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Nebraska's international ties are opening doors to opportunities

By John Gale

Trade missions? Confucius Institute? Marshall Plan for Mexico? Diplomatic conferences?

Just in case you weren't aware of the rapidly changing international outreach by Nebraska, these are just some of the things happening that tie us to a full-speed, global freight train.

Since I was authorized by the Legislature in 2003 to become the state's chief protocol officer for international relations, I have witnessed a growing movement in Nebraska to become more connected to the global community in the areas of commerce, educational studies and cultural exchange.

Although we have a small population and are located far from our country's coasts, Nebraska takes global matters seriously and does remarkable things in the international field. I will provide some examples to give you a flavor of what is happening.

Gov. Dave Heineman has been particularly active abroad, promoting Nebraska products and soliciting foreign investment in the state.

He has opened a trade office in Japan. He has reached lucrative trade agreements with Cuba that involve the purchase of more than \$70 million in Nebraska agricultural products.

In September, the governor led a trade mission to Asia that achieved a number of accomplishments, including a commitment from Taiwan to purchase as much as \$462 million in Nebraska agricultural products over a two-year period and agreements to buy and promote Nebraska beef.

The University of Nebraska Medical Center in Omaha has established an extensive international presence in recent years.

UNMC is extending its advanced expertise around the world by partnering with foreign health care facilities in training, education, consultation and research. These efforts are accomplished by bringing foreign students and professionals to Omaha, by sending UNMC teams abroad and through online interaction. UNMC has established over 140 partnerships with health care facilities around the world.

In addition, foreign patients come to UNMC for its renowned medical care. UNMC goes to great lengths to make sure that foreign patients and their families receive first-class hospitality during their Omaha visits.

The University of Nebraska-Lincoln is undertaking two new Chinese initiatives.

First, UNL has opened a Confucius Institute to promote Chinese language and culture to Nebraskans of all ages. This is the 20th such institute in the United States and will help build stronger ties between Nebraska and the world's most populous country.

Second, UNL has entered into a dual-degree arrangement with Xi'an Jiaotong University's City College. The deal will allow Chinese students to take their first two years in their home country and their final two years at UNL. The arrangement could bring as many as 200 Chinese students to UNL a year.

Nebraska is playing a role in an exciting proposal, a so-called Marshall Plan for Mexico, to boost agricultural production and employment opportunities in Mexico.

Rural poverty in Mexico has become alarming, contributing to the flow of illegal immigrants to the United States in search of jobs. One problem identified is that Mexico has no land grant universities with extension services to bring modern agricultural practices to individual farmers.

It has been proposed that a number of U.S. land grant universities, including UNL, partner with Mexican universities to develop an extension service system in Mexico. This would be a two-way program with Mexican universities helping to address problems of Mexicans living in the United States. The governments of the United States and Mexico would fund the program.

If Mexican agriculture can become more prosperous, it will help Mexico develop more employment and help reduce the illegal immigration to the United States.

The U.S. Congress has not yet approved the program, but this is the kind of bold, visionary thinking that is going on in Nebraska.

As chief protocol officer, I have sponsored a series of events designed to raise the profile of Nebraska in the international arena.

The Secretary of State's Diplomatic Conference was held in Omaha in 2004 and 2006, and we are planning one for 2008. The Secretary of State's Foreign Affairs Symposium was held in Lincoln in 2005 and 2007.

These events are designed to showcase what Nebraska has to offer the world – commercial and otherwise. We also use the events to highlight Nebraska initiatives in international relations.

We bring foreign diplomatic officials to Nebraska for these events. They get to see the state, meet Nebraska representatives and hear about the exciting things happening here.

We are told by the diplomatic corps that we are the only Great Plains state holding such events, and they are delighted to attend. Good things happen from such relationships.

Through a variety of international efforts, Nebraska is creating friends all over the world. Such friendships will open doors to exciting commercial, educational and cultural opportunities for our state.