

USD Leading with Optimism and Action

By Sarah Wetzel for the Plain Talk, Dec 26, 2025



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University of South Dakota President Sheila Gestring provided an update to the Vermillion Rotary on investments in the University earlier this month by highlighting what the state of South Dakota has done for USD.

Gestring noted the university projects completed and underway that the state has already assisted with while mentioning that this year is going to be more difficult.

“We have to remember that when we share in the good years that we benefit; we also have to remember that we will have to share in those tough years and we’re willing to do that,” she said.

Gestring, quoting Winston Churchill, stated that “A pessimist sees the difficulty in every opportunity; an optimist sees the opportunity in every difficulty.”

In line with choosing optimism, she noted the positive impact of the state’s investments when a broader perspective is taken.

“Over the past several years the state has shown consistent support for higher education in South Dakota,” Gestring said. “We have been the beneficiary of multiple tuition freezes and that provides a more affordable access to higher education for our prospective students and more access to countless students.”

She mentioned significant investments in facilities such as the South Dakota Union building and the Health Sciences building which could not have happened without state support.

“In fact, over \$85 million in investments in academic building improvements alone in the last five years,” Gestring said. “That is a commitment.”

Creating a needs-based scholarship also came to fruition in the last few years, further showing the state’s commitment to student success.

The success of the investments is reflected in the university’s growth with USD welcoming 10,405 students this fall, its second highest count in history, according to Gestring, with the year prior being the highest at 10,719.



University of South Dakota President Sheila Gestring pointed out both challenges and opportunities that the university will face in the near future during her Dec. 3 address to the luncheon meeting of the Vermillion Rotary Club. Courtesy of Vermillion Rotary Club

Enrollment at USD-Sioux Falls also grew by 19% with MBA programs designed to meet the workforce needs remaining the most popular majors.

“We have capacity limitations here in Vermillion,” she said. “So as our online programs and our Sioux Falls campus grows, that growth feeds and fuels our Vermillion campus. It complements what we do here and it expands what we’re able to do here at our main campus.”

USD’s Biomedical Engineering program earned a rare and prestigious AET accreditation this year, she said, and the school is on track with progress on the medical school.

“The reception around the state has been really positive,” Gestring said. “The students are really excited.”

She said the USD medical school relies on a community-based model where local professionals provide instruction and experience. They receive a small stipend but are very generous with their time allowing the university to keep costs to the student and state reasonable.

This model is not allowed for dentistry, making it difficult to add a dental school.

Gestring said in order to add a dental school they would in essence need to set up their own practice, taking business away from local dentists which they do not want to do.

“Until those accreditors change how they allow that to happen, and I think someday they probably are going to have to, dentistry is probably going to be on the periphery for us,” she said.

Coyote sports continue to shine, according to Gestring, as support continues to come with the announcement of a state-of-the-art indoor track facility with a \$20 million gift by Mr. T. Denny Sanford and football playoff success for the third consecutive year.

Gestring also said women's basketball had its best start in the Division 1 era and volleyball had a strong finish to their season.

“The men’s basketball team is off and rolling,” Gestring continued. “They have taken on a really high caliber schedule this year and I’ve been impressed with their hitting that schedule with such high caliber competition this early and I really feel like that’s going to pay off for them as the season goes on.”

She said in terms of sports facilities, the university is continuing to invest in the fieldhouse and the wellness center.

“I hope you’ve all had an opportunity to see that facility,” Gestring said, referencing the wellness center. “That is state-of-the-art, the envy of the region, no question. We have clubs from Omaha reaching out wanting to come up and host competitions in this facility.”

Residence hall updates are also in the works over the next six years, she said.

“We have over \$150 million in projects planned over the next 7-10 years and they’re not just about buildings,” Gestring said. “These are about creating environments where students can learn and succeed.”

The future will not be without challenges.

“We are in what researchers over the years have called the demographic cliff,” she said. “It started this fall and it’s a 10-year window, so I would not anticipate growth. It’s going to be tough. I think universities like the University of South Dakota will survive. I think a lot of universities will not, but it will not be easy.”

Since many hands make light work, Gestring said USD will continue to focus on building partnerships with local businesses and organizations in future projects, scholarships and other student success initiatives.

“Our focus is going to be on solutions and we are going to continue to choose to lead with optimism and action,” she said. “USD is proud to be South Dakota’s flagship university. We are proud to call Vermillion home and together I know that we can ensure that our students and our community are going to continue to thrive.”