The Way the Future Was

A Report of the Nebraska Higher Education Forum for Student Success in 2020

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Introduction

TG and the University of Nebraska–Lincoln jointly hosted a forum to imagine the future of higher education in Nebraska as envisioned by various stakeholders. In the interim between forum planning and execution, the U.S. Secretary of Education convened a group to study the future of higher education. The primary focus of the forum in Lincoln was to identify institutional practices that would lead to student success in postsecondary education. The Spellings Commission principally focused on broader policies for states and the nation. This crucial difference was the major reason why each group reached different conclusions. The Spellings Commission recommended future change in areas such as accountability, financial aid, and preparation of STEM field graduates without suggesting specific ways for implementation. This report, more specifically, suggests tasks practitioners can undertake.

In publishing this report, TG intends to share the deliberations and findings of this forum with other communities, whether local, regional, or state. TG hopes that the issues and suggested solutions in this report might help inform other communities as they prepare for the future. The opinions, commentary, and recommendations included in the report are not intended to represent the positions of TG or the University of Nebraska–Lincoln.
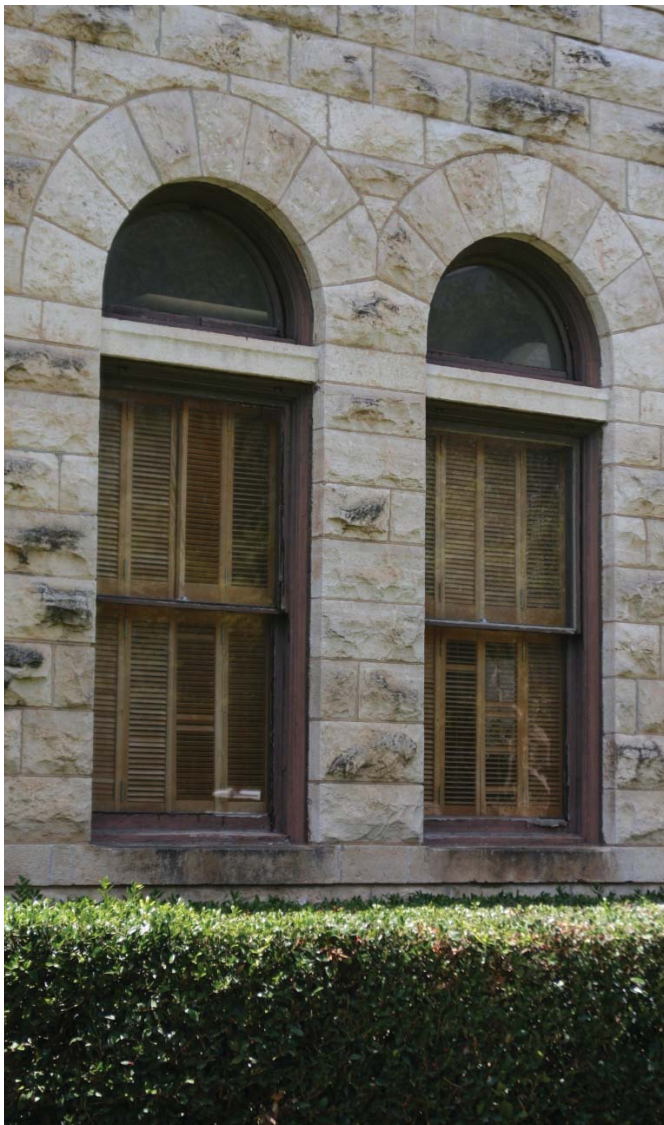
Vision and Purpose

The vision in conducting the forum was to move beyond the statement, "higher education needs to change," to the identification of what needs to change to enable student success in 2020.

To realize this vision, the purpose of the forum was to determine, given 2006 resources, what changes colleges and universities in the Plains states could implement in the short term (three to five years) to ensure student success in 2020.

Methodology

The methodology involved a two-stage process. In the first stage, a multiple-constituency group was identified and asked to complete an open-ended survey. In the second stage, those who responded to the survey were convened in a one-day forum to examine and summarize survey findings and to probe more deeply into specific aspects of the issues. Key to this process was convening actual survey responders (in addition to University of Nebraska–Lincoln and TG staff) to participate in the forum.

Invitations were extended to individuals from K–12 schools, public and private 4-year institutions, community colleges, the business community, the Chancellor of the State College System, and the Commissioner for Postsecondary Education. Individuals from all sectors attended except for the business community.

In the first part of the forum, participants verified and added to survey responses and began identifying areas where change was necessary. In the second part, small groups were formed to explore topical areas based on the survey results and the changes that would be necessary in order to realize the vision. These small-group discussions were summarized and then reported to the participants.

Survey Analysis and Results

A 10-question survey was developed by a subcommittee of the Council for the Management of Educational Finance, an advisory council to TG. The instrument was distributed to 32 individuals, with 23 (72 percent) returning responses. The survey questions and representative responses are detailed later in this report. Analysis of the responses focused on identifying topics for small-group discussion. To complete the analysis, responses were grouped into broad themes or subject areas. For example, almost two-thirds of the respondents mentioned some aspect of technology. With a limited number of respondents, identifying more specific themes (e.g., technology support, technology infrastructure) was not feasible.

From the analysis, four themes emerged: 1) the teaching and learning environment; 2) cultural backgrounds and participation rates; 3) recruitment, retention, and time-to-degree; and 4) developing and using technology. These themes were used to guide small-group discussions, which became the catalysts for designing the final vision for student success in 2020.

> The Teaching and Learning Environment discussion group approached their task by describing what they thought the future environment would be and then worked backwards.

Small Group Summaries

Teaching and Learning Environment

Survey respondents were asked to evaluate undergraduate and graduate education separately. During the large group session, the forum participants emphasized the appropriateness of this distinction.

Undergraduate Learning

Technology will be more pervasive in 2020 due to more blended, online, and on-demand course offerings. Technologies such as audio and video streaming, among others, will require greater bandwidth. For face-to-face instruction, classrooms will require Internet access, presentation equipment, and student response systems. In addition to course delivery, technology will supplement and enhance curriculum through integrating information resource delivery systems (the library), class notes and presentations (podcasting), and discussion forums (chats and blogs). Student services such as admission, financial aid, advising, counseling, and mentoring will be available at any time, often delivered using technology and/or self-service options. "Smart" living environments will be the norm in residential settings.

Demand will increase for greater accountability, outcomes-based measurement of student progress, and "standards" similar to those enacted within P–12 learning communities. The focus of learning will shift from process to outcomes. Outcomes will include increased recognition of competency-based versus seat-time learning, basic/soft skills, critical thinking and organizational skills, moral development, reading, and writing. Non-economic outcomes will also be important. Higher education will be expected to enrich lives through encouragement and learning.

The role of the faculty member in the classroom will change. The primary emphasis of the role will move from teaching to facilitating, from lecturing to discussion and application. The faculty member will be seen as more of a facilitator of learning.

The physical environment of the campus will expand into the workplace across state and international borders. It will become more acceptable for students to attend multiple institutions simultaneously and sequentially. The learning environment will incorporate community-based, experiential-based, and service-learning opportunities. Extra-curricular and student activities will be more closely linked with the formal curriculum. Students will become more active in the learning experience, and students and faculty will become co-learners.

Students will not be as engaged with campus life because of increased part-time attendance, as well as increased numbers of students working or having outside family responsibilities. There will be more students pursuing distance learning, resulting in fewer residential students. For those remaining on campus, "suite-style" dwelling will become the norm.

Graduate Learning

For programs comprised largely of students working full time (e.g., education and business), online programs and services will dominate. The traditional semester will have disappeared in favor of an "on-demand" calendar.

Some students and disciplines will continue to follow a more traditional model. These examples are based on full-time, on-campus enrollment in programs that are often externally funded and require research experiences and facilities. In other disciplines, there will be fewer full-time fellowship/assistantship students unless institutions find the means to fund increases to an equitable wage.

The primary challenge to maintaining graduate enrollment will arise from increased opportunities for international study as well as increased graduate offerings at proprietary institutions. As in undergraduate education, technology will be used to make services continuously available at any distance.

Life-long learning will be emphasized, and credit/evaluation mechanisms will expand to include opportunities for credit through demonstration of competencies, life, work, and professional development experiences. There will be increased emphasis on global issues and application or value-added components of courses and programs. Teacher and administrator preparation will utilize a scholar-practitioner model aimed at helping individuals translate theory into practice.

Cultural Backgrounds and Participation Rates (Including Graduate and Professional Students)

Addressing the cultural backgrounds and participation rates in the future will require a move from awareness to action. Strategies suggested by the participants included: increasing representation of diverse cultures among administration, faculty, and staff; multilingual faculty and staff; mentors from business, industry, or the community; peer mentoring; and cooperation and/or collaboration with other institutions, including those in P–12 arenas.

An ideal in addressing cultural backgrounds would be to increase the diversity of employees. Although the ideal would not always be attainable, forum participants agreed that the creation of a campus ethos valuing diversity would be possible. Such an ethos would strive to eliminate stereotypes regarding participation, degree aspiration, and discipline selection, and would integrate and assimilate everyone into a broader "culture of learning." Strategies to create this ethos would include student advising and counseling, developing communities of interest or learning to support cultural groups, and enriching the curricula to encompass cultural perspectives.

Faculty and staff will need information, education, and resources about cultural backgrounds and perspectives in relation to higher education. Parents and leaders from underrepresented racial and ethnic groups will need information and resources about postsecondary educational opportunities and the extrinsic and intrinsic values of postsecondary education.

To move beyond awareness of cultural barriers, the support of parents and families for higher education will be essential. Higher education will not remove these barriers on its own. Business and industry, community organizations and leaders, the P–12 community, and other educational entities will be essential partners in efforts to develop welcoming environments.

The Cultural Backgrounds and Participation Rates discussion group approached their task by asking, "What do we need to do to improve?"

Recruitment, Retention, and Time-to-Degree

With a slight projected decline in the number of high school graduates and changing demographics, it is likely that some postsecondary institutions in Nebraska will need to develop creative recruitment strategies to maintain their current levels of enrollment. As a result, it will be important to start postsecondary recruitment activities earlier than the high school years, especially for populations with lower participation rates. In order for these efforts to be successful, postsecondary education will need to work more closely with the P–12 community. In addition, colleges and universities will need to increase outreach activities aimed at educating parents and prospective students about the application process, tuition costs, and financial aid. Additional strategies for maintaining enrollment include expanding access and opportunity by offering courses in the evenings, on weekends, and through distance learning technologies, as well as working closely with business and industry to provide training. Market analysis will be necessary in determining the feasibility of attracting out-of-state students.

A solution for maintaining or increasing enrollment will be for postsecondary institutions in Nebraska to improve retention rates. An initial step towards increasing retention would be to improve the diagnostic and assessment measures for entering students. A corollary to this step would be to provide sufficient academic support services, including developmental education and tutoring. In order to reach learners with different skill levels, professional development activities for faculty regarding learning styles and learner-centered approaches would need to be developed. P–12 education has experienced success with individualized educational programs, a strategy that postsecondary education should consider. Additional strategies to increase retention would include a focus on first-year experiences, engaging students with each other to form support groups and learning communities, and engaging students with faculty beyond the traditional classroom and office encounters.

Although traditional college attendance patterns and time-to-degree remain common measures, it has become unrealistic to assume that even the majority of college students in Plains states will continue to enroll full time or complete a baccalaureate degree in four or five years. To facilitate degree attainment, postsecondary education will need to improve the processes that allow students to transition between and among different institutions and institutional types. There is also the need to create better means of tracking students as they attend multiple institutions. With more students attending multiple institutions, it is becoming essential to ensure that institutions provide accurate advising and counseling regarding degree requirements for their own institutions as well as those of other colleges and universities in the state. Therefore, a communication system needs to be developed in order for information about curricular changes to reach advisors and counselors at all postsecondary institutions.

As the Plains states are projecting declines in the number of high school graduates during the next five years, the Recruitment, Retention, and Time-to-Degree discussion group focused on maintaining current enrollment levels.

Developing and Using Technology

Resources, both capital and human, will become even more crucial as technology usage accelerates in the future. Moreover, the technology infrastructure at postsecondary institutions will increase in complexity as use and volume rise. To maximize technology, decision-making capabilities need to improve in terms of standards-based tools, cutting-edge levels, and institutional policies and procedures to accommodate the use of technology. Security and legal concerns as well as the currency and reliability of institutional databases will continue to be issues and require attention. As the use of technology increases, planning will become more important in order to develop policies for replacement and upgrades, and to make sure that sufficient funds are available for such expenditures.

A number of challenges and issues will influence the increased use of technology in postsecondary education. Gaining faculty consensus will continue as a challenge on many campuses. Finding a way to deliver cost-effective and timely training will also be an issue. The fact that the public systems (community colleges, state colleges, and universities) rely on different enterprise system vendors prevents any economy of scale savings, and problems with data (such as tracking students across the systems) emerge. A final technology challenge will be providing student access. Students now expect access to labs at any time of day. Students with physical disabilities and learning differences may require different kinds of technology. Closing the digital divide in student homes will also be a paramount concern.

The Developing and Using Technology discussion group focused on the barriers and issues to higher education more fully adapting technology in both academic and student affairs.
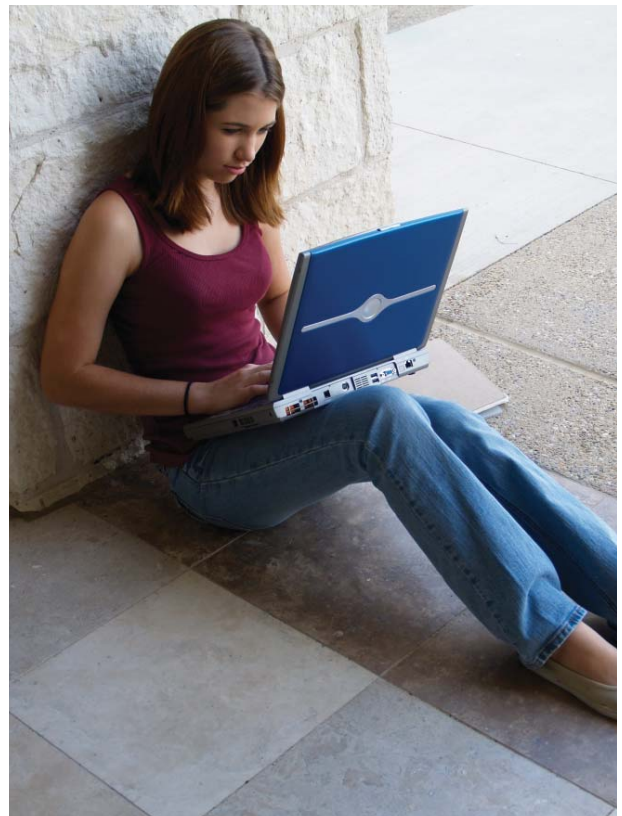
Representative Survey Responses

The following section presents the questions from the survey instrument and provides representative responses.

What changes do colleges and universities need to make to the teaching and learning environment to serve undergraduate students in 2020?

- Classrooms need to include state-of-the-art technology
- Course offerings should include more technology to enhance instruction
- More course offerings using distance learning technologies
- Develop a "smart" environment, with 24/7 access to services
- Classroom pedagogy needs to move from a lecture-based teaching model to a facilitator-based learning model
- The concept of the campus needs to expand to include workplace, out-of-state, international, and other campuses
- The classroom needs to expand to include community-based, experiential-based, service-leaning, extra-curricular, and student activities
- The discipline specific nature of courses needs to include basic/soft skill development
- Employment practices and priorities need to change. Fewer tenure-track faculty lines, additional lines to provide adequate technology support personnel
- Opportunities for advanced high school students need to be provided
- The state needs to develop a cadre of experienced individuals willing to serve as adjuncts
- Helping students manage multiple responsibilities will become a responsibility of student affairs

What changes do colleges and universities need to make to the teaching and learning environment to serve graduate students in 2020?

- Move from a semester-based to an on-demand calendar
- Develop options to fulfill the purposes of residency
- Move from a course completion model to a knowledge/skill/ability/competency/experience model of evaluation
- Provide online programs and degrees
- Secure adequate funding for traditional, full-time doctoral students
- Develop faculty as facilitators rather than lecturers

What changes will be necessary to better meet the needs of learners from diverse cultural backgrounds?

- Address social and cultural barriers
- Provide access to and information about higher education and how to participate
- Increase numbers of and exposure to role models and mentors
- Develop a welcoming environment that celebrates cultural differences

What changes will be necessary to better meet the needs of learners who enter postsecondary education with differing levels of skills and abilities?

- Work with K–12 to better prepare learners
- Improve diagnostic and assessment capabilities
- Adopt individualized educational programs
- Provide faculty development programs focused on strategies of different levels in the classroom
- Provide system access to entry and to developmental offerings

What can we do to bring into postsecondary education those who historically have not attended and those who have attended but departed before graduation?

- Reach out to these populations in elementary and secondary school
- Coordination and cooperation with each other and P–12
- Develop a social contract that provides postsecondary opportunity to all

Given the projected decline in the population of high school graduates in Nebraska, what changes will be necessary to effectively market our institutions to maintain sufficient enrollments?

- Recruit regionally, nationally, and globally
- Realize that the status quo cannot remain. Niche programming, less duplication, more state system approach vs. individualized institutions
- Increase online offerings
- Four-year institutions need to adopt strategies of community colleges — more adult learners, workforce training, lifelong learning
- Attract those who normally do not attend

What are the major challenges that your institution currently faces in developing and using technology?

- Developing a plan to remain current with hardware and applications
- Providing faculty and staff development and end-user support
- Developing institutional policies and procedures regarding new applications

What factors, positive and negative, will impact efforts to move students through the enrollment pipeline — from prospects to applicants, and from admitted students to graduates?

- Recognize that the traditional timeline is obsolete for many students
- Develop tracking systems that recognize "stop out" and attendance at multiple institutions
- Improve counseling and advising
- Emphasize individual and self-paced instruction

What are the key factors to increasing the number of today's undergraduate students who enroll in and complete graduate and professional programs?

- Recognize the need for graduate education in regard to the workforce
- Recruit for graduate school in K–12
- Exposure to role models from under-represented populations
- Encourage faculty to promote graduate school

What changes will be necessary for colleges and universities to better meet the needs of their communities, to serve lifelong learners and to solidify the view of our institutions as valuable community and state assets?

- Establish and maintain relationships and partnerships with business and industry, community organizations, and local leaders
- Serve as an economic engine and a cultural focal point for the entire community
- Emphasize lifelong learning
- Document outcomes and the achievements of alumni

Other Comments:

- Create more opportunities to participate in a variety of activities
- Form a learning community in distance offerings
- What should we expect from faculty
- Reward systems need to be developed for teaching, mentoring, advising, recruitment, retention, and graduation rates
- Disconnect between federal rewards and community/student needs

Where Should Change Begin?

Which changes should occur first? During the morning of the forum, changes suggested in the survey responses were presented and discussed. In the afternoon, five small groups continued exploring necessary changes and developed a short list of where change should begin. Each of the five groups identified the necessity of first focusing on student learning and student needs. Two groups suggested the need for differentiation within the classroom to accommodate the needs of various learning styles and individuals with diverse levels of knowledge or ability. Addressing the cultural imprint on the short attention spans of contemporary youth was considered essential for improving teaching and learning. With greater numbers of students working significant numbers of hours, one group suggested that expanding academic and student services to selected workplaces could benefit recruitment and retention. Another group pointed out that addressing students and student needs, in and of itself, was a tremendous change and would require a fundamental paradigm shift from faculty allegiance to the discipline to allegiance to students.

Four groups agreed that professional development activities focusing on differences in learning styles and developing a greater cultural awareness through curricular initiatives could address, in part, cultural and demographic differences in the prospective student population. Forum participants indicated that changes would also be necessary to the challenges presented by populations of illegal immigrants and English-language learners. Notably, participants felt that greater participation in higher education by underrepresented groups would be essential if colleges and universities desired to retain current enrollment levels. Of concern to most was the increasing number of high school students becoming less likely to pursue postsecondary education. In rural states, such as Nebraska, it will be critically important to provide educational access and opportunities, even to those individuals who are isolated due to employment or family location.

Four groups stressed that change needed to begin with greater collaboration and cooperation between educational organizations. While efforts to work across organizations for the good of students is becoming more common, participants pointed out that current linkages were sequential, rarely expanding to include three or more levels of education (e.g., collaboration between high schools and community colleges). Fulfilling the needs of learners in 2020 will require flexible boundaries, cooperation, and collaboration among and between all levels of education, from preschool through graduate school.

Four groups indicated that any educational change would require changes in fiscal resources. One group emphasized that addressing the costs of higher education could lead to change in participation rates. Disparities in educational opportunity (because of socioeconomic status) have become more evident to policy-makers and to the public. A second group suggested that change should begin through leveraging financial aid for those most in need. Another group contended that providing fiscal resources that encourage change, such as efforts at seamless education, would promote action and stressed that the initial difference should be in funding. There was shared sentiment that states would need to shift philosophy and resources and revise their structure of postsecondary education with an emphasis on providing access and opportunities for all.

Two groups suggested that improving student measurement and documentation of student outcomes would spur change in other areas of postsecondary education. They noted that their current outcome measures did not begin with the identification of the intended purpose of education. Participants decided that methods of identifying and documenting skill development, job preparation, as well as degree attainment would be essential.

Another consideration in outcome measurement would be to assess employer and alumni satisfaction with career decisions.

Two groups recommended two aspects of technology as starting points for change. One group asserted that continued growth in distance education required higher education institutions to develop and provide basic skills training to enable effective use of distance technology by instructors. Consequentially, to recognize efforts to improve teaching using distance technologies, reward structures would also need updating. The second group recommended expanding current technology to develop a 24-hour electronic campus making available comprehensive academic offerings, administration, research, and student services.

Two groups also pointed to change being driven by a global society. One group elaborated on emerging opportunities to recruit students from other countries as well as the education opportunities provided by cooperation and collaboration with international institutions. The second group mentioned a possible shift in prospective student educational choice as postsecondary offerings and programs abroad become more widely known and respected. Most agreed that acute change will be pivotal in enabling the United States to retain dominance as the system of higher education.

Conclusion

The forum participants determined that their vision was one of a P–20+ educational system that would recognize the contributions of all kinds of educational organizations and the unique types of students. In this new vision, partnerships among and between educational entities would be the rule rather than the exception. The appropriate use of technology would permeate student life, teaching, and administration. The vision of lifetime learning, valued by all and for all, would be sustained by adequate capital, human, and fiscal resources.

All institutions of higher education recognized that each would have a role to play in the future, but acknowledged that their roles and niches could possibly eclipse the tendency of most institutions to strive to be comprehensive. The distinctiveness of these institutions would arise from the unique ways in which they would engage students and because of the unique students that would select them. The value of higher education would be based on student development and learning, rather than economic measures alone.

Summary and Recommendations for the Future

Forum participants focused on four major themes and two specific areas of change. The four themes that emerged were: 1) the teaching and learning environment; 2) cultural backgrounds and participation rates; 3) recruitment, retention, and time-to-degree; and 4) developing and using technology. The two specific areas of change were: 1) changing to meet a vision of the future, and 2) where change should begin in order to realize the vision.

After considering all of the specific and general visions, suggestions, and recommendations about the future, one must conclude that the work of the forum is not complete. There are, in fact, some considerations that need to be addressed in future dialogues. One consideration must be the role of the state in

creating a truly seamless K–12 program through higher education pathway. The question is essentially whether the state should mandate, regulate, or facilitate the necessary cooperation. The reasoned conclusions of the forum participants was that the state needed to play a larger role, but as a facilitator rather than as a mandator or a legislator. Another thought was that the state should also establish a technology infrastructure throughout all levels of education to avoid duplication and incompatibility.

A related consideration is the role of respective institutions in creating this seamless pathway. In the current vision, all higher education institutions would be required to commit to training and the continued professional development of teachers at all educational levels. The focus of future discussions on collaboration should not only identify areas of improvement, but solutions and incentives to carry out said solutions.

The vision also assumes that personnel roles would shift from traditional duties such as the expectation for faculty to teach and conduct research to new responsibilities related to the use of technology and the support of student needs (e.g., tutoring, developmental education, access and affordability, career services, and information). This shift would also require well-conceived reward structures that would recognize the changes illustrated in the vision of the forum participants.

Finally, the traditional mission of many institutions focuses on research, teaching, and service. This forum focused primarily on the teaching mission of academia, but did not directly address the research and service missions. Additional discussions should determine how research and service would be integrated into the vision for the future.

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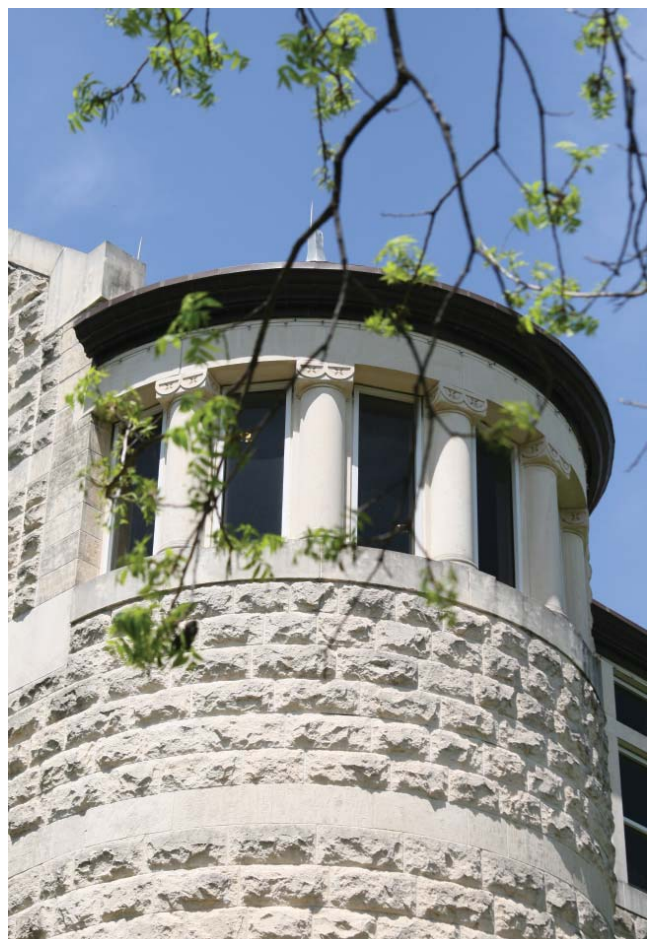
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