, and fosters creativity and entrepreneurship. Rather than closure, they advocate for providing more time for thoughtful curricular revamp that the program did just last year to attract new students. There was also support for realigning with the College of Fine and Performing Arts to enhance the visibility, appeal and sustainability of TMFD.

#### Synthesis of “in favor” explanations:

All in favor voters expressed hope that the program could be retained through realignment, consistent with the opposition voters’ sentiments, and encouraged providing more time for these opportunities to be explored, given the program’s uniqueness and the opportunities it provides to students. Although some noted that there have not been significant improvements in enrollment since 2020, when this unit was proposed for elimination previously, these voters also noted new leadership at the Dean and Unit level and that the Unit has several promising initiatives for increasing enrollment that have just recently launched, furthering hope that this program can be retained in a new setting.

#### Elimination of Statistics

Votes: 13 opposed; 8 in favor

#### Synthesis of “opposed” explanations:

Opposition overwhelmingly emphasized the strategic, academic, and reputational importance of retaining the Statistics program at UNL. Eliminating it is seen as a threat to the university’s R1 status, its chances of joining the AAU, and its standing among Big Ten institutions. Statistics is seen as foundational to modern science, interdisciplinary research, and data-driven decision-making across campus and the state. Critics of the proposed distributed model argue it lacks viability, cohesion, and the capacity to attract or retain top-tier faculty, potentially leaving UNL without the expertise needed to advance statistical innovation that would benefit student training and research programs at UNL. There is strong support for alternatives such as merging Statistics with Mathematics or forming a Division of Quantitative and Data Sciences, which could achieve fiscal goals while preserving the program’s essential contributions. This is another program that would benefit from better cross-campus coordination, as the Department of Statistics provides critical expertise for programs at other campuses of the NU system. The opposition view is that

eliminating Statistics would be short-sighted, damaging, and contrary to the university's mission and future competitiveness.

Synthesis of “in favor” explanations:

Voters noted that the absence of a viable alternative proposal from CASNR and the lack of clarity around the distributed model make it difficult to assess the long-term impact of the cuts, especially in relation to UNL's R1 status, Big Ten standing, and AAU aspirations. Even among voters favoring the proposal, there was broad agreement that retaining the program, either outright or through strategic restructuring, would benefit both UNL and the NU System. Suggestions included leveraging existing consulting platforms and exploring mergers or coordinated models across campuses to preserve essential statistical expertise. The loss of degree programs is acknowledged as a significant blow to scholarship and innovation, and the need for further exploration before final decisions are made is strongly emphasized by these voters.

#### Elimination of Earth & Atmospheric Sciences

Votes: 11 opposed, 9 in favor, 1 abstention

Synthesis of “opposed” explanations:

Opposition to the proposal highlighted the essential expertise that EAS provides in geology, meteorology, and climate science directly supports Nebraska's safety, agriculture, and environmental resilience. They felt that its elimination would severely weaken the university's research capacity and public service mission, especially given EAS's role in training the state's geoscientists and meteorologists, its strong record in grantsmanship, and its distinguished faculty, including a National Academies of Science member and multiple NSF CAREER awardees. There was concern that dispersing faculty across other units will risk diluting EAS expertise and prompting departures that would leave UNL without critical capabilities. Instead of elimination, a merger with the School of Natural Resources (SNR) should be considered to reduce duplication, increase student credit hours, and improve operational efficiency. Faculty should be empowered to lead this restructuring and given time to develop a sustainable plan. The metrics used in the current proposal fail to capture EAS's full contributions, and eliminating the department would not only harm Nebraska's ability to respond to environmental challenges but also damage UNL's reputation and long-term competitiveness.

Synthesis of “in favor” votes:

Supporters of the proposed elimination of the Earth and Atmospheric Sciences (EAS) program acknowledge its contributions but argue that its core expertise, particularly in meteorology and geology, can be retained through strategic reorganization within the university, especially by integrating faculty into the School of Natural Resources (SNR). They emphasize that this approach allows UNL to preserve critical research and instructional capacity while addressing budget constraints. They noted that the program's degree production may be below CCPE

thresholds, and that no viable alternative budget reduction was presented by the unit or CAS. However, with plans to retain key faculty and maintain essential academic pathways, some APC members viewed restructuring as a pragmatic solution that balances academic continuity with necessary financial adjustments.

Synthesis of “abstain” vote:

The “abstain” voter felt that there had not been sufficient time to explore the viability of a merger of EAS with SNR to create an Earth Systems Science Institute, especially given the challenges involved in cross-College mergers. Without understanding the viability of the proposal, an “opposed” vote felt unjustified, but an “in favor” vote could not be justified because of the importance of the academic disciplines to the state.

#### Realignment of Plant Pathology and Entomology

Votes: 0 opposed; 21 in favor

Synthesis of “in favor” explanations:

APC members applauded the willingness of the faculty, staff, and students in each program to come together to make this new School work. They have strong support from IANR to help facilitate this realignment. At the same time, voters noted that these are two units whose mission was not well-captured by the current metrics, and that without reconsidering those metrics, this new School might not fare better.

#### Realignment of Agricultural Economics and Agricultural Leadership, Education, and Communication

Votes: 1 opposed; 20 in favor

Synthesis of “opposed” explanation:

This voter argued that they would like to see a detailed plan for how this realignment will work and suggested making administrative cuts instead. There were concerns about loss of identity of the original units leading to attrition and declines in academic program quality.

Synthesis of “in favor” explanations:

APC members also applauded the willingness of the faculty, staff, and students in these programs to come together. However, voters echoed the concerns raised by the units themselves that this realignment needs to be managed very carefully to ensure that the new School can build a cohesive culture that balances the two programs, rather than allowing one program to become subsumed. The realignment must also preserve the visibility and brand recognition of each program for Nebraska’s agricultural community. There were suggestions that the new Director of the School might need to come from outside the University to ensure that the creation of the new

School can proceed inclusively, unburdened by the history of the two units. Again, concerns were raised about the metrics not capturing the mission of these two units.

#### Reductions to the budgets of the College of Engineering and the College of Arts and Sciences

Votes: 9 opposed; 11 in favor; 1 abstention

Synthesis of “opposed” explanations:

Opposition to this proposal focused on the essential role that graduate teaching assistantships play in both the teaching and research missions of the University. GTAs provide critical teaching capacity at very low cost, while also bolstering the research productivity of their academic programs. Elimination of GTA lines does not eliminate the teaching needs of these programs, requiring either faculty to cover that teaching (potentially at the cost of research or other teaching responsibilities) or necessitates hiring undergraduates (at the cost of expertise) or temporary lecturers (at higher financial cost).

Synthesis of “in favor” explanations:

The voter highlighted that elimination of GTAs was preferable to further academic program eliminations.

#### Administrative Change to the Schools of Music and Theatre & Film

(Note: We were not asked to provide feedback on this proposal, but we were offered the opportunity and chose to do so after considering a request by the faculty of the School of Music.)

Votes: 7 opposed; 7 in favor; 7 abstain

Synthesis of “opposed” explanations:

Opposition to the proposed shared leadership model between the Glenn Korff School of Music and the Johnny Carson School of Theatre and Film focused on the widespread concern and only conditional support from faculty, students, alumni, and donors. While there is openness to increased collaboration across the Hixson-Lied College of Fine and Performing Arts, stakeholders strongly oppose a single directorship, citing risks to program identity, accreditation, faculty capacity, and donor relationships. The hearings revealed a respectful but deeply apprehensive tone, with many questioning the academic rationale behind the proposal and criticizing the lack of transparency, planning, and meaningful faculty engagement. Concerns were raised about the unique operational needs of the music program, including its staffing, accreditation requirements, and performance obligations, which differ significantly from other units. The proposal is viewed by many as potentially damaging to morale, program quality, and the university’s reputation. There is a strong call for better leadership, clearer communication, and preservation of distinct program governance to ensure the continued success of both schools.

Synthesis of “in favor” explanations:

Supporters of the shared leadership model emphasized that the change is primarily administrative and does not constitute a fundamental alteration to academic programs or curricula. They argued that it falls outside the purview of the Academic Planning Committee (APC). While concerns about implementation and program impact were acknowledged, supporters noted that the alternate plan proposed by the School of Music was deemed financially unworkable by the Dean. The change is viewed as an internal decision within the College, with limited relevance to the university's land-grant mission, and should be managed accordingly by the schools and college leadership.

Synthesis of "abstain" explanations:

These APC members largely echoed the opinions of those members who voted in favor of the proposal, arguing that this matter falls outside the scope of the APC. They emphasized that the changes involve administrative and staffing decisions rather than alterations to academic programs or curricula, and therefore should be handled within the college's leadership rather than through APC deliberation, maintaining that the APC should not issue a recommendation on a decision that is fundamentally administrative in nature.