

Nebraska LEAD Program Explores Eastern Europe During International Study



COURTESY

Nebraska LEAD 42 Fellows stand in front of Parliament Palace (also known as “The People’s House”) in Bucharest, Romania on Jan. 5, 2025. The palace is the second largest building in the world after the Pentagon. Photo by Kurtis Harms, Director of the Nebraska LEAD Program.

By Kurtis Harms, Director of the Nebraska LEAD Program

Nebraska LEAD Program Class 42 recently returned from an impactful International Study-Travel Seminar to Romania, Hungary and Poland, held from January 3-17, 2025. The two-week journey provided 28 fellows with an immersive opportunity to explore the historical, cultural, religious and agricultural dimensions of these Eastern European nations.

“The International Study/Travel Seminar is a cornerstone of the Nebraska LEAD Program, offering Fellows an invaluable global perspective that enhances their leadership skills and understanding of agriculture in a global context,” said Kurtis Harms, Nebraska LEAD Program director. “This year’s visit to Romania, Hungary and Poland provided meaningful experiences and connections that will undoubtedly shape our Fellows as future leaders.”

The seminar featured a diverse itinerary, including visits to farms, businesses and historical sites. Highlights of the trip included:

Meetings with ag leaders, such as a discussion with the U.S. Embassy in Romania and a visit to the Regional Agricultural Chamber in Poland. These discussions provided Fellows with insights into international production systems, relations and trade.

Agricultural visits, such as a large-scale Angus beef operation, an agritourism farm and a business specializing in animal genetics, showcasing the diversity and innovation within European agriculture.

Historical site tours, including Auschwitz-Birkenau, Schindler’s Factory and various churches, offering a profound understanding of the region’s history, religious influences and societal evolution.

“Visiting these countries opened my eyes to the shared challenges and opportunities we face in agriculture,” said LEAD 42 Fellow Jake Werner, a senior merchandiser with ADM. “Seeing how farms in Romania and Poland operate and hearing their stories inspired me to

think differently about how we approach our agricultural systems back home. The visit also helped me appreciate the local and international markets we have in the United States.”

Fellow Michelle Bose, a farmer and closing agent with Dvoracek Title, added, “Walking through Auschwitz-Birkenau and Schindler’s Factory was an emotional experience that deepened my appreciation for the resilience of humanity and the importance of leadership grounded in empathy and understanding.”

The Nebraska LEAD Program continues to prepare agricultural leaders for tomorrow through its comprehensive leadership development curriculum.

The International Study-Travel Seminar serves as a capstone experience, equipping participants with global perspectives that enrich Nebraska’s agricultural and rural communities.

“One of the most important factors in becoming a good leader is being able to get outside of your bubble or your comfort zone and experience life through the eyes of others,” said Director Harms. “This enhanced understanding of people and cultures around the world hopefully lead to better decision-making and greater relationships with others.”

Nebraska LEAD 42 Fellows by hometown that traveled to Romania, Hungary and Poland are:

Arcadia: Michelle Bose
Aurora: Matthew Oswald

Ayr: Adam Oldemeyer
Bellevue: Annalyssa Fountain
Broken Bow: Levi French

Cairo: Ryan Hanousek
Dewitt: Wes Cammack
Elkhorn: John Garlock
Greenwood: Nicholas Swenson

Hemingford: April Delsing

Holdrege: Logan Reed
Kearney: Sloane Holtmeier

Lincoln: Nic Grams,
Rachel Ibach, Michael Manning, Nathan Watermeier, Jake Werner
Mason City: Brad Parliament

Mitchell: Jessica Palm
North Platte: Emmet Storer

Omaha: Cathryn Klein
Ord: Kelly Sudbeck
Randolph: Blake Horkamp

Seward: Traci Menke,
Zach Tveitnes
Shelby: Carter Smith
Wahoo: Brett Storer
Wood River: Dalton Kenning

The Nebraska LEAD Program includes Nebraskans currently active in production agriculture and agribusiness and is a two-year leadership development program under the direction of the Nebraska Agricultural Leadership Council in cooperation with the University of Nebraska-Lincoln’s Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources.

For more information, or to request an application for Nebraska LEAD 44 which begins in the fall of 2025, contact the Nebraska LEAD Program online at lead.unl.edu. The application deadline is June 15.

SJNSB Annual Conference

The annual conference of the Sandhills Journey National Scenic Byway has been set for Saturday, February 8, at the One Box Convention Center in Broken Bow.

“Out and About on the Byway” is this year’s theme. The annual business meeting will begin at 1:00 p.m. CT, followed by the local community showcase at 2:00 p.m.

Speakers this year are Carmen Minnick, Carhenge and Karen Wyatt Drevo, Humanities.

The social hour is at 5:00 p.m. and the banquet and entertainment will follow.

The public is invited to attend. Conference tickets are \$30.00 per person or \$50.00 per couple. 2025 memberships are \$30.00 per person.

Contact Linda Teahon for ticket information at 308-430-0786.

Byway communities are invited to showcase their community at a table display throughout the day. Contact Bill Burdett at 308-379-3261 or Linda Lacy at 308-458-8051 if you would like to reserve table space.

Some of the highlights from the past year include:

- The SJNSB Visitor Center “Red Barn” had 1,360 visitors this season. Volunteers at the visitor center logged 1,008 hours, not including the hours spent mowing, weeding, or other special projects

by other volunteers. The barn welcomed visitors to the new sod house and an outhouse was added to the display.

- Byway stops on the 2024 Nebraska Tourism Passport Program included Knight Museum, Alliance; Barista’s Coffee House, Grand Island; Island Oasis, Grand Island; Nebraska National Forest, Halsey; Mullen Arts Center, Mullen; Anthem Coffee, Thedford; and the Secret Garden, Merna.

- App updates were made on both iPhone and Android platforms and there have been over 1,500 downloads of the app.

- The Byway placed a 1/2 page ad in the 2024 Nebraska travel guide.

- Audio CD’s that highlight communities, attractions, and local history were distributed at the barn and other visitor centers.

- 16th annual Polar Bear Tank Race was a success with participants coming from numerous other states.

- One \$500 Entrepreneur Grant awarded in 2024 – Ol’ Ironsides Barbecue and Banquet in Cairo.

- Monthly radio segments featuring Byway happenings aired on KCNI/KBBN radio sponsored by Custer Federal State Bank.

- The Byway updated and reprinted Byway brochures with the new

National Scenic logo through a grant through Nebraska Tourism.

- To reach new visitors, the byway participated in the Certified Folder program which distributed byway brochures at attractions and businesses along the front range of Colorado. This was done with funding through the NE Tourism grant program.

- Byway members are participating in planning efforts for the Sandhills Discovery Center, a learning center to replace the state 4-H lodge that was lost in a forest fire.

- A portion of the Byway is included in the Junk Jaunt route with many businesses and attractions participating.

Dues payments of \$30.00 may be sent to Twila Phillips, Sandhills RC&D, P.O. Box 28, Mullen, NE 69152 and make checks payable to the Sandhills Journey National Scenic Byway.

Any individual or business member who pays their 2025 SJNSB dues by February 8 will be entered into a drawing for a two-hour tanking trip down the Middle Loup River thanks to Sandhills River Trips. The drawing will be held during the awards banquet and there will also be a drawing for those present for a nice gift basket donated by businesses and supporters along the byway.

NCF Hometown Interns gain new appreciation of going home

The Nebraska Community Foundation has a one-of-a-kind internship that puts college students back in their rural Nebraska hometowns for a summer, and prompts them to make a difference. Five years in, some of these 95 Hometown Interns have graduated, moved back to their hometowns and are helping to lead them into the future.



Kalli Kroecker, then an intern for the Hickman Area Community Foundation Fund, takes a group selfie during a May 2023 peer learning session for Hometown Interns in Ord. The Nebraska Community Foundation’s internship program has placed 95 interns back in the rural Nebraska home counties, where they work on community service projects to better the place where they grew up. (Courtesy photo).

By Leo Adam Biga
Flatwater Press

When Dakota Cherney, Paige Hansen and TK Hergott left Thayer County for college, they didn’t intend returning anytime soon to that rural southeast Nebraska borderland. Yet “The Thayer County Three,” as they’ve become known in Nebraska economic development circles, have replanted roots there after a unique internship supported by the Nebraska Community Foundation let them see things in a new light.

“Me, TK and Dakota, we all have the same kind of mindset when it comes to our hometowns, we want to give back, contribute and make them a better place,” said Hansen.

The program, called the Hometown Internship,

has affected far more than the Thayer trio. In interviews, former Hometown Interns from Fillmore County, Jefferson County, Keith County and elsewhere say they also gained a fresh appreciation for and commitment to home. Some 95 interns have gone through the program during its five years.

Young adults staying or returning has large implications as small Nebraska towns struggle keeping their best and brightest. As older generations age or die out, challenges of leadership succession and wealth transfer arise, which is why retaining or attracting Gen Zers is critical to long-term prosperity.

Turning rural places from communities of last resort to communities of choice drives the Ne-

braska Community Foundation, which recently celebrated its 30th anniversary.

President and CEO Jeff Yost has been with NCF since 1998. The nonprofit, founded in 1994, provides resources and training to a statewide network of affiliated funds focused on community building.

NCF launched its paid summer Hometown Internship in 2019, seeking to retain young people as ambassadors in their own communities. College students are matched with affiliated community foundation funds in their home counties and then tasked with doing community-based development projects dreamt up by local