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A Look at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln

The University of Nebraska-Lincoln is one of the more interesting public universities, not only for its football history, but also for costs, regional appeal and alumni loyalty. It is the most affordable, and probably the most accessible, university in the Big Ten, an academic conference as well as a competitive sports conference.

Sometimes a phrase, positive or negative, becomes associated with a school, and sticks. At the University of Nebraska tone phrase, unfairly negative, is “Where The ‘N’ Stands for Knowledge.” I doubt that the motivated students, alumni, faculty and administration of the school find that flattering or funny. But sometimes I have to wonder if the folks who make college rankings do. Like the unflattering phrase, their judgements are not amusing, and they are unfair to the school and its community.

Nebraska’s campus was host to a reality show in 2005 called ‘Tommy Lee Goes to College’ featuring Motley Crue drummer and high school dropout Tommy Lee. It’s reasonable to believe that prospective students and their parents, especially those outside of Nebraska, might take a school less seriously after hosting such a show. However, the number of applicants rose from just under 7,500 for the freshman class that entered in 2005, the fall after the show aired, to nearly 8,000 for the class that entered a year later, according to Common Data Sets posted by the school. Back then, less than a fifth of the freshmen came from outside Nebraska. Eleven years later, just over a quarter of the freshmen came from out of state, and nearly 15,000 students applied for those seats.

While Tommy Lee might not have had much of a short-term impact on admissions—the university was also not a member of the Big Ten at the time—interest in this school has clearly risen, even as its football profile has been on a downside.

Competition

Nebraska accepted 64 percent of the students who applied to be part of this year’s freshman class, less than Big Ten rival Iowa, among other flagship state schools across the country. The average high school GPA for the incoming freshmen was a 3.6. The middle 50 percent scored between 22 and 29 on the ACT.

More interesting, over half (51 percent) decided to deposit! That’s fabulous for any school of any size, even better than the University of Michigan (43 percent), the most selective public university in the Big Ten.

But while the University of Michigan has a broad enrollment across the United States, and competes head to head with more selective private universities, Nebraska competes more closely to be a first or second-choice school against the most of the other larger but also more selective, flagship state schools in the Big Ten as well as former sports rival, the University of Colorado-Boulder.

As a member of the Midwest Student Exchange, Nebraska offers discounted tuition through scholarships to residents of Illinois, Indiana, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, North Dakota, Ohio and Wisconsin. The university enrolled more than 2,100 undergraduates, about ten percent of the full undergraduate student body, from these states, including nearly 600 from Illinois, and more than 500 from Minnesota, recruiting



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aggressively in Chicago and Minneapolis, among other cities. As Big Ten schools such as the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities become more selective and more expensive, the University of Nebraska should continue to attract a stronger student body. The university currently draws 30 percent of the class from outside Nebraska.

Transfer admissions in 2017-18 were quite competitive for a flagship state school. Less than 1,000 of the more than 2,000 who applied were accepted. The yield rate, the percentage of accepted students who decided to transfer to Nebraska, was a very impressive 83 percent.

Costs

The estimated Total Cost of Attendance at Nebraska—tuition and fees, room and board, and incidentals such as books and transportation—for the 2018-19 academic year will be \$25,000 for Nebraska residents, \$40,800 for non-residents. Residents are charged just under \$9,000 for tuition and fees. Last year, Nebraska's resident charges were the lowest in the Big Ten, and less those assessed by the flagship state universities in 38 of the 50 US states, according to the College Board.

A non-resident will pay less to go to Nebraska than s/he would pay in *tuition and fees alone* to attend the University of Colorado-Boulder or Michigan State, before scholarships are considered. No Big Ten university, and likely few others outside of the conference, offers as many generous scholarship awards for non-residents as Nebraska

- Non-resident students who score 29 or higher on the ACT, combined with a strong transcript may qualify for the George Beadle Scholarship, which represents a \$14,500 discount. This scholarship requires only a 2.0 GPA to be renewed. It may also be combined with a Husker Heritage Scholarship of between \$5,000 or \$7,000 per year.
- The Ruth Leverton Scholarship, a renewable award of \$13,000/year, requires a 24 to 28 ACT for consideration. It too, requires a GPA on only 2.0 to be renewed.
- The Nebraska Legacy Scholarship offers a \$14,000 annual discount to non-residents who are children of alumni.

Given the low resident charges as well as the awards that reduce costs for non residents, the average indebtedness of Nebraska graduates was low in 2016, the last year data is available. Among 2016 graduates, nearly half (48 percent) graduated with no debt at all. Among those who borrowed, the average indebtedness was just under \$23,000. The maximum that dependent graduates could have borrowed under the Federal Direct Student Loan program was \$27,000 over four years, \$31,000 over five.

Completion

Most recently, 83 percent of the students who entered in 2016 returned for their sophomore year, the lowest freshman retention rate in the Big Ten. The four-year graduation rate is improving. It was 36 percent for the class that entered in 2010. But it rose to 42 percent for the class that arrived in 2013.



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The latest transfer-out rate available, for the class that arrived in 2012, was just over eight percent, compared to more than 20 percent at Big Ten rival Iowa and former Big 12 rival Colorado. Given that Nebraska is a less expensive institution than either school for residents and non-residents alike, it would be no surprise that students would be more likely to stay, even if more time was required to complete a degree. The five-year graduation rates for the students who arrived in 2012 and 2013 was 64 percent.

Nebraska tracks graduation rates by undergraduate college as well as the university as a whole. Among the undergraduate colleges, enrollments in the College of Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources not only trended upward from 2002 through 2011, but so did the retention. Sixty-five percent of the students who entered this college in 2011 remained there to earn a degree, and 75 percent graduated from the university. No other college within the university did better, although the College of Business, the College of Journalism and Mass Communications and the Hixson-Leid College of Fine and Performing Arts awarded degrees to more than half of the students who were members of their 2011 freshman classes. The College of Architecture, College of Arts and Sciences, College of Education and Human Sciences, and the College of Engineering did not.

Curriculum

Being a Federal Land Grant University as well as flagship state university, Nebraska offers more academic options than most of its sister schools in the Big Ten. Only Michigan State, Ohio State, Penn State, Illinois, Maryland and Minnesota offer a similar selection—and they are all larger, and more selective, schools. Nebraska also offers a university-wide Honors Program that welcomes majors in all eight of its undergraduate schools on the Lincoln campus. There are two other honors opportunities, one in the business school, the other in a unique school of computer science and management.

In 2011, the same year that Nebraska joined the Big Ten the university was asked to leave the Association of American Universities, although it had been a member for 102 years. This decision, by a difference of only two votes by the other member schools, was based not on student or alumni satisfaction, but on faculty research and research funding. While this matters in attracting doctoral candidates as well as research professors, it also impacts undergraduate education in mathematics and the sciences in terms of faculty resources. The university reported a student-faculty ratio of 21 to 1, including adjuncts and teaching assistants, high for any school, including a flagship state university. For comparison, current conference sports rival Iowa has a ratio of 16 to 1. Kansas State, a university with a similar student body size, freshman profile and academic mix, has a ratio of 18 to 1.

A high student-faculty ratio impacts enrollments in classes that are upper-division (sophomore, junior and senior years) more than the large lecture classes that may fill an auditorium. Course selection after declaring a major might not be as flexible, and the upper-division enrollments not as small, as students might like. During the 2017-18 academic year, 18 percent of all undergraduate courses at Nebraska enrolled 50 or more students, eight percent had more than 100. Only 35 percent had fewer than 20.

Nebraska students gave their faculty a rating of 3.63 (out of a possible 5) on RateMyProfessors.com, lower than any Big Ten university. It's hard to consider student survey results to be the major indicator of the quality of teaching at the university. But



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this is a large school, and many students have the opportunity to submit a survey. Students at Kansas State, probably the most comparable public university, gave their faculty a slightly higher rating of 3.69, as did students at the University of Colorado-Boulder.

Community

Nebraska's campus and community could be considered a smaller, but also more navigable version of Ohio State's, which has about twice as many students in a capital city and business center, Columbus, that has more than twice as many people. While Columbus, the third-largest city in the Midwest, and the largest in Ohio, has more than 800,000 residents, Lincoln has just under 285,000. The city's Haymarket District includes the Nebraska Student Union as well as the entertainment, shopping, dining and drinking places that you would expect to find in a college town that can become quite busy and crowded on a fall football weekend.

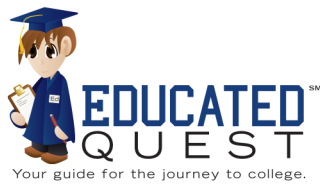
Nebraska not only has the smallest undergraduate student body of any Big Ten school; it also has the smallest campus, comprising less than 700 acres within Lincoln. Nebraska has a main academic quad with tree lined walkways at the center, academic buildings, residence halls and athletic facilities spread out from there. Parking near classes appears to be quite difficult. One concern: reported incidents of drug and alcohol-related referrals on campus trended up from 2014 to 2016, according to the university's 2017 Clery Report. Drug-related referrals reported on rose from 123 to 209. Alcohol-related referrals reported rose from 331 to 470. Drug-related arrests rose as well, from 129 to 164. There were also reported weapons-related arrests each year from 2014 to 2016.

A member of the Big Ten since 2011, Nebraska's football team, the Cornhuskers, has won more games, at a higher winning percentage, than any NCAA Division I program over the past 50 years. The Cornhuskers have won five national championships, and went undefeated in every season that they won those titles! Memorial Stadium, their home field, seats over 86,000 fans, and sells out for every home game, regardless of opponent, or the Cornhusker's record. Nebraska ranks 37th among US states in terms of population. Among the states where the flagship public university plays football at the highest national profile, only West Virginia is smaller. Nebraska has also achieved success in women's volleyball, winning five NCAA national titles, and gymnastics.

Comforts

Nebraska houses nearly 90 percent of the freshman class, and nearly 40 percent of the undergraduate student body, the second figure quite high for a flagship state school. The university requires all students who are under the age of 19 to live on campus, unless they commute from the home of a parent or guardian. The university owns and operates 16 residence halls, all grouped into complexes, including three suite-style halls and three apartment living options.

Greek social life is relatively important on the Nebraska campus, attracting just under a fifth of the men, and about a quarter of the women. The university has approved living accommodations at 15 fraternity houses on campus, and three sorority houses. Unlike many large state schools, Nebraska allows first-year students to rush and pledge Greek social organization, then reside in their houses after the pledge process is completed.



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It is also possible to share an apartment for under \$400/month, though tenants will likely be obligated to a 12-month lease. This might be the better option for students who wish to live in Lincoln during the summer to work, or attend classes. However, apartments may be difficult to sublease over the summer months. Renters must compete with the Greek houses, which have their own parking, and are closer to campus, for tenants

Connections

Among the public universities in the Big Ten, Nebraska has the second-highest alumni giving rate after Purdue. Nearly a fifth of the alumni base makes a contribution to the school, according to the data that the university submitted to *US News*. The alumni network is organized into nearly 90 chapters and groups across the US and abroad, including the Nebraska Women's Leadership Network. There are also many football watch sites across the country.

As a member of the Big Ten, the university complements its career services programs and events with an in-person Career Expo that runs in conjunction with the conference's men's basketball tournament as well as an online virtual job fair that include the conference's member schools plus DePaul and Notre Dame.

Among the more than 122,000 alumni registered in LinkedIn.com, over 58,000 are based in or around Lincoln and Omaha. The Denver area has nearly 5,500 Cornhuskers, while more than 3,700 are based in or around Kansas City. There are more than 2,000 Cornhuskers in or around Chicago, Minneapolis, Dallas/Fort Worth and Phoenix, and more than 1,500 in or around San Francisco, New York, Washington DC and Los Angeles.

Conclusions

A student who wants Big Ten academics, and a social experience with spirit and sports, will find no school more affordable, or more achievable for admissions, than the University of Nebraska. But one can't help to wish that the school had more resources towards academics and student success, especially when a great number of the admitted students have committed to enroll.

Report Card: University of Nebraska-Lincoln

- Four-Year/Six-Year Graduation Rates: C+/B
- Freshman Retention: C+
- Costs: A
- Curriculum: A
- Community: A
- Comforts: A
- Connections: A in Nebraska and the Denver and Kansas City metro areas/B elsewhere