

## UNL's late-night ride program takes off, but funding questions loom

Written by Chris Dunker

The numbers point to success: Thousands of University of Nebraska-Lincoln students have signed up for and used the new Husker Late Night Ride program.

But Libby Wilkins says the clearest sign comes from what she's hearing at bars and off-campus social events.

"I've heard people say things like, 'I'm pretty sure I'm fine to drive, but I have a free Uber,'" said Wilkins, a senior agricultural leadership major from Ainsworth. "That is exactly what we want to be able to provide for students."

The outgoing UNL student regent and president of the Association of Students of the University of Nebraska said the partnership between the university, Husker Athletics, and ride-hailing company Uber has been more of a hit than anyone imagined.

As of Friday morning, more than 5,900 undergraduate students at UNL have signed up to receive free ride vouchers from Uber. Each voucher, valued at \$10, allows students to take a ride within a 3-mile radius of campus between 9 p.m. and 3 a.m.

Since the program started in late January, nearly 13,800 rides have been taken by Husker students, which Wilkins said illustrates how the program is meeting student demand.

Students can simply open their Uber app, hail a ride, and the voucher automatically applies to their fare, she said. If the ride costs more than \$10, the student pays the difference, which often amounts to less than \$2.

"This is a really tangible thing for students because it's something they already use," Wilkins said. "It isn't just a random program or one that only students in the right circles use. A significant amount of the student body is able to use this in a way that's seamless."

### Long history at UNL

The Husker Late Night Ride program, which followed NU on Wheels — better known to many as 475-RIDE — came together at the right moment.

Started in 1999 following the death of UNL student Laura Cockson, who was struck and killed by a drunk driver, NU on Wheels gives students who called the number a free ride anywhere between 7 p.m. and 7 a.m.

Funded by ASUN, the free ride program saw the number of users decline throughout the 2010s following the arrival of several ride-share options in the Capital City, until the student government pulled its funding altogether in 2018-19.

Over the next few years, the number of drunk driver arrests made by the University of Nebraska-Lincoln Police Department began to spike, according to data from the department.

Campus officers arrested 20 people on suspicion of driving under the influence of alcohol in 2020, with five of those arrests being students who were enrolled at UNL.

The next year, 2021, UNL PD arrested 47 people (including 12 students) for DUI; that number jumped to 59 (including 15 students) in 2022.

Between 2020 and 2025, nearly 1 in 4 people arrested by UNL PD for DUI were students.

In the meantime, as ASUN continued exploring options to replace NU on Wheels, a breakthrough opened a new pathway: the NU Board of Regents approved the sale of alcoholic drinks at Husker football and volleyball games in October 2024.

To help win approval from ASUN and others ahead of the regents' vote, the athletic department pledged \$100,000 from the proceeds to support alcohol and binge-drinking education programs at UNL.

The idea of using revenue generated through beer sales to give Husker students a free ride won overwhelming support among students at the 2025 campus elections, Wilkins said, but the plan languished at the end of the semester and during summer break.

Beginning in the fall, Wilkins set about meeting with Ryan Lahne, assistant vice chancellor in UNL's Student Life office, and Athletic Director Troy Dannen about using the funds as seed money for the Husker Late Night Ride program.

"Troy said 'you can do whatever you want with the money,'" she said.

'Dream program'

In the last few years, Uber has launched partnerships at more than 600 colleges and universities on a wide range of ride voucher programs.

Anushka Lakhani, a go-to-market specialist for Uber for Business — Higher Education, said some of those programs give students a free ride home from a late night work shift or internship. In other places, Uber provides "first and last mile" rides from public transportation like trains.

UNL's late night ride idea has been adopted in other places, including the University of Iowa, Lakhani said, but its rollout and early adoption have the ride-hailing company gushing.

"Nebraska is our dream program in so many ways," Lakhani said.

Schools often put a lot of thought into how they want their programs to operate, she added, but how to get students' attention and interest is often an afterthought.

Wilkins, Lahne and others developed a coordinated social media campaign, a website with frequently asked questions, and got the Husker Late Night Ride program in front of students for a month before launch. Lakhani said that made a huge difference.

"There was a lot of intention and thought into how this was communicated to students that it's almost become a source of truth for me moving forward because we've seen how it's been successful," she said.

When the vouchers became available in January, Husker students snapped them up at a quicker rate than other universities that had rolled out a similar program.

"It has been an amazing program and far exceeded our expectations," Lahne said.

The university maintains a dashboard with a host of data showcasing how the Husker Late Night Ride program is being utilized.

- Most rides (87%) happen on Thursday (20%), Friday (39%), and Saturday (28.3%) night.
- 61% of rides take place before midnight. The busiest hour is between 10-11 p.m., where 23% of rides have happened.
- 1,437 students have used all 5 vouchers made available to them this semester.
- The average ride fare is \$11.50, meaning students who use a voucher pay \$1.50.
- The biggest tab for which a voucher was applied was nearly \$63; the smallest fare was \$1.26 cents.
- On average, students ride 2.14 miles, well within the 3-mile radius of City and East Campus.
- The shortest ride recorded is a meager 0.15 miles, or 792 feet, which is roughly the distance between the highest row in North Stadium and the highest row in what is now South Stadium.
- This year, to date, UNLPD has made a total of 12 DUI arrests. Only one has been a student.

Chris Wagner, executive director of Project Extra Mile, which seeks to prevent and reduce alcohol-related harms, said those figures may not include arrests that happen away from campus.

"The fact that arrests are down doesn't mean that students aren't driving impaired -- they just aren't getting caught on campus," said Wagner, who spoke in opposition to the sale of alcohol at Husker events in 2024.

The program may provide a benefit to UNL students, he added, but it could come with some drawbacks as well.

Students may be drinking more because they know they have a ride waiting. Excessive drinking may also contribute to increased sexual assaults, violent crime, property crime, and health problems, Wagner said.

"That's not to say that it's not a good use of funds raised from alcohol sales, but it does gloss over the other harms that these sales cause for students and the broader community," he said.

For now, the program is set to continue. Three weeks after the Husker Late Night Ride started, Wilkins and Lahne sat down to talk. Lahne had good news and bad news.

The good news was the program had proved to be a smash with students. Usage roughly doubles that at Iowa, but it comes with a cost.

UNL had been chewing through the \$100,000 provided by Nebraska Athletics at an unsustainable clip.

While an additional \$25,000 in private funds was secured to help the university reach the end of the semester (a total in \$118,833 has been spent as of April 27), Lahne said changes might have to be made to ensure its survival.

"It's underfunded," he said. "Based on the usage we have seen, in the fall, it will either need new funds or be modified to reduce the number of rides a student can receive, or in the geographic footprint where rides can occur."

Nebraska Athletics has pledged to contribute \$100,000 to support the program for the 2026-27 school year – possibly more, according to a spokesman – but Wilkins said students will have to take the lead.

The upcoming graduate who is one of the late-night ride program’s biggest boosters but has yet to use it herself, hopes ASUN can work with alumni or donors to ensure more students can find a safe way home.

“If we want this program we think is so beneficial for the student body to continue, we’re going to have to find funding,” she said. “It’s a really important program, and it’s been really exciting to see it used so much.”