Momentum at the University of Nebraska at Kearney continues to build, and the hard work of our faculty and staff are evident throughout campus. As we watch the progress taking place before our eyes, it is clear that every step forward increases UNK’s impact on students, the community, the state and the region.

Few things are as important to our future, or more critical to rural Nebraska, than quality health care, and last spring, we were very pleased to announce an exciting partnership with the University of Nebraska Medical Center to increase education and training in nursing and the allied health professions. A new $19 million facility will be created adjacent to Bruner Hall of Science to house the programs and will include a clinical simulation laboratory, anatomy and physiology laboratories, and technology for state-of-the-art distance education. All will be dedicated to enhancing and expanding four-year and graduate nursing opportunities, and delivering new programs in the fields of clinical laboratory science, diagnostic medical sonography, physician assistant, physical therapy and radiography.

UNK is also an important part of the arts community in Nebraska, and we were pleased to hire Dr. Deborah Freedman last year. Dr. Freedman is the first to hold the Ronald J. Crocker Chair in Orchestra and is the new director of the Kearney Symphony Orchestra. KSO enriches the cultural landscape in central and western Nebraska with performances throughout the fall and spring seasons.

This summer, UNK joined the Mid-America Intercollegiate Athletics Association (MIAA), an athletic conference that includes universities in Kansas, Missouri, Oklahoma and Nebraska. The Lopers will find new competition in the MIAA as they continue their outstanding record of success. And with athletic competition, we look forward to building new research and academic collaborations.

In the midst of these new developments, our focus on excellence in education and original scholarship remains the same. Our faculty devote considerable time to research and creative activity, and are experts in their disciplines. But professors also create opportunities for students to engage in their own research outside of course requirements. Across campus, 25 percent of our students conduct original research and are involved in creative projects, with the College of Natural and Social Sciences leading the way at more than 60 percent. Students in Fine Arts and Humanities are close behind at 35 percent. Such opportunities are powerful learning experiences for students as they prepare for their futures, and our growing enrollment numbers reflect that they understand the value of the UNK experience.

Every year we attract talented new faculty to join the ranks of scholars who lead the institution. This issue of New Frontiers focuses on some of the contributions they are already making. We hope you enjoy reading about them, and we invite you to visit UNK and see for yourself the strides we are making.
Welcome to the fifth issue of New Frontiers!

At the University of Nebraska at Kearney, we view our mission as a commitment to be one of the nation’s premier undergraduate institutions, with excellent graduate education, scholarship and public service.

Along with our legacy of strong teaching, a commitment for faculty members to engage in meaningful scholarship has evolved. Our strength lies in combining teaching with research and creative activity to create innovative classroom experiences.

Faculty accomplishments in research and creative activity serve as the foundation for involving students in research opportunities outside of class. This is one of our priorities. Students publish in the Undergraduate Research Journal, present at UNK’s Student Research Day and present at the National Conference on Undergraduate Research (NCUR) and other professional conferences. More than 25 percent of our students do original scholarly projects under the supervision of faculty mentors. Two years in a row, UNK students have been selected to participate in the prestigious Posters on the Hill event in Washington, D.C.

Seventy-seven percent of our classroom faculty have terminal degrees, and they not only teach students but they are also contributing to their fields of study. Our faculty, such as those featured in this issue of New Frontiers, work in communities of experts to expand the body of knowledge. This quest for knowledge and the passion for their subjects brings energy and expertise to the learning environment.

This issue highlights the accomplishments of several faculty at relatively early stages of their careers. Each came to UNK with a passion to teach, and a demonstrated interest in and training for conducting scholarship. We consider this combination a high priority in recruiting new faculty. The scholars featured in this issue of New Frontiers provide a glimpse at just some of the important work being done at UNK. These faculty illustrate UNK’s growth in research and creative activity, and demonstrate the university’s commitment to scholarship in the arts and humanities, education, business, basic and applied science, and social sciences.

As you read, you will see UNK researchers can be found working in the lab, the classroom, the community and throughout the world. I hope you enjoy reading about some of their research and the global impact it has.

KENYA S. TAYLOR, Ed.D.
Associate Vice Chancellor for Academic and Student Affairs
Dean for Graduate Studies and Research

KENYA S. TAYLOR, Ed.D.
Associate Vice Chancellor for Academic and Student Affairs
Dean for Graduate Studies and Research
undergraduate at the University of Iowa, Simon said, the gradu-
teate students who worked in the laboratory would sequence a
handful of genes per year. Now, there are thousands of sequences
available to scientists.

Sequence analysis remains a highly specialized field, how-
ever, and even fewer scientists share Simon’s focus on a particular
 type of sequence, called an intron. From that group, perhaps
only a handful of scientists share her specialty—Group I and
Group II intron evolution.

Her intense focus has led Simon to publish 10 articles on
intron-related research, including the results of a 2009 broad-scale
study of Group II introns in bacteria that is the most compre-
henisive treatment of the subject to date. Since coming to UNK,
Simon has participated in projects funded by almost $3.5 mil-
lion in grants and has collaborated with specialists in many other
subfields of biology. As colleague Kim Carlson explained, Simon’s
expertise and passion for bioinformatics put her in high demand.

“She brings a very unique part of biology that (UNK) hadn’t
had, and many other places have started to have, and we needed
to have,” said Carlson, who was also on the search committee for
Simon’s position.

Carlson explained bioinformatics as “the marriage of computer science
and biology,” which happens after a biological sample is collected, and
DNA is extracted. With the help of computer programs, the material
is then broken down into sequences of letters that represent its components.

By studying those sequences, scien-
tists can identify genetic characteris-
tics. They can also form ideas about
how those characteristics developed,
and how they may continue to evolve.

“(Simon) can come up with a story
about the evolution of a DNA sequence
that few people would think of,” Carlson said.
That’s an element that improves any research
project and makes the results more readily accepted.

“We all collaborate with her, because she has that unique
background,” Carlson said, noting that adding Simon to the fac-
ulty broadened research possibilities for the entire department.

“It’s just opened up our entire research perspective,” she said.

For Simon, however, those letters arrange themselves into
patterns. As pair with U’s, and G’s with C’s (and sometimes
other pairs) “fold” into branches, some short and some long,
with loops of non-mating letters in the middle. For example
the “GGCCGAUAAU” in the above sequence folds on itself to
pair with the “ACAGCUUAAU,” remaining some distance away.
Simon sees on the screen isn’t chaos, but the orderly blue-
print of an organic life form.

“I don’t even see the letters,” she explained. “I just see ‘Oh,
there’s a Group I intron,’ or ‘There’s a Group II.’”

Simon’s field, molecular evolution, has exploded since the
1990s, when technology advanced enough to make genome
sequencing efficient and relatively cheap. When she was an

an University on a project that will build more sequence analysis
training into biology curricula. Titled “Integrating Bioinformat-
ics Into the Life Sciences,” the project has researchers at each
institution creating laboratory units for all curriculum levels.

Simon said she and Letitia Reichart, a UNK assistant professor of
biology, have developed one lab thus far, and will eventually have
20. The idea, she said, is to introduce more students to more
research training, earlier.

“For me, my favorite thing to do is research, and I think you
don’t know if you like research until you try it,” she said.

It’s the hunt for answers within a mass of data that first at-
ttracted Simon to molecular evolution and to science in general.
Growing up in Cascade, Iowa, she said she first became serious
about studying science after she tackled genetics problems in a
superspecialized biology class.

As an undergraduate at the University of Iowa, Simon found a
question that has kept her searching for answers. “Ever since
someone told me what (introns were), I started thinking, Why, why
do they exist?”

For Simon, introns are nucleotide sequences—small bits of an organism’s
genome. These particular sequences are bits that get removed as
an organism’s DNA is translated into usable products, such as
proteins. While researchers know that introns exist, Simon said it
is not always clear what role they play in a gene’s evolution. It has
been estimated that as many as one-third of all human genetic
disease are caused by introns that are not processed correctly.

Simon said most researchers choose to work with splicesso-
mal introns, because they are found in humans. She decided to
work with Group I and Group II introns instead, which predate
splicosomal introns and may be billions of years old. In fact,
they (or similar genetic elements) are hypothesized to have
existed before any DNA-based life form.

Simon did her first studies on Group I introns while at Iowa, and then chose to
do her postdoctoral work in Canada in a lab-

atory that worked with Group II introns.

Her work there led to the 2009 publication
in Molecular Biology and Evolution. Simon
considers it her most important paper, in part
because it highlights just how chal-
gen her field is.

For that study, Simon and two col-
leeagues analyzed all known Group II in-
trons in bacteria. Based on those sequences,
they created phylogenetic trees to try to
understand how the introns change over
time. Their work yielded some interest-
ing data about intron evolution, Simon
and her colleagues also found it was dif-
cult to create trees that were “robust” to
changes in methods and sampling. She said
that it is likely due to the antiquity of the
introns, which results in a large number of
I think this is the project we’re going to be working on for a long time.

While Simon said results from that research should be ready for publication soon, another project is just getting started. Collaborating with scientists at Duke University, Simon has found introns in lichen fungi, an exciting finding for those studying intron evolution, she said. “I think this is the project we’re going to be working on for a long time;” Simon said. Working now from a $20,000 award, she’s preparing pilot data to qualify for a larger grant.

Currently, Simon is sifting through thousands of intron sequences from Duke researchers, who found them while conducting studies on the evolutionary relationships of fungi. They had no use for the introns, but were intrigued by the fact that the fungi had both Group I and spliceosomal introns; it is not typical to see close related introns, researchers might have less difficulty creating trees they could trust. Simon has taken that lesson to heart in her research at UNK, which has included a more focused study of Group II introns in red algae.

Supported by a five-year, $1.3 million collaborative grant from the National Institutes of Health Institutional Development Award Program (IDeA) Networks of Biomedical Research Excellence (IN-BRE), Simon has been working on a study of the oldest known Group II intron and the first reported in red algae. She and undergraduate students who are part of the Nebraska-INBRE program studied the introns to understand how they have degenerated over time.

“I had 14 years of teaching experience, and I loved teaching, so it was a pretty seamless transition to go from teaching as an elementary and middle school teacher, she teaches, and continues to research, the best methods to teach those concepts.

Strawhecker, a professor and the assistant chair in the Department of Teacher Education, is an award-winning teacher whose research is focused on finding ways for the next generation of teachers to be even more effective. As an elementary and middle school teacher, she taught math concepts. Today, she teaches, and continues to research, the best methods to teach those concepts.

“I had 14 years of teaching experience, and I loved teaching, so it was a pretty seamless transition to go from teaching elementary school children to teaching future teachers what I know,” Strawhecker said.

Her office in the College of Education Building reflects her passion for teaching. Before you enter, a sign alongside her door says: “Do math, and you can do anything.”

Once inside, a plaque on one wall reads: “A teacher makes you feel good about who you are and inspires you to become all you can be.” Just above her desk on another wall hangs a framed copy of the “Oath for Mathematics Teachers,” and above the oath hangs a whimsical black and white clock. The round face of the clock, which looks like an old-fashioned chalkboard, has math problems—addition, subtraction, multiplication, division, square roots and algebra—to solve for each of the 12 time numbers. Noon or midnight is measured by 6x2. The square root of 4 is the answer for 2 o’clock, and there’s even a “pi” part of the equation for 9 o’clock.

Of all the various kinds of math problems to work with, Strawhecker has been especially interested in finding better ways to teach fractions—an interest that has led her to develop a novel way to teach the concept. She has developed what she calls a “fraction slide,” a math manipulative designed to help upper elementary students more clearly understand the connections between fractions. The fraction slide is a rectangular box with two strips of numbers and an attached device that highlights fractions for comparison. With the symbolic representation of “friendly” fractions, the handheld slide includes halves through twelfths.
One teaching challenge she faced, especially with middle school students, was to change the minds of children who came to her classes with the idea that math was too hard and/or didn't apply to them. “When math makes sense to you, you're not afraid of it,” she said. “So I would try to get them to see that math is bossed, and there was something in math they could be good in.”

“Once the denominators are alike, students can compare fractions, add fractions or subtract fractions. I still had to physically use my fingers to understand how things work. “It’s all pretty rewarding,” Strawhecker said with a broad smile, noting that she applies that thinking to her own life—using math to help her see the angles in winning shots on the tennis court.

In the Department of Professional Teacher Education, she serves as an adviser for curriculum and instruction for math master’s degree candidates, teaches graduate and undergraduate math education classes, and supervises math field experiences for UNK students at up to six schools per semester. Each year, she has 80 to 100 teachers-in-training in her UNK classrooms. Her classroom experiences, past and present, drive her research. One example is her most recent study of the outcomes of co-teaching math content and math pedagogy for elementary pre-service teachers concurrently as a pilot study.

The research into combining the two aspects of teaching preparation was recently published in Issues in the Undergraduate Mathematics Preparation of School Teachers: The Journal. Based on the positive outcomes of teaching content and pedagogy together, the two have sought grant funding to support further refinements to their pilot study. Strawhecker has also secured grants to enhance teacher effectiveness. An Eisenhower Professional Development Grant for Mathematics supported a “Preparing Tomorrow’s Elementary Teachers” project, and an American Association of State Colleges & Universities grant focused on “Improving the Mathematics Subject-Matter Preparation of Elementary School Teachers.”

UNK teacher education students in Strawhecker’s classes are required to do 25 hours of supervised field experience at area schools. Four students commonly are assigned to the same classroom. Although two may be preparing lesson plans, two are in the classroom at one time. “This is a pre-student teaching experience,” she said, which helps students prepare, teach and analyze their students’ work. “Perfection isn’t the goal. It’s getting comfortable with the content and the delivery of the content.”

The field experience for teacher education students was the focus of a study “Preparing Elementary Teachers to Teach Mathematics: How Field Experiences Impact Pedagogical Content Knowledge.” The study was published in Issues in the Undergraduate Mathematics Preparation of School Teachers: The Journal.

“Findings to engage students,” Strawhecker said, which can increase student learning, having students explain their thinking and how they approached a problem, and making connections between and among concepts.

She said that as an elementary teacher, she would tie math and real-world lessons together, such as showing a video of Olympic competitions and talking about how math is a part of the events. Classroom teachers also use a variety of technology tools, such as smart boards and tablets, which can be used to engage students in visually appealing ways.

“They (technology tools) do have a place in the classroom when they’re used at an appropriate time for practice or to aid the teacher in showing why a concept works in a certain way,” Strawhecker said. “There are plenty of high expectations for young learners, things I don’t remember learning until I was older.”

For example, she said, a student could be asked if he wants a ½ of something or 4/7ths. For a common denominator, in this case 14, was the way she began showing students how they could isolate the new fractions with like denominators. That’s when the idea of a ‘slide’ came into play. “Ideally, a student would have access to one of these, so he could compare fractions or compute with fractions.” Currently, she is looking at ways to further refine the prototype she has had built.

The idea for a fraction slide is an outgrowth of her teaching experiences. She was an elementary teacher with the Omaha Public Schools from 1986-1988 and then a middle school math teacher in the Blue Valley School District in Overland Park, Kan., for seven years, before moving to Kearney to teach elementary grades in the Kearney Public Schools from 1995-2000. She earned a bachelor of arts degree in elementary education, with an elementary mathematics minor, from Kearney State College/UNK in 1986. She received a middle school endorsement a year later, and then went on for a master’s degree in education from MidAmerica Nazarene University in Olathe, Kan., in 1992. In 2004, she earned a Ph.D. in curriculum and instruction, with an emphasis on K-8 mathematics education, from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. One teaching challenge she faced, especially with middle school students, was to change the minds of children who came to her classes with the idea that math was too hard and/or didn't apply to them. “When math makes sense to you, you're not afraid of it,” she said. “So I would try to get them to see that math is bossed, and there was something in math they could be good in.”

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In a second floor office in Founders Hall, Satoshi Machida’s view out his window is east down 25th Street, but as he does research, prepares for classes and talks to students, it’s clear that his vision goes well beyond his view.

His vision is global. Bookcases along the wall hold a scattering of books, along with bulging manila folders, stacked side-by-side and shelf-to-shelf with his research.

Globalization is at the center of his work, which has included the effects of globalization on people’s cultural, economic and political views, and even on issues related to HIV/AIDS, trust and peace.

Using key data sources such as Ronald Inglehart’s World Values Survey and the Pew Research Center, he searches for trends, asks questions and looks at the many ways globalization affects the world.

Machida, an assistant professor of political science, defines globalization as “…the increasing layers of interdependence among countries.”

In a 2009 article published in International Studies, Machida examined how globalization affects the legitimacy of intergovernmental organizations (IGOs). He found that globalization does not undermine the legitimacy of IGOs in democratically well-attuned rich states.

For that study, he used data from the Pew Global Attitudes Project. Machida presented a paper on the study at the 2009 Pacific Northwest Political Science Association meetings in Victoria, British Columbia, Canada.

“I always find something new,” Machida said. “Globalization is very important to look at. It is changing lives drastically. The impacts of globalization can be seen in almost all aspects of human life.”

He pointed to another scholar’s definition of globalization: “Globalization can be thought of as the widening, intensifying, speeding up and growing impact of worldwide interconnectedness.”

In a recent publication, Machida cited examples of “interconnectedness” from another study that included, among other things, “…the interpenetration of industries across borders, the spread of financial markets, the diffusion of identical consumer goods to distant countries…”

“Borders between countries don’t mean as much as they used to,” Machida said. “People can move across borders, and that creates more opportunities for commerce and cultural exchanges.”

Globalization is reflected in world economies, trade and immigration.

“Nebraska traditionally is homogeneous, but that no longer is true in cities where Hispanics and people of other cultures have moved for jobs,” he said.

His most recent research looked at whether globalization rendered people more ethnocentric, which he said is the idea by some that they are superior to others. Machida said that is why some people want to defend their places against immigration.


Responses to the following two statements were among those he included in his study: “Our people are not perfect, but our culture is superior to others,” and “Our way of life needs to be protected against foreign influence.”

“My finding was that as people are exposed to more diversity, they are less prone to be ethnocentric,” he said.

While Machida’s research usually takes a world view, he and two UNK colleagues recently studied “Tracing Wealth, Cooperation and Trust: A Comparison of Two Great Plains Communities.”

The article was published in Social Science Journal.

“In many ways, the world is smaller, but that doesn’t mean that the world is one now. People are just moving more,” he said.

Machida noted that, because of globalization, “There are winners and losers economically. Some countries are core—the U.S., Japan and other western countries—and they benefit from globalization, because they can make money.”

“Globalization provides a lot of opportunities, but it has to be managed very carefully to help poor people,” he said.

His compassion for the less fortunate grew out of a 1997 study abroad experience. That year, he traveled to Nepal with The Society for Promoting Inter-Cultural Education for Children (SPIEC).

He and others in the group walked two days along rugged mountain paths to reach the village of Nangi. There he met Mahabir Pun, a Nepalese teacher known for his work using wireless technologies to connect Nangi to the global village, work that earned Pun the Mangsayar Award, considered by many to be the Nobel Prize of Asia.

“The experience in Nepal was important in my life,” Machida said. “Very intense experience. I knew then that I did not want to work for a big company.” He would not be following his father’s footsteps into the Japanese corporate world.

Little did he know that a decade later he would begin his career as a university professor on the UNK campus—the same campus where Pun earned his bachelor’s and master’s degrees.

Although Machida did not return to Nepal, he did further volunteer work in The Society for Promotion of Youth and Masses in India in 1999 and 2000.

He went on to attend Waseda University in Tokyo for his undergraduate degree in political science. A year as an exchange student at Earlham College in Richmond, Ind., would further change his life.

“I thought it (the U.S.) was such a good country, where I could be myself,” he said, explaining that in Japan, there is pressure for people to act in the same manner and say the right things.

“In the United States, you could be you. And also there were people with different backgrounds, so that experience in Indiana was very important to me.” Based on that experience, he returned to the United States where he earned master’s and doctorate degrees from the University of Kentucky. After earning his doctorate in 2006, he joined the UNK faculty in 2007.

“I hope to make contributions through my work and talking with students,” Machida said. “My personal experiences drive my research. I try to bring a new perspective to the research.”

In and out of the classroom, he brings the world to his students. He mentors student research projects and serves as the faculty advisor to the Model United Nations, an organization for students in which they do background work on the issues facing the United Nations and then take a position on an issue and develop possible solutions.

Each spring, Machida takes the group to the Harvard National Model United Nations where they role play situations at the United Nations. The group researches the position they will be playing and practices simulating the international negotiations.

Of the various sites that host Model UN events, the Harvard National Model United Nations is “the biggest one in the world,” according to Machida. He helps students promote the UNK organization and assists with fund-raising to support the students’ annual trip to the Harvard competition.

“The organization (UNK Model UN) is very popular among students,” he said. “It is good to see the students grow.”

He also sees students’ growth as he mentors their research. He said: It is really fun to teach students how they can ask important questions in political science. This is a fun part of political science.

“The process of trying to answer these questions may not be easy, but it is rewarding when I see students making progress in their research projects. My job is to teach students how to conduct research in political science. I am so happy when students tell me that they would like to explore more issues in the world. That’s when I know I did a good job in guiding students in a right direction.”

And what is next on his research list? Several topics, including immigration. As an immigrant, himself, Machida said, “It’s about my life, and my family’s life, too.”

“Immigration is changing Kearney (and the world). I can see it,” Machida said.
At the age of 17, violinist Ting-Lan Chen was a first-prize winner in the National Chamber Music Competition in Taipei, Taiwan, and the summer before she turned 21, she performed in Young Musicians Concerts at the White House and the United Nations as a select violinist from the Asian Youth Orchestra.

By then, she had already performed in the legendary concert halls in Asia and Europe with the prestigious Asian Youth Orchestra, an orchestra co-founded by renowned violinist Yehudi Menuhin.

Each spring, only 100 talented musicians are selected by competitive audition for the Asian Youth Orchestra. They are chosen from among the very best music students in Mainland China, Hong Kong, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, Taiwan, Thailand and Vietnam. The student musicians rehearse for two weeks in the summer, and then tour in July and August as young professionals with major international solo artists and conductors. Chen was selected to tour with the orchestra for three consecutive years.

“Touring with the Asian Youth Orchestra is one of the most cherished memories I have,” she said. “Musicians from every country are trying to squeeze in. All are strong players. It’s very competitive. It’s also quite intense—only two weeks to prepare and then tour for six. They (AYO) have great conductors, and it is good to see how other musicians do.”

Among the concert halls where she has performed are the Concertgebouw in Amsterdam, Gewandhaus in Leipzig, Berlin Schauspielhaus, Vienna Konzerthaus, Suntory Hall in Tokyo, Hong Kong Cultural Centre, Singapore Conference Hall, Avery Fisher Hall in New York, Hollywood Bowl in Los Angeles and the Taipei National Concert Hall. Her favorite—the Concertgebouw in Amsterdam.

“Playing in the Concertgebouw, the music sounds better,” she said. “Not only ear-good, but you can physically feel it. It gives the music a warm, juicy, rich sound. Wonderful!”

Chen began her music training with piano lessons at the age of 3. “In Taiwan, music students learn two instruments—piano and one other,” she said. “As principal, it’s important to give a clear physical cue, because it is a cue for the whole violin section. People in four or five rows of the orchestra need to follow. You have to make sure they go with you.”

Describing the experience of performing in an orchestra, she said, “Playing in an orchestra is like being part of a whole big sea wave of sound. It’s a great feeling.”

Her passion for performance encompasses a wide range of venues, but she is quick to acknowledge that some especially stand out. “Another very precious experience for me is when I play in a duet, trio or any chamber ensemble,” she said, noting in particular her affection for performing with the Mendelssohn String Octet as part of the Omaha Conservatory of Music’s festival each July. Participation is by invitation only. Last year, Chen was the only octet member from Kearney. Others came from as far away as San Francisco, Gaithersburg, Md., as well as from as near as Omaha and Lincoln.

In addition to an active performance schedule, her creative scholarly research has resulted in numerous national and international jury-selected lecture recitals. Last year, she presented a lecture recital on composer Ma-Shuai Long at the College Music Society International Conference in Seoul, Korea.

Another project, “Rediscovery: The Violin Music of Rebecca Clarke,” earned her a jury-selected lecture presentation at the University of Nebraska at Kearney. Glennis Nagel

I came to the United States to pursue master and doctoral degrees in Cincinnati, because there is a very strong string program at the University of Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music,” she said. She earned both the M.M. and D.M.A. degrees in violin and chamber music performance from CCM, and has served as concertmaster of the CCM Philharmonic Orchestra. She also performed in the Music 2000 Contemporary Music Festival with the American minimalist Steve Reich for his composition “Different Trains” and collaborated with Xian Zhang, associate conductor of the New York Philharmonic Orchestra, for Stravinsky’s “The Soldier’s Tale” in Ohio.

After completing the D.M.A., Chen played with the Dayton (Ohio) Philharmonic Orchestra for a year.

“In Taiwan, music students learn two instruments—piano and one other,” she said. “Today, as an associate professor of music, she teaches violin and viola, chamber music and core curricula. She is also violist for the UNK Faculty Piano Trio and has been concertmaster with the Kearney Symphony Orchestra since she joined the UNK faculty in 2004. She spoke of her role with KSO saying, “As principal, it’s important to give a clear physical cue, because it is a cue for the whole violin section. People in four or five rows of the orchestra need to follow. You have to make sure they go with you.”

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Her passion for performance encompasses a wide range of venues, but she is quick to acknowledge that some especially stand out. “Another very precious experience for me is when I play in a duet, trio or any chamber ensemble,” she said, noting in particular her affection for performing with the Mendelssohn String Octet as part of the Omaha Conservatory of Music’s festival each July. Participation is by invitation only. Last year, Chen was the only octet member from Kearney. Others came from as far away as San Francisco, Gaithersburg, Md., as well as from as near as Omaha and Lincoln.

In addition to an active performance schedule, her creative scholarly research has resulted in numerous national and international jury-selected lecture recitals. Last year, she presented a lecture recital on composer Ma-Shuai Long at the College Music Society International Conference in Seoul, Korea.

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I came to the United States to pursue master and doctoral degrees in Cincinnati, because there is a very strong string program at the University of Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music,” she said. She earned both the M.M. and D.M.A. degrees in violin and chamber music performance from CCM, and has served as concertmaster of the CCM Philharmonic Orchestra. She also performed in the Music 2000 Contemporary Music Festival with the American minimalist Steve Reich for his composition “Different Trains” and collaborated with Xian Zhang, associate conductor of the New York Philharmonic Orchestra, for Stravinsky’s “The Soldier’s Tale” in Ohio.

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Research on another composer resulted in a paper titled “Revival and Rebellion: Astor Piazzola and His Six Etudes for Solo Violin.” The research, which was sponsored by a UNK University Research and Creative Activity Grant, was jury selected for an American String Teacher Association National Conference presentation, and for lecture recitals at Westmont (California) College, Illinois State University, Louisiana State University and the College Music Society National Conference. While she is passionate about music, she also has strong feelings about how music should be performed. A study of musicians who are known for exaggerating their movements, or gestures, as they perform became the subject of a paper titled “When Music Becomes a Visual Art.” The article was published in the refereed International Journal of the Arts in Society.

“Some musicians feel if the performance is more visual, they sustain the audience’s interest longer,” she said. “That bothers me a little. I try not to use gestures to entice. I don’t like that very much. If your music is powerful enough, you don’t need to use that.” When asked which composers she likes to perform, she is quick to say, “I feel I have those I like, not just the form or structure but their character. I like Beethoven better than Mozart. Ravel is so sensual. And Brahms’ music is very complex. I am quick to say, ‘I feel I have those I like, not just the form or structure but their character.’ I like Beethoven better than Mozart. Ravel is so sensual. And Brahms’ music is very complex. I don’t feel I have those I like, not just the form or structure but their character. I like Beethoven better than Mozart. Ravel is so sensual. And Brahms’ music is very complex.

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Brenda Eschenbrenner’s ground-breaking research into virtual worlds is helping find solutions to real-world questions.

Eschenbrenner, an assistant professor of accounting and finance, studies human-computer interaction, or HCI, with much of her current work focused on information systems users and enhancing information systems usage.

“We’re now just scratching the surface of how we can use the virtual world (for training and commerce),” Eschenbrenner said. She and her research colleagues at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln are studying the potential benefits of systems featuring avatars.

Avatars are graphical personas of humans placed in a virtual world environment. In 2D, the avatar can be a simple icon; in 3D, a fully representational human. And the size and complexity of the computer-based simulated environment is only limited by the creator’s imagination. Some environments are as small as a room, such as a science lab, while others are re-creations of entire real-life crises.

Virtual worlds, commonly thought of in terms of gaming, are becoming more “real” with real-life applications. As noted in an article by Victor Keegan in The Guardian, “…Regular users know that some virtual worlds are more ‘real,’ and certainly more efficient, than real life.

“An increasing number of companies such as IBM, for instance, hold meetings in virtual worlds, because they can gather executives from around the world at one place without increasing their carbon footprint. And PowerPoint presentations are far better. You can move your online camera closer, so that you have a better view of what can be seen.”

According to the article, “The results suggest that although the 3D virtual world environment has the potential to increase brand equity by offering an immersive and enjoyable virtual product experience, the rich environment can also be a distraction…developers of virtual world branding sites need to take into account limitations in the information processing capacity and attention span of users when designing their sites in order to avoid cognitive overload, which can lead to users being distracted from brand information.”

Their research was also featured in 2010 in the Proceedings of the International Conference on Information Systems. Eschenbrenner describes the conference as “one of the premier” conferences in her specialty.

In addition to publishing her research, Eschenbrenner has made numerous conference presentations, including the New Ventures and Leadership in Virtual Worlds Workshop in Austin, Texas, in 2010; the Big 12 Plus MIS Research Symposium at UNL and the University of Kansas in 2009 and 2007, respectively; the 2007 Human-Computer Interaction Research in MIS in Montreal, Canada, at which her paper with Nah received a best paper nomination; and the Americas Conferences on Information Systems in San Francisco in 2009.

She’s also had work published in other journals, book chapters and conference publications: workshops on HCI Research in MIS in Shanghai, China, in 2011 and St. Louis in 2010; the Journal of Database Management; Information Science Publishing; Journal of Virtual World Research; International Journal of Mobile Learning and Organisation; and the International Conference on Human-Computer Interaction in Beijing in 2009.

Eschenbrenner brings to her research the real-world experience of an earlier private sector career with one of the nation’s top accounting firms, Deloitte & Touche, and with Gateway Inc., during the Fortune 500 company’s 1997-2001 expansive growth period.

She joined Deloitte & Touche LLP in Lincoln immediately after earning her bachelor’s degree from UNK. At Deloitte & Touche, one of the “Big Four” accounting firms, many of her clients were banks for which audits required specific procedures and controls to determine if the numbers were right, and if the clients were meeting regulatory obligations.

Her experiences with those firms taught her that for accounting systems to be effective, they require constant improvements to meet specific business needs and to keep up with new technologies. She also saw good systems fail when employees did not follow procedures.

The result of a procedure failure is one of the real-world lessons she shares with her accounting students—when something is done incorrectly in one department within a company, it affects the entire system.

“You just never know what you will find until you get in there,” Eschenbrenner said. “A lot of it is experience. I tell students that when you do auditing, it’s just a different way of thinking … You have to put that critical thinking skills hat on.”

In 1997, while at Deloitte & Touche, she was approached by a “head hunter” firm hired to recruit talent for Gateway, an international company with offices in locations such as Japan, Malaysia, Australia and Ireland.

“They were growing really fast at that time, a Fortune 500 company. They needed a lot of help,” Eschenbrenner said, including help willing to work a lot of late nights on the many start-up projects.

Gateway was competing with Dell for computer and laptop customers, a competition that generated constant change.

“Some people don’t like that challenge and intensity,” Eschenbrenner said. “I lived for that.”

In her first role as a Gateway financial analyst, she focused on corporate financial reports and analysis. When she advanced to senior finance manager for Gateway Country Stores, which grew from 30 to more than 500 stores in just 18 months, Eschenbrenner worked on information system upgrades and implementations across the divisions.

The accounting systems she was designing focused on the need for real-time data from all departments—marketing, sales, shipping, inventory and manufacturing. She said that real-time data is important not only for day-to-day business, but also because the data collected is used to make business decisions.

It soon became clear to her that no one had “put their arms around information system competency.”

Without that, Eschenbrenner said, companies may spend millions of dollars on accounting systems and not get the return on that investment, because not all employees are using it correctly.

Eschenbrenner still rolls her eyes when she recalls the many times in her Gateway years she heard someone say, “We tricked the system to get that done.”

“Ohhh, don’t tell me that,” she said. “From an accounting standpoint, that means we have incomplete or inaccurate data.”
Following set procedures is essential to an entire accounting system, so it doesn’t matter whether the “trick” was using a wrong code, inputting data late or some other problem.

That, she says, is where her interest in human-computer system relationships was born. When Gateway moved their headquarters from Sioux City to San Diego, Eschenbrenner chose to stay in the Midwest to raise her family. By then, she was a senior finance manager in international margins at a time when the separate international units were closed, and Gateway was operated as one company.

After a year working with Kov Building Products in York, she went on to earn MBA and Ph.D. degrees from UNL, while serving as a research and teaching assistant. She joined the UNL faculty in 2010.

“Teaching was always something I wanted to do, probably since high school. I thought, ‘maybe someday.’ Then I tried it while working on my master’s, and I loved it,” Eschenbrenner said. Her teaching earned her the UNL College of Business Administration Outstanding Research Assistant Award in 2008-2009, and in 2010, she received honorable mention for the UNL Outstanding Graduate Research Assistant Award.

“...and [user competence research] as a way to solve problems she recognizes more than a decade ago when Gateway employees didn’t understand that how they input data into the system and get over any fears they might have.

Without allowing such hands-on exploration, she said, it would be like telling students how to use a new cell phone and expect them to understand all the options without touching the phone.

For accounting systems, Eschenbrenner said one question is whether virtual world technology can help train employees. Would a system with an enhanced virtual world experience result in employees using it correctly, rather than trying to “trick the system”?

“The big push now is to be more mobile. Doing things on the fly. Pulling it up on your iPhone,” she said, so integrated solutions must be part of effective accounting systems.

“Virtual worlds are relatively new,” she said, but they are becoming more mainstream with a younger generation that is entertained by 3-D computer games, movies and virtual worlds. Arth those looking for real-life profit in virtual life worlds.

For example, in Business Week Bob Hof profiled virtual-life landbarons Anshe Chung, who is Allin Graef in real life, as one of many lessons Stanko has learned as an illustrator.

Her art director at D&D loved the idea, and kept asking him when he talks about the uproar he created with that image. Stanko’s illustration of Lloth for a 2008 Dungeons and Dragons Player’s Handbook shows her muscled and armored. Her bearing is regal, her long white hair glowing as she looks down at the viewer – maybe her victim – somewhere near her feet.

Working in his studio on the campus, Stanko laughs when he talks about the uproar he created with that image. His art director at D&D loved the idea, and kept asking him to give the goddess an even fuller figure. Only later did he find out that director had to fight with other executives for months to get the drawing approved.

It may sound strange to hear adults in heated debate over a demon spider’s curves, Stanko explained, but that’s how important art is to the fantasy gaming industry. That is one of many lessons Stanko has learned as an illustrator. Since breaking into the industry about five years ago, Stanko has created artwork for the well-known games—Dungeons and Dragons, Star Wars Galaxies, Legends of Norrah, World of Warcraft, Lord of the Rings and Magic: The Gathering.

An associate professor in the Department of Art and Art History, Stanko has built a solid reputation for his illustrations. He earned a Chesley Nomination in 2008 for the oil painting “Fall of Tink” and has received awards four out of the last five years at the juried Gen Con Art Show.

He has had two illustrations in each of the last two issues of Spectrum, a journal that annually showcases the best fantasy art, and two of his illustrations are in a Dun-}

Dungeons and Dragons players long recognized Lloth, Demon Queen of Spiders, as a thin and sinewy creature. The evil goddess had been drawn long and lean since 1978, when she was introduced to the role-playing fantasy game.

Artist John Stanko just didn’t see her that way.

“She’s only five feet tall, but she has an overwhelming aura when she walks in a room,” Stanko said. “It just didn’t make sense that she’d be waiflike.”

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“I don’t care how hungry you are or how tired you are, you have to sit there, and take that 15 or 20 minutes with them, and make it special,” he said.

Stanko started as a gaming fan, when he was a kid and everyone was crazy about a game called Pong. He played all the classic games growing up, including the very popular role-playing board game Dungeons and Dragons. He was also a strong art student.

“I had a love for (the art of fantasy games). I really had a love for it,” he said. “That’s what got me into D&D, the art.”

As an undergraduate at UNK, Stanko sent his art to the company that produced Dungeons and Dragons. Stanko said his drawings weren’t very good, “but the art director took pity on me and gave me some work.” Throughout college, Stanko received $75 apiece for thumbnail-size “spot illustrations” that ran as chapter work. “Throughout college, Stanko received $75 apiece but the art director took pity on me and gave me some work.”

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“That’s how I paid for pizza, and going out,” Stanko said, shaking his head at a younger self who thought breaking into the illustration business would be easy. Instead, he started collecting rejection letters after college.

“ ‘You’ve got to be able to tell a story,’ Stanko said. “Because what I do, I have to paint swamps. I have to paint forests . . . I have to do clothing design, “he said. “All my skills as an artist are tapped when I do a fantasy illustration.”

Still, Stanko did not have immediate success when he began marketing his work at fantasy gaming conventions. He recalled his first meeting, with an art director for Magic: The Gathering. The director said his work lacked a consistent style, and advised Stanko to go back in the studio and create “four good pieces.”

“It was a punch in the stomach,” Stanko said, but it was the direction he needed. Among the paintings Stanko brought the next year was the award-winning “Fall of Tink.”

The year next, Stanko attended a master class with instructors he describes as “icons.” He said the experience changed his work dramatically.

“My work really exploded. My work really came together after that master class,” he said, adding he learned more than technique. He also learned about the relationship fantasy/science fiction artists have with their fans, and the important role they play in the games. “I learned they’re not only great artists, but they were great people, and I learned that who you were was almost as important as your work.”

Since then, Stanko has built many relationships in the industry, and his work has appeared in many forms. For the online card game Legends of Norrah, Stanko has illustrated dozens of virtual cards that feature the game’s characters. His illustrations have appeared in Dungeons and Dragons books and magazines, while the art he has done for games such as Magic: The Gathering has been printed onto playing cards. Other illustrations have gone on to be featured on board games and in online articles.

Stanko’s illustrations begin with photographs of models. He sketches his images using Photoshop; the photo gives him a posed figure, but the character’s features, clothing and surroundings spring straight from Stanko’s pen.

Once his client approves a value study, Stanko adds color using a program called Painter and a Cintiq – equipment that allows him to “paint” on the digital image. Stanko strives to capture not only the characters’ “looks,” but their backstories.
**CORPORATE COACH**

**Pop quiz: Which employee is going to work harder, and smarter, for a company?**

A) One who’s treated like a member of a team or
B) One who’s treated like a piece of office equipment?

If the answer seems obvious, you’re seeing exactly what Jake Messersmith hopes his research can show business owners and managers – a good place to start building the bottom line is by building up employees.

“A company is not just some abstract entity, it’s a collection of people,” Messersmith said. In numerous studies over the past few years, Messersmith has explored the complex relationships between human resource management and business outcomes. His published articles quantify those relationships, showing with hard data that how people are treated in the workplace really does matter.

An assistant professor of management since 2010, Messersmith’s publications include seven articles in the last two years. A 2011 article, titled “Managing Human Resources to Achieve New Firm Growth: A Stewardship Perspective,” was honored by the Stevens Institute of Technology with an award for excellence in research. Two of his articles have appeared in the Journal of Applied Psychology, including a study on pay dispersion that was also selected for the Academy of Management annual proceedings.

In 2011, Messersmith’s work earned him a Faculty Research Award for Untempered Faculty from the College of Business and Technology. The majority of Messersmith’s work looks at high performance work systems, which are a type of human resource management. These systems include strategies such as incentive-based compensation, detailed training opportunities, and programs for employee recruitment and retention. He said corporate America has focused on high performance work systems since the mid-1990s. The idea is that by helping employees succeed, the business succeeds.

His interest in human resource management grew from the nearly two years he spent as an analyst at Accenture in Overland Park, Kan. Accenture is a consulting firm, working with client companies to address problems within their organizations or improve on company strengths. Working on a variety of projects, and observing a variety of management styles, made him curious about what gives some firms an edge over others.

“I grew interested in how organizations function, and how they don’t function,” he said.

He further refined his focus when he realized how little research had been done into entrepreneurial, or new, firms. Most studies have traditionally focused on larger, established companies.

“The young, growth-oriented firm is really the engine of growth for the economy,” Messersmith said, responsible for creating many new jobs. Concern over the recent economic recession has sparked increased interest in entrepreneurs among policy-makers and academics alike, while today’s fast-paced technology and global marketplace makes it easier than ever before for entrepreneurs to succeed.

“These (new firms) are intriguing to me, because they are the type of businesses that are going to continue to help our country grow,” he said. While many studies had already shown that high-performance work systems benefit established companies, he wanted to find out what affect the systems had on new firms.

Through a survey of technology-oriented new firms, Messersmith was able to show that the affect was similar. From job-specific training to flex-time and telecommuting opportunities, the strategies associated with high performance work systems yielded “higher levels of sales growth, product innovation and organizational innovation.”

After detailing the results in a 2010 article for Human Resources Management, Messersmith looked at the survey data on managerial philosophy. His 2011 article on the “stewardship perspective” shows entrepreneurs that even if they do not have the resources needed to implement high performance work system strategies, they can still increase sales growth and reduce turnover simply by looking at employees as partners, rather than just workers. That philosophy, or “stewardship perspective,” creates many of the same responses among workers as the more formal incentive programs.

The combination of a “stewardship perspective” with the practices of high performance work systems are key, especially for firms with a strong entrepreneurial bent, as Messersmith showed in a 2011 article for the International Small Business Journal. That study looked at companies with an entrepreneurial orientation, or in other words, a corporate philosophy that emphasizes innovation and risk-taking. While an entrepreneurial attitude will not necessarily translate into increased sales, the study showed, firms had a better chance if they managed their human resources well.

Always, the focus of Messersmith’s research is on the human element. He has also used data from a survey of government workers in Wales to study not only how high performance work systems affect workers, but what factors contribute to that affect.

In a 2011 article for the Journal of Applied Psychology, Messersmith showed a link between the strategies of high performance work systems and employee attitudes, such as job satisfaction and commitment to the organization. In other words, the article cautions, businesses cannot simply put programs in place and expect to see the results they want. They must pay attention to how employees receive, and perceive, those programs.

In his current research, Messersmith is again looking at the effect of high performance work systems on new firms. What he is interested in now is the balance all firms must strive between...
exploitation and exploration. That is, how much of the firm’s resources should go toward playing it safe, exploiting growth opportunities, and how much should be risked in exploring innovations?

Messersmith is working with data collected from Midwestern high-tech companies, and said he is seeing a strong link between ambidexterity and the use of high-performance work systems. He is also working on a follow-up to his study on entrepreneurial orientation, looking up the same firms he surveyed four years ago. He wants to see how many have survived, and whether their approach to human resource management had any affect on the outcome.

It is not a new approach to management that Messersmith’s research advocates. What the data show over and over again, he said, supports what successful companies and successful managers already know – policies work best when they encourage workers rather than punish them, support workers rather than constrain them. Through his research, Dr. Messersmith provides managers and business owners with hard evidence that what is good for employees is very good for business.

“It is common sense, for the most part,” he said. “It’s just not commonly applied.”
OUR REPUTATION IS GROWING...AGAIN.

The University of Nebraska at Kearney is a growing university of 7,199 students from 91 Nebraska counties, 48 states and 58 countries. With enrollment at a 16-year high, UNK is thriving with a 6 percent increase in first-time, full-time freshman, 79 percent being Nebraska residents. International student enrollment increased 13.1 percent to 544 students.

Students select from 170 undergraduate, 25 pre-professional and 34 graduate degree options. With a 17-1 student-to-faculty ratio, UNK students learn from more than 300 faculty who are recognized for excellence in scholarship, teaching and research.

This year also marks the third straight year UNK has been ranked a Top 10 University in the Midwest Region by U.S. News & World Reports Annual Best Colleges publication.