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Op-Ed: With hard work, Nebraska can lead on free speech issues

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In recent months the University of Nebraska, like higher education institutions all across our great country, has been part of a statewide conversation about free speech, tolerance and respectful behavior on our campus.

Finding the right balance isn't always easy. Sometimes, we come up short.

August 25 was one of those times. An undergraduate student who set up a booth on campus for a conservative organization not currently affiliated with UNL was the recipient of unprofessional and unacceptable behavior by a graduate student who was also a part-time lecturer. Moments from that incident were captured on video and led many Nebraskans to ask whether their university is a welcoming place for conservatives. Even a former senior campus administrator, in lending advice to current university leadership, raised concerns about civility on campus and the need to make sure conservative students don't feel shut out. At the same time we heard from Nebraskans reminding us to respect free speech, even in instances where we find the expression of that speech to be distasteful.

The behavior of the particular graduate student that day was unacceptable; she has not been teaching at the university since that time. We communicated today to the grad student that she will not teach at our university going forward because of this inappropriate behavior. As leader of this campus, I will always strive to do what is in the best interest of this great University, seek input from citizens of this state, and learn from each experience.

Having said that, I want Nebraskans to know that this is a safe campus. It's been recognized as one of the safest in the nation, in fact. We vigorously defend free speech and we expect members of the university community to treat each other with dignity. I'm proud that those values are on display at our university every day. In fact, I've met with countless students, of all beliefs and backgrounds, and beyond this specific instance, not one identifying as conservative has ever told me they felt threatened. Not one student identifying as conservative has filed a report to our anonymous tips line. Conservative students and faculty have been quoted in recent news articles complimenting the open learning environment that we provide.

I'm also keenly aware that our work in this area is never finished. We will continue to examine ourselves, seek feedback, and ask the tough questions. We expect students, faculty, and staff to engage respectfully with each other, especially when we disagree.

I want to thank all Nebraskans for expressing their views to me. No matter what perspective you hold, I am listening to your concerns. Nebraskans have a right to express those views, know they are heard, and know that the university is doing everything it can to foster a learning environment where all views can be heard and where disagreement occurs respectfully. It's on us to earn that trust.

We are hard at work to keep and earn your trust. And we are working hard every day to build an exceptional university that welcomes students from Nebraska and the rest of the world. Here are a few examples:

- We'll participate in a university-wide survey conducted by Gallup to assess the climate for students, faculty and staff of diverse backgrounds. Along with our fellow NU campuses, we'll develop an action plan for ways we can continue to carry out respectful and civic discourse, while addressing any weaknesses identified in the survey.
- The University of Nebraska-Lincoln's early work in engaging the campus community in the development of a statement on free speech is contributing to a university-wide effort to bring recommendations to the Board of Regents in January for improved clarity and consistency in NU policies related to First Amendment rights.
- Since the August incident, we have written to all students to encourage respectful interactions and to arm them with campus resources for navigating the campus if they ever feel marginalized.
- We're building on the work we began some time ago to promote inclusiveness and respectful conversation on campus. For example, we hosted recent "Husker Dialogues" listening sessions that were attended by 3,200 students.

The common thread in all of these efforts is that they rely on the candid input of the people we exist to serve: our students and their families, faculty and staff, alumni and friends, and all Nebraskans whose investment in their university is our most precious resource. We'll continue to ask for Nebraskans' help moving forward.

My wife and I are proud graduates of this university and I have been fortunate to be a part of UNL campus leadership since 2010. All four of our children have chosen to study and thrive here. There is nothing more important to me than the safety, well-being, and highest quality education of every student who themselves and their parents entrust us with their care.

We have work ahead. But the results are worth it. I absolutely believe Nebraska can be a national model for how to have robust, respectful, productive dialogue that makes us all stronger. We're ready to work together to get there.