

ENGAGE

Innovating the Student Experience



Welcome from the Vice President



“Students come here to learn, grow, and define their own paths—carrying forward the legacy of the Mother Road into the future.”

It is my pleasure to introduce the inaugural edition of *Engage*, the Division of Student Affairs’ magazine dedicated to sharing the people, programs, and innovative strategies that shape and impact the student experience at The University of New Mexico.

This first issue comes at an important moment for the division. Last year, we launched our strategic plan, *Innovating the Student Experience*, which affirms our commitment to fostering an innovative, equitable, and culturally responsive environment grounded in a strong sense of place and tradition. *Engage* reflects that work in action, showcasing how our students, staff, and partners support individual and institutional success each day.

At UNM, place is central to who we are. As New Mexico approaches the centennial of Route 66, we are reminded of the connections that shape our communities. For generations, this historic roadway has brought people together across our state and country. That same spirit is evident on our campus, where students come to learn, grow, and define their own paths—carrying forward the legacy of the Mother Road into the future.

The stories in this issue show how that experience comes to life. Students are building community in spaces that foster identity, culture, and belonging. These programs open doors to higher education, strengthen academic success, and create opportunities for leadership, mentorship, and peer learning. These experiences help students develop confidence, build skills, and find their place at UNM.

Equally important is our commitment to supporting the whole student. This issue highlights efforts that promote well-being through accessible care,

recovery support, mentoring, and restorative practices. It also reflects how we support students through resources focused on financial capability, basic needs, parenting students, and military-affiliated students. Together, these efforts help ensure students have what they need to succeed.



Engage captures the role of storytelling, research, and community impact. From student journalists to scholars and program participants, these stories demonstrate how learning at UNM extends beyond the classroom and into the communities we serve.

Guided by our strategic plan, we continue to strengthen a student experience rooted in connection, well-being, and belonging. When students feel supported, they are better prepared to succeed at UNM and beyond.

As we look ahead, we recognize that our students arrive with different goals and experiences. Our role is to ensure they find a community that supports them, challenges them, and helps them grow. We are proud to share these stories and spotlight the collective effort behind them. This inaugural issue marks an important step in telling the story of Student Affairs at UNM.

Thank you for being part of this work.

Go Lobos!

With appreciation,

Dr. Eric Scott
Vice President for Student Affairs

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UNM Division of Student Affairs
Office of the Vice President
Scholes Hall, Suite 229, MSC05 3410
1 University of New Mexico
Albuquerque, NM 87131, 505.277.0952

Managing Editor
Dorene DiNaro

Editors
Florencio Olguin
Kim Delker

Writing
Dorene DiNaro
Megan Borders
Kim Delker
Uchme Gollette

Design
Dorene DiNaro

Photography
Emilio Arguello
Brandon Bennett
Hyunju Blemel
Miles Cargas
Erin Dalton
Dylan DeYapp
Kyler Kinzie
Liz Lopez
Jasmine Maokhamphiou
Niko Martinez
Anna Padilla
Mark Sanchez
Melanie Westfall



On the cover
2026 Lobo Day
credit: Brandon Bennett

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UNM celebrated its 137th birthday during Lobo Day 2026, honoring its founding in 1889. The event brought together students, faculty and staff for cake, a group photo and campus activities, and also recognized the Route 66 centennial, highlighting Albuquerque's connection to the historic roadway as it nears its 100-year milestone.

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UNM American Indian Senior Day Empowers Indigenous Students

By Uchme Gollette

American Indian Student Services (AISS) provides opportunities that support student success, with recruitment and retention serving as driving forces for the program since its establishment in the 1980–81 academic year. One annual initiative is American Indian Senior Day.

Each fall, the AISS team welcomes prospective students from high schools and tribal higher education departments across New Mexico and surrounding states to gain insight into The University of New Mexico (UNM) and leave motivated to pursue higher education.

Over the years, AISS has hosted a variety of college day programs and continually strives to improve and update its offerings to best meet student needs. During the 2016–17 academic year, American Indian Senior Day was reestablished with a new approach that focused on working directly with high schools and tribal higher education departments to bring students to the UNM campus, rather than asking families to travel to Albuquerque. This approach ensures AISS can reach students who might otherwise face difficulties traveling across the state to experience UNM.

The program gives high school seniors considering UNM the opportunity to learn about the application process, academic programs, campus resources, and financial aid and scholarship options. American Indian Senior Day has become the largest targeted American Indian and Indigenous recruitment initiative at UNM, and is helping drive growth in Indigenous student enrollment. In 2015, the first-year cohort included 114 American Indian students. By 2025 that number had risen to 154.

During Senior Day, students take part in interactive sessions on admissions, financial aid, housing and academic support services—turning what can feel overwhelming into an approachable process. The event also gives participants the chance to connect directly with UNM staff, faculty and current students. Support from UNM students is essential to the program’s success and reflects the University’s commitment to increasing access and visibility at a pivotal point in students’ educational journeys.

UNM students greet attendees, assist with the admissions application, share information about AISS programs and services, offer personal insight on college readiness and campus life, and lead campus tours. These student ambassadors help

demystify the college experience while creating a welcoming, culturally affirming space for high school seniors.

By centering Indigenous voices and experiences, the event allows students to see themselves reflected on campus and envision belonging at UNM.

Senior Day also helps address challenges many students face when transitioning to college. By increasing access to admissions and financial aid information, and showcasing a campus thriving with Indigenous students, this early engagement supports student persistence and turns higher education from an abstract possibility into an attainable pathway toward holistic success.

Ethan Montoya attended the program during his senior year of high school. “I learned about the various resources I had at my fingertips, including several programs that helped me meet new people and pursue my goals to the fullest extent possible,” he said. “Most importantly, I learned about the FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid) and that I should complete it as early as possible.”

During the program, Montoya and his peers were able to “explore UNM.” He said the program “was perfect for people who needed more answers and who had concerns about housing, financial aid and campus life.”

The AISS team is committed to creating meaningful, relationship-driven experiences for students and families. From coordinating campus partnerships to providing one-on-one guidance during sessions, staff intentionally cultivate a welcoming atmosphere rooted in care, cultural awareness, and student advocacy.

Montoya later participated in the American Indian Summer Bridge and AISB Fall Experience programs, and he now serves as an AISS ambassador—advancing his leadership skills and supporting AISS recruitment and outreach efforts.

Each year, AISS looks forward to engaging prospective students, showcasing the campus and inspiring them to pursue higher education. Through sustained investment and intentional outreach, American Indian Senior Day continues to support Indigenous students in imagining, accessing, and achieving their educational goals at UNM.



Asian American Pacific Islander Resource Center Opens Dedicated Space

By Megan Borders

The Lobo community celebrated a historic milestone as the Asian American Pacific Islander Resource Center (AAPIRC) opened its doors, hosting its grand opening and annual welcome back lu'au last fall. The celebration drew over 350 attendees, reflecting the community's excitement about the youngest ethnic center, which is just four years old, marking the center having its own space.

"Securing dedicated space is a critical milestone in AAPIRC's ongoing development and growth and is also a tremendous demonstration of the positive power and impact of the student voice," said Pamela Agoyo, acting director of AAPIRC.

The center's goal is to foster a strong sense of belonging among the UNM AAPI community through special events and its resources. With the new space, the center now offers a special prayer and meditation room. In addition, AAPIRC's open space concept provides students with a welcoming area to relax, study, socialize and eat in between classes. Providing visitors with a space to connect with one another helps foster a sense of community amongst the AAPI community.

Aaron Tuioti-Mariner, AAPIRC's program manager, and his team, with the assistance of numerous student affairs offices and staff, came together to host a lively, culturally significant event that welcomed the entire UNM community and showed off their new space.

"We owe a great deal of gratitude and appreciation to all of our on-campus and community partners as well as student organizations," said Tuioti-Mariner. "Without their help, this momentous event would not have been a success."

Gabriel Hudson, a UNM alumnus, used AAPIRC's previous spaces during his time in the studio art program. He was excited to be a part of the grand opening celebration. He shared that he "studied at two other higher education institutions, and they had nothing like AAPIRC."

"The center supported me academically and culturally while I pursued my MFA," said Hudson.

"AAPIRC taught me the importance of nurturing intergenerational cross-cultural collaborations. It personally reminds me of the magnitude of what my mother, ancestors, and their immigrant parents made in order for us to be exceptional scholars. I imagine that their new space will be more accessible to more students now that it is in Mesa Vista with the other ethnic centers."

UNM is committed to supporting students holistically and helping remove any barriers to achieving their higher education goals, to the extent that this dedication is a part of UNM's 2040 strategic plan. AAPIRC's new space is a testament to this ongoing dedication.



photo credit: Emilio Arguello

Packing Them In: Silent Lights Shines as Growing Student Tradition



photo credit: Kyler Kinzie

By Dorene DiNaro

Silent Lights—a high-energy silent disco designed to welcome students back to campus and kick off Homecoming Week—has quickly become one of The University of New Mexico's most popular student traditions. Now a true Lobo staple, the event transforms campus into a triple-channel dance party where students switch between DJ stations through neon-glowing headphones.

"It's a great way to make friends and start the year off on a high note," Student Activities Advisor Megann Roszak said. "Silent Lights continues to serve as both a celebration and a gateway, inviting students into a vibrant year of campus involvement."

In 2025, Student Activities ordered 2,250 headphones, all of which were claimed — allowing more students than ever to join the experience. Student DJs play a prominent role, with ASUNM Student Special Events recruiting them through open calls. Four of the six DJs rotating throughout 2025's event were UNM students, deepening the sense of ownership and pride.



photo credit: Erin Dalton

"Its success comes down to community, culture and an expanding network of campus partnerships."

A key contributor to Silent Lights' growth is its partnership with University Communications, or UCAM. UCAM provided installations, signage, swag and full media coverage — support Roszak describes as vital to the event's success.

Normally held on Smith Plaza, the event moved to the football stadium due to ongoing construction. The athletics facilities team, led by staff member Matt McCurin, partnered with Student Activities to coordinate logistics. The stadium offered improved crowd control, enhanced safety and a unique atmosphere

— including surprise appearances from the men's and women's basketball coaches.

Silent Lights supports UNM's strategic goals by fostering pride, visibility and cultural inclusion. The event consistently features a cultural DJ channel — often with Latinx music — and incorporates local food vendors when possible. Bringing student DJs into the spotlight strengthens student connection and engagement.



photo credit: Anna Padilla

Historic New UNM Hair Shop Honors Black History

By Anna Padilla

A new hair shop has found a home on The University of New Mexico's campus. But more than simply a place to do hair, this shop carries the legacy of Black New Mexicans working to create a designated space for culture, care, and connection.

African American Student Services (AFRO) hosted a panel and grand opening of the AFRO Hair Shop in Mesa Vista Hall. "This shop is not just a student-led initiative—it's a gift of love from our community," said AFRO Director Brandi Wells-Stone during the panel.

"It has been dreamed of by students, staff, faculty and alumni. It has been imagined in meetings, passing conversations, in our hallways, and jokes turned into a serious proposal."

The shop features two salon chairs, two ring lights, mirrors, mats, a guest chair, and a moveable tray for placing hair products. "The Fro" neon sign glows on a gallery wall adorned with posters representing the history of styling Black hair throughout the ages.

There are no televisions in this room intentionally. Wells-Stone and her team wanted to prioritize building community. "Black hair shops, salons, barbershops, were more than conversation. They were about checking in, laughing, debating, organizing, mentoring, mobilizing, and dreaming," Wells-Stone said.

The goal is to encourage visitors of this space to build friendships, to challenge each other, plan, and check in with each other. The room itself is a converted storage space.

Wells-Stone pitched the idea of a shop to the New Mexico Black Central Organizing Committee, and they donated the funds alongside AFRO alumni to make this a reality. When the time came for the grand opening, AFRO welcomed the community to undo a large braid as an alternative to cutting a ribbon and welcome folks into the hair shop.

For decades, UNM students have gathered in dorm rooms or offices to get their hair done by fellow students for line ups, braids, locks, and more. "All of these moments tell a deeper story of the way Black students have always been intentional about building community," Wells-Stone said. While this has been decades in the making, Wells-Stone attributes two state bills to paving the way—the CROWN Act and The Braiding and Licensure Bill.

"The passing of New Mexico's version of the CROWN Act (Creating a Respectful and Open World for Natural Hair) affirms that our hair, our natural textures, our locks, our braids, our protective styles cannot be grounds for discrimination, particularly in education spaces," Wells-Stone said. House Bill 281, known as the "Braiding and Licensure Bill" exempts barbers and cosmetologists from receiving disciplinary action for braiding hair without being licensed. "The Braiding and Licensure Bill expands pathways and legitimizes the cultural labor that has always existed in our communities," said Wells-Stone.

Both bills provide an opportunity to connect legislation, wellness, and retention in ways that prioritize serving—not just enrolling—students who utilize African American Student Services. "This is such a special occasion, genuinely," said Vice President for Student Affairs Dr. Eric Scott. "It's a pivotal moment for the evolution of the student experience here at UNM."

Outdoor Adventure Center Builds Community and Skills

By Megan Borders

At The University of New Mexico, a unique, integrated business model is transforming how students develop the professionalism and transferable skills that prepare them for careers after graduation while increasing access to the outdoors.

UNM's Recreational Services Outdoor Adventure Center combines hands-on work experience through five programs run by students. Students gain real-world skills in leadership, customer service, time management, equipment management and program operations, all while following their passion for spending time outside.

Miles Cargas is the outdoor program specialist who manages the center. He himself was a student at UNM who found his calling as a center student employee and feels lucky to have made it his career after graduation. "I was blown away that I could do my dream job in the place that helped me grow," said Cargas.

"As a student employee here, I learned how to talk with peers and navigate stressful and adverse situations."

Cargas coordinates all five programs under the Adventure Center, which include the Outdoor Rental and Resource Center, the Lobo Bike Shop, Getaway Adventures, Challenge Course and Leadership Development and Classes and Clinics.

The purpose of the center is to make having fun outdoors accessible to the UNM and the greater UNM community. It offers all skill levels a variety of outdoor activity options and educational opportunities while teaching safety skills and fostering a supportive community where participants can work together to learn about the outdoors and themselves. Cargas shared that "Our goal is to promote outdoor safety and outdoor confidence. This

involves sharing Leave No Trace guidelines and teaching practical skills such as bike maintenance, wilderness first aid and scuba diving."

Student employees help maintain the gear the center rents out, perform bike maintenance for customers, and learn how to lead the trips. "This combined model is great for the students, because it connects the dots from the beginning to the end result for them," said Cargas.

"They learn how to plan, identify and maintain the necessary equipment, while working with the participants."

This integrated model turns the Outdoor Adventure Center into a living-learning lab where students and community members come together to build community.



photo credit: Miles Cargas

Opening Doors: ARC Scholarship Supports Educational Path

By Dorene DiNaro

Education has always felt like a calling for UNM junior Andres Padilla. His academic path has been shaped not only by the opportunities he embraced but also by the support that helped make them possible. Now, as an elementary education major planning to pursue a master's degree in educational psychology, Padilla is focused on building a future centered on helping children succeed.

Padilla is a recipient of the Anne B. Thomas No Bounds Scholarship—support he says allowed him to focus without the financial stress that often comes with college.

Early in his freshman year, his father became seriously ill and unable to work, creating major financial strain for the family. The scholarship eased that pressure, giving Padilla the stability he needed to stay focused. “With financial worries off my mind, I could really concentrate on my goals. It was a huge blessing for me and for my family,” he said.

The scholarship didn't just help him stay enrolled—it helped him thrive, take on leadership roles and eventually study abroad. One of the highlights of his college experience is unfolding as he spends a semester just north of London. Living and studying

in the United Kingdom has given him a global perspective on education—something he's excited to bring back to his future classroom.

“Everything I've been able to do at the university—even studying abroad—was possible because the scholarship gave me the ability to focus on my

academic, social and overall growth,” he said. “Being out here has opened my eyes to how education looks in different places, and I'm collecting tools I can bring back into my community.”

Study abroad is just one way Padilla has immersed himself in campus life. Back at UNM, he works as a video student employee and student manager for Lobo football. The role has taken him across the country with the team for two seasons, filming practices, managing equipment and supporting the coaching staff — an experience he said has helped him feel even more connected and at home on campus.

For students considering applying for the scholarship, Padilla's message is simple: “Do it. It gives so much peace of mind. It's a no-brainer.” From Albuquerque to the United Kingdom, from the football field to future classrooms, Padilla's story is one of resilience, opportunity and purpose — the very impact the scholarship was created to support.



photo courtesy of Andres Padilla

“Receiving the scholarship has been a huge blessing. It cleared away so many worries and opened the door to incredible opportunities. It let me concentrate fully on my academics.”

Anne B. Thomas No Bounds Scholarship

The No Bounds Scholarship is an endowment generously established by the family of Anne B. Thomas in her memory. The scholarship supports undergraduate students with disabilities in achieving their dreams. Thomas was a fierce spirit who lived with no bounds.

Paralyzed at 18, she became a lawyer, advocated for the rights of others at the UNM Office of Equal Opportunity, traveled the world and became a professional storyteller. Anne was the linchpin of her family and a

confidant to her friends, touching everyone she met with her wit, warmth and kindness. Albuquerque held a special place in her heart as the site of her reentry into independence after her accident, where she earned both her bachelor's and law degrees from UNM.



photo courtesy of Laurette Alexander, LA Photo

Celebrating First-Gen Students and the Communities They Uplift



photo credit: Brandon Bennett

By Dorene DiNaro

Nearly half of The University of New Mexico student body are first-generation students. At UNM, we celebrate these students because their stories are our story. They embody courage, persistence, and the belief that education opens doors—not just for one, but for entire families and communities.

Being the first in a family to attend college means navigating unfamiliar cultures, expectations, and even language. “You don’t inherit a roadmap. You learn and create it, step by step, while showing others what’s possible,” says Jose Villar, director of UNM College Enrichment and Outreach Programs (CEOP).

For first-gen students, it is more than learning timelines and processes—it is about forging a path where none existed before. And when they succeed, entire communities rise with them.

In 2025, UNM and its First-Gen Focus Committee joined branch campuses and the College of Nursing to host dynamic events—from webinars and panels to banner unveilings and athletic recognitions—celebrating the strength and success of first-generation students and the communities they uplift.

“This celebration is more than a single day of recognition—it reflects who we are as a university. When we build a place that works for those who must learn it from scratch, we make it better for everyone.”

The celebration included the College of Nursing honoring the unique journeys of first-generation nursing students and their future impact. A First-Generation Parenting Students Lunch and Learn brought this unique group together to explore their

challenges and strengths. Attendees learned how staff and initiatives like Generation Hope’s FamilyU help student parents thrive in college and beyond.

A webinar, *Supporting First-Gen Student Well-Being*, was held which featured a dynamic discussion on the mental health and basic needs of first-generation college students. Students and staff shared insights, challenges, and strategies for building a supportive and thriving campus environment.

The Class of 2029 Day banner reveal featured the unveiling of a banner proudly signed by all incoming first-year students during orientation—a powerful way to celebrate the start of their Lobo journey and the community we build with them.

“We stay with our first-gen students through every milestone by offering scholarships, academic support, mentorship, research opportunities, and guidance that help them not only graduate, but go on to create new knowledge, earn advanced degrees, and lead in their communities,” Villar said.

“By sharing stories, building awareness, and connecting students to resources, we strengthen a culture where asking for help is a sign of courage—not weakness.”

At UNM, thousands of first-generation Lobos are proving every day that education transforms lives, families, and communities. Together, we rise.

Being the Change: One Public Ally's Path to Community Impact

By Dorene DiNaro

Samata Alhassan moved from Ghana to New Mexico five years ago determined to give back. In Ghana, she worked as a licensed physician assistant, delivering primary and acute care and leading community outreach on reproductive health, hygiene and disease prevention.

Those experiences shaped her commitment to service. After first settling in Los Lunas and later Albuquerque, she balanced motherhood, school and the challenges of adapting to a new country, while growing to value New Mexico's diversity, kindness and community spirit.

The climate felt familiar, but it was the warmth of the people that convinced her she could build a future here. "New Mexico became a place where I could raise my daughter, grow professionally and give back to the community that welcomed me," she said.

"I realized this was a space where I could grow and still stay true to the reasons I came to New Mexico—to give back and be part of something meaningful."

She discovered Public Allies while working in UNM Health Sciences Center's Office for Diversity, Equity and Inclusion and saw an ideal fit: leadership development grounded in community service. Early in her term, Alhassan joined Communities to Careers (C2C), which introduces students of all ages to healthcare career pathways.

"Our program serves the central New Mexico communities and Santa Fe, Silver City, Taos and most of the communities that you can find underserved students who are interested in healthcare careers," Alhassan said.

Her days blend behind-the-scenes coordination with hands-on engagement: preparing outreach materials, drafting communications and assembling resources for upcoming programs. She also manages data entry and analysis to track progress, spot gaps and inform improvements.

"My main goal at the office is helping with data entry and analysis of all the programs we've been doing so that we'll be able to track our progress and see if we need feedback or if we need to redesign the programs that we are running for the communities," she said. "Though detail oriented, the work is essential to ensuring long term impact."

She has also helped refine curriculum for the BOSS (Building Outstanding STEAMH Students) program,

which introduces elementary students to science, technology, engineering, arts, math and health. "We had a curriculum earlier, but we are just trying to refine it to reflect where our main goal is, so developing a curriculum for the BOSS program has been really cool," she said.

Alhassan also helps facilitate hands-on workshops where healthcare professionals—from nursing and medicine to physical therapy—share their work and demonstrate basic skills. The events give students a direct look at healthcare careers and help them imagine new possibilities.

"Watching students become excited about careers they hadn't previously imagined is one of the parts of the job I treasure most."

Public Allies has supported Alhassan's growth while also letting her give back in ways that mirror her own path. After benefiting from mentorship through C2C's Undergraduate Health Professional Scholars Program, she now mentors students through the program's bridge initiative—an experience she describes as coming full circle.

"I began as a participant in the Communities to Careers program, and now I'm proud to give back—still part of the program, still mentoring and still helping other students succeed," she said.

In December 2025, she graduated from UNM's nursing program and passed her licensing exam. She now prepares to enter the field with a focus on clinical excellence and community-centered care. She believes lasting change comes from working with communities, not for them, and grounding solutions in lived realities—an approach that guides her work.

"Community engagement looks like actively listening to the communities you want to serve and working with them to create change that is sustainable, positive and reflective of their needs," she said.

Looking ahead, she encourages future Public Allies to embrace leadership, collaboration and growth. She says the program builds lifelong tools—communication, teamwork, community engagement and practical experience—that shape both careers and personal development.

Alhassan's story reflects resilience and purpose—and a belief that lasting change grows from everyday actions. Through C2C, student mentorship and her emerging nursing career, she is helping shape a more equitable future for New Mexico.

A woman wearing a blue hijab, a white ribbed top, and a black blazer is smiling and looking off to the side. She is holding a white clipboard in her hands. The background is an outdoor setting with trees and a fence.

**“Meaningful change often
begins quietly, through
everyday actions that
build trust and strengthen
communities.”**

Taking Their Turn to Lead: Student Affairs Leadership Interns Rise to the Challenge



photo credit: Melanie Westfall

By Dorene DiNaro

In fall 2024, Vice President for Student Affairs Dr. Eric Scott launched the Student Affairs Leadership Intern (SALI) program to engage top student leaders in outreach, development and programmatic support within the Office of the Vice President for Student Affairs. Now in its second year, the program has welcomed four outstanding student leaders who are helping shape the future of the UNM student experience.

Designed to provide mentorship and career exploration in student affairs, SALI offers participants meaningful insight into the division's work and direct access to its leadership. Interns contribute to essential functions within the OVPSA, including assessment, communications, development, event planning and administrative support.

"Our leadership interns are positioned to directly serve, advise and influence the Division of Student Affairs as we execute the ambitious Innovating the Student Experience strategic plan," Scott said. "The program—and the leaders we have welcomed into it—have had a real and genuine impact on divisional decision-making while creating space for service, learning and growth."

Scott said he is grateful for the poise and perspective interns bring to the office as they work to improve campus life in real time while also experiencing it as students.

In their roles, interns help foster a vibrant, inclusive campus environment where every Lobo feels supported and empowered. They also gain firsthand experience with the operations and initiatives that shape the student experience across the division.

The program emphasizes professional accountability, exposure to student affairs career pathways, and preparation for graduate studies and future roles in higher education. Through hands-on work in assessment, reporting and divisional projects, interns build practical skills and strengthen evidence-based decision-making. SALI also encourages innovation by giving students opportunities to develop and implement ideas that enhance services, programs and campus life.

The inaugural cohort included UNM seniors Brandon Chavarria-Salazar and Kaelyn Moon, followed by current interns Miriam Barba and Bree Hawkins. All four remained actively involved in campus and community organizations throughout their time at UNM, both academically and through their SALI roles.

Chavarria-Salazar, now a student recruitment specialist for the High School Equivalency Program at El Centro de la Raza, and Moon, a student success specialist in African American Student Services, credit their time as SALIs as pivotal to their professional success. For Chavarria-Salazar, the internship offered a unique opportunity to gain a deeper understanding

of student affairs and higher education as a whole. “These experiences helped me stand out when applying for positions and supported a smooth transition from student to professional.” Moon said the role played a key part in shaping her leadership journey. “Being part of the strategic plan helped me fine-tune that passion and realize this is exactly the career I want to pursue.”

Both alumni said the SALI experience helped them grow professionally and gain clarity about their future paths, underscoring the program’s value in preparing students for careers in higher education. In many ways, the inaugural group passed the torch to the second cohort: Barba, a Chicana and Chicano studies and political science major, and Hawkins, a biology, psychology, and political science major. Barba said she was encouraged to apply by her close friend and former SALI, Chavarria-Salazar.

“He spoke highly of the experience and the professional growth it offered,” Barba said. “I hoped the role would allow me to build on my own experiences and contribute to the supportive campus environment I care about.”

Barba said the program deepened her appreciation for cross-campus mentorship. “Connecting with staff and student employees across different student affairs departments allowed me to learn from a variety of perspectives and better understand the interconnected nature of the division,” she said. “These mentorship experiences helped me grow professionally, build meaningful relationships and feel more confident navigating higher education spaces.”

One of her biggest takeaways was gaining a clearer understanding of how decisions are made within student affairs and the level of collaboration behind initiatives that impact students.

Hawkins found her way to the SALI program through her involvement with the Associated Students of UNM, where she most recently served as chief of staff. “Working closely with student organizations, resource centers and UNM administration gave me valuable exposure to campus operations,” Hawkins said. “That experience inspired me to join the Vice President for Student Affairs office to help create the best possible college experience for all students.”

She added that seeing how decisions made in the VPSA office affect the organizations she supports has been especially meaningful. “Through this position, I’ve interacted with students across campus I would have never had the pleasure of meeting before,” she said.

The program continues to grow as a cornerstone of leadership development within the Division of Student Affairs. By offering hands-on experience, mentorship and exposure to high-level decision-making, the program equips student leaders with the skills and confidence to excel beyond graduation. As new cohorts join, SALI remains committed to fostering future professionals who will shape inclusive, student-centered environments in higher education and beyond.



Brandon Chavarria-Salazar

Student Recruitment Specialist
High School Equivalency Program
El Centro de la Raza

“Through SALI, I had the opportunity to share a student perspective, attend Board of Regents sessions, and connect with Student Affairs professionals.”



Kaelyn Moon

Student Success Specialist
African American Student Services

“The position gave me a bird’s-eye view of Student Affairs and ultimately helped reinforce my passion for this work.”



Miriam Barba

Undergraduate Student
Chicana & Chicano Studies
and Political Science

“Connecting with staff and student employees across different departments allowed me to learn from a variety of perspectives and grow professionally.”



Bree Hawkins

Undergraduate Student
Biology, Psychology and
Political Science

“Hearing students’ lived experiences has shaped my view of UNM and informed my goals and programming.”

Bridging Purpose and Perseverance: El Puente and Family Into P

Laysha Lineth Chaparro Bustillos

By Dorene DiNaro

When Laysha Lineth Chaparro Bustillos reflects on her academic journey, it begins long before her first day at The University of New Mexico. Her parents immigrated from Chihuahua, Mexico, just one month before her birth, leaving behind careers and community to create new opportunities.

“My mom had a whole career as an educator in Mexico,” she said. “She gave all of that up so I could have a better future. I carry that with me every day.”

After settling in Los Lunas, family remained central to Chaparro Bustillos’ life. As a first-generation, bilingual student, she stayed closely connected to home while pursuing bachelor’s degrees in psychology and Spanish at UNM. Her transition to college, however, was complicated when her mother suffered a life-altering brain aneurysm the summer before her freshman year.

“It was that weird balance of feeling like I was missing my family while also trying to pursue my goals,” she said. “I didn’t feel comfortable being away. I felt like I needed to be responsible for my mom.” Although she excelled academically, she struggled to feel present. “I was a straight-A student, but emotionally I just wasn’t there,” she said. “I didn’t see the point of getting involved.”

“Just because I didn’t understand their terminology didn’t mean I didn’t belong.”

A heart-to-heart conversation with her mother during her second semester changed that. Encouraged to prioritize her own growth, Chaparro Bustillos began building community on campus as an ASUNM senator and through El Centro de la Raza. While browsing opportunities she wasn’t sure she qualified for, she discovered the El Puente Research Fellowship.

“El Puente popped up first,” she said. “I thought it was fate.” As a first-generation student, she initially misunderstood what research could be. “I thought research meant sitting in a lab with beakers. El Puente showed me research could look different.”

With mentorship, she developed a project examining postpartum depression among immigrant women, highlighting cultural strengths often overlooked in research. Even when imposter syndrome surfaced, she learned to trust her voice.

Now in her second year of UNM’s Master of Counseling program, she hopes to serve immigrant communities, especially children. One of her proudest moments came when she spoke at the 2024 Raza Graduation. “It was a full-circle moment,” she said. “El Puente is a bridge,” Chaparro Bustillos said. “It helps you grow, gives you your first experience and supports you along the way.”

El Puente Research Fellowship

The El Puente Research Fellowship is an undergraduate program at El Centro de la Raza that supports interdisciplinary research and prepares students for graduate programs. It provides mentorship, research skill development, and a supportive community for historically underrepresented and Raza students.



Research Fellows Turn Community, Research Pathways Forward



Noah Lucero

By Dorene DiNaro

New Mexico born and raised, Noah Lucero's path to becoming a physician began long before he entered a university classroom. Growing up between Los Lunas and Albuquerque, he learned the values of hard work, resilience and family from generations of farmers, builders and teachers. His parents, deeply rooted in New Mexico, worked to provide opportunities they never had themselves.

"My siblings and I were always involved in activities," Lucero recalled. "Eventually my parents decided to move us to Albuquerque so we could have access to more school options, more extracurriculars, more stability." That decision helped shape the trajectory of his future. Some of Lucero's most meaningful memories come from attending basketball games at The Pit with his family during their most difficult years. Those moments of shared joy offered comfort and connection.

"It's emotional for me," he said. "Some of my happiest memories during tough times come from being in that arena, cheering together."

Lucero and his two siblings all attended UNM, united by a shared interest in science and service. He followed his older sister's path by majoring in biochemistry before pursuing medicine, while his younger brother soon followed the same route. Their collective interest in healthcare was influenced by their father's battle with cerebral cavernous malformation.

"UNM isn't just where I study. It's part of who I am. It's family. It's a home on campus."

"Being in and out of hospitals growing up was really formative," Lucero said. "It made medicine feel personal." As an undergraduate, Lucero balanced rigorous coursework with volunteering that supported his interest in medicine. His most influential experience came through the El Puente Research Fellowship at El Centro de la Raza.

"It taught me the hidden curriculum of academia—things no one explains but you're expected to know," he said. "It showed me research can look like whatever you're passionate about."

Entering El Puente as a junior, Lucero worked with a faculty mentor in Family and Community Medicine. The fellowship helped prepare him for the next phase of his education. "It gave me a leg up," he said.

"El Puente gave me a foundation I wouldn't have had otherwise." Now a fourth-year medical student, Lucero mentors undergraduates and hopes to pursue a career in academic medicine. As he applies to anesthesiology residencies, he hopes to stay close to New Mexico—ready to serve wherever he is needed.

Peer Learning Facilitators Power Student Success



photo credit: Hyunju Blemel

By Dorene DiNaro

At The University of New Mexico, stepping into a massive lecture hall could be intimidating. Surrounded by unfamiliar faces and fast-moving instruction, even the most motivated students often feel reluctant to speak up. The Peer Learning Facilitator (PLF) Program helps transform these large, overwhelming spaces into supportive, collaborative learning environments.

Housed within Student Affairs but sustained through strong cross-campus partnerships, the PLF Program blends academic support, mentorship and holistic well-being in a way few initiatives have. At its core is a powerful idea: students often learn best from peers who have been exactly where they are.

“It’s a program that takes students who had been successful in a challenging course and places them

back in that same classroom to support others,” said Christopher Lynch, senior student success specialist for the College Enrichment and Outreach Programs (CEOP). “They have been through it. They know the struggle.”

The program’s roots stretch back to 2012, when it was part of the federally funded STEM UP collaborative. After the grant ended, the initiative paused until campus leaders revived and expanded it in 2019.

What began with five PLFs grew into a team of more than 40, supporting high-demand, high-fail rate courses.

“Working as a peer learning facilitator has made such a difference in my life; not only allowing me to help students in my field of interest to get

Unlike traditional tutoring, PLFs work inside the classroom. In large lecture halls where students might otherwise have felt lost, PLFs facilitate small group work, answer questions and offer structured guidance that make the environment more personal and manageable.

ahead and master the material, but also to help me brush up on concepts that come in handy for upper-level courses,” said Zen Melendez, peer learning facilitator with CEOP. “In that way, I can also help the students connect concepts they are learning now with what they’ll need to know in order to be successful in their future courses.”

Faculty members apply to participate in the PLF program because it strengthens teaching and learning in high-enrollment, high-challenge courses while preserving ownership of the classroom. Participation is voluntary, reflecting a shared commitment to evidence-based teaching, student success and continuous improvement. The program provides a structured, collaborative way to enhance the learning environment while contributing to a coordinated, cross-campus approach to student support.

By integrating trained peer learning facilitators directly into lectures, faculty can incorporate more active and collaborative learning strategies such as small-group discussion, formative problem solving, and real time feedback without sacrificing content coverage.

Kimran Buckholz, principal lecturer III in the Department of Biology, said the PLF program represents a “win-win-win” for students, facilitators and instructors. “PLFs help create valuable mini-communities in large enrollment courses,” she said.

“They emphasize active learning and self-testing, growth mindset, well-being and community building to help mitigate college challenges.”

Buckholz described her PLFs as “the waves that move between shore and the ocean blue,” explaining that they serve as extensions of both instructors and students while emphasizing best class practices and advocating for learners.

“They are active collaborators—contributing to my course curriculum and Canvas content—and some of the best parts of my job because they elevate my class environment to new heights. I couldn’t imagine teaching without them,” she said.

The instructional partnership PLFs provide is highly valued. Having previously succeeded in the course, PLFs reinforce discipline-specific expectations, model effective learning strategies and support students who may hesitate to seek assistance directly from an instructor. This added layer of support can contribute to improved persistence, reduced repeat enrollment and stronger overall course performance.

By supporting real-time engagement in large courses, PLFs make active learning more intentional while providing instructors with better insight into student challenges—without changing course rigor or structure.

“We are connectors of resources,” Lynch said. “We bring in presenters from across campus—SHAC, the Dean of Students, the Center for Financial Capability—and PLFs take that knowledge back to the students they work with.”

This training allows PLFs to recognize when a peer needs more than academic help and to connect them with housing support, accommodations or other vital services—insight strengthened by challenges many PLFs had faced themselves.

The program also became a bridge between campus divisions. Trinidad Mendoza, CEOP program manager, said one of the most meaningful outcomes was the collaboration across campus silos. “Student Affairs didn’t usually get to hang out with Academic Affairs,” he said. “But through this program, we built strong relationships.”

At its heart, the PLF program is about community, connection and care—students lifting one another up and staff investing deeply in their growth. “Every year it gets better,” Mendoza said.

“So much of the PLF experience is getting to help students with what the next steps look like,” Melendez said. “Because we’ve been in their situation not so long ago, we know how to get them where they need to go.”



“His insight had a profound,
long-term impact for me and
so many other students.”

Randy Montoya
Hillerman's former student

Daily Lobo Creates Tony Hillerman Fund

By Dorene DiNaro

Renowned author Tony Hillerman is recognized throughout the world for his novels and memoirs centered around the Southwest with a spotlight on the reservations and Indigenous people of New Mexico. Perhaps a lesser-known fact about Hillerman is that he used his wisdom, guidance, and passion for the art of writing to nurture journalistic talent at The University of New Mexico's student newspaper, the *Daily Lobo*.

Among his accolades, Hillerman served as the student newspaper's inaugural writing coach—a role he developed that proved essential in cultivating and supporting future journalists at the *Daily Lobo*. Others have followed in his footsteps, including renowned journalist Hank Trehwitt, continuing to mentor, inspire, and guide student journalists.

“Tony Hillerman's former students at the *Daily Lobo* still talk about what his mentoring meant to them,” said Daven Quelle, business manager for UNM Student Publications. “He, and the writing coaches who followed, transformed students' lives and careers, which in turn contributed to local, regional, and even national journalism.”

To mark 130 years of student journalism, the *Daily Lobo* partnered with Tony Hillerman's daughter, Anne, to establish the Tony Hillerman *Daily Lobo* Writing and Resource Coach endowment. The fund aims to raise \$300,000 to permanently support a part-time writing coach and has already secured more than \$50,000 from alumni and friends.

Quelle said that the *Daily Lobo* has been a launching pad for aspiring journalists since its inception, and the need for guidance and support for its student writers hasn't diminished over the years. “In an era of decreasing local journalism, the importance of supporting communities through strong, reliable reporting is more critical than ever,” said Quelle. “The *Daily Lobo* writing coach supports young journalists so they can grow into those essential reporting roles.”

Quelle said that the Tony Hillerman *Daily Lobo* Writing and Resource Fund will ensure future generations of journalists will receive the mentorship and support they need to thrive.



A Culture of Connection: UNM Advances Restorative Practice

photo credit: Hyunju Blemel

By Dorene DiNaro

Paula Smith, associate dean of Student Rights and Responsibilities at The University of New Mexico, is committed to ensuring students feel genuinely seen and valued as she leads a shift from punitive conduct processes toward restorative approaches. Through her efforts, discipline is becoming less about punishment and more about fostering accountability, connection and personal growth. Historically, student conduct processes on college campuses have relied on tools like warnings, probation and sanctions, approaches that often fostered shame instead of meaningful learning.

Restorative practices trace back to the relational, healing-centered traditions of Indigenous and First Peoples communities—roots that long predate their use in higher education. “Restorative practices ask different questions surrounding what happened, who was affected and what is needed to repair the harm,” Smith said. Over the last year, Smith and her team have rewritten the student disciplinary procedure to be more student-focused by incorporating restorative questions early in the process. They have also

built partnerships with Ombuds Services, Residence Life, the College of Education and UNM’s social work interns.

Smith said conflict coaching is emerging as a valuable resource, helping students develop the interpersonal skills needed to navigate disputes before they escalate. Peer mediation is also being planned, along with an expanded reintegration process for suspended students to ensure they return with accountability and meaningful support.

“We want students to understand impact, reflect on what they’ve learned and see how they can grow,” she said. “Punishment alone doesn’t do that.” Many students arrive believing the conduct office is a place of fear—the “walk of shame” to the building and the expectation of discipline. Smith wants them to experience it instead as a space where they can be heard, understood and supported in making things right.

Smith describes restorative justice on campus as a triangle, with facilitated dialogue at the top supported by a wide base of everyday relational practices such as checking in, asking

what happened and approaching conflict with curiosity rather than accusation. “It doesn’t have to feel like us against them,” she said. “It’s more like: Stuff happens. Let’s figure it out together.”

“It’s a shift toward understanding context, impact and healing—and for many students, it lowers the anxiety often associated with conduct processes.”

While a more traditional, retributive mindset remains common at UNM, Smith sees that reality as what makes the shift toward restorative practices both timely and necessary. Slowly, she said, the campus is beginning to embrace them.

She imagines a campus where students have agency in resolving conflict and accountability comes with dignity and reintegration rather than exclusion. UNM isn’t there yet, Smith said, but the growing momentum gives her hope.



photo credit: Hyunju Blemel

Inside the box are meaningful items honoring the clinic's new namesake, including her 1999 Regents' Award, a biography, a poem, flowers and a subtle nod to *curanderismo*—a collection that reflects Olga's dedication to students, staff, family, and all who knew her.

SHAC ASAP Acute Care Clinic Renamed in Honor of Former Director Dr. Olga M. Eaton

By Dorene DiNaro

The UNM Student Health and Counseling (SHAC) ASAP Acute Care Clinic is set to receive a new name and a complete remodel. One transformative step took place in January, during a dedication ceremony attended by colleagues, family and friends of former SHAC Director Dr. Olga M. Eaton.

Thanks to the generosity of Dr. R. Philip “Phil” Eaton, the clinic will be named in honor of his late wife, Olga, who served as SHAC’s director for 14 years during her tenure at UNM. The new name — the Olga M. Eaton, M.D., ASAP Acute Care Clinic — will appear at the clinic’s entrance alongside a handcrafted tin memory box celebrating her compassionate and supportive nature.

The memory box was envisioned by SHAC Executive Director Dr. Stephanie McIver after meeting with Phil and UNM Foundation staff. It was created by Santa Fe master tin artisan Fred Ray Lopez, with contributions from Facilities Coordinator Nicholas Ross and local craftsman Zecharia Starks.

Since Olga’s passing, Phil, now 90, has taken to composing poems and included his No. 115, “Heritage, an Awesome Reality,” in the memory box, a reflection on his learning from ancient experience: “Healing with extracts of herbs, fruit, corn and faith. Generation after generation passing on the legacy of remedies.”

He credits Olga’s presence for guiding him through every step of this new endeavor and reintroducing him to the art of curanderismo. “Olga and I used to go to the Albuquerque Botanic Garden quite a bit,” he said. “Olga led me to the El Jardín de la Curandera Healers Garden there shortly after her passing.” Dr. Eliseo “Cheo” Torres, former vice president for Student Affairs, hosted a curanderismo class teaching traditional Mexican healing methods.

“This is something we have right in our own backyard,” Phil said. He added that curanderismo’s deep roots should be incorporated into caring for students through the power of touch, listening, and genuine care—qualities Olga embodied even without the formal curandera title.

“Olga would make anyone she was talking to feel like they were the only person in the room,” Phil said. “She greeted every student with a warm touch, eye contact and a knack for really listening to what they had to say.”

“SHAC is the mother and father for the students and one of the ways we as a university can ensure that students don’t drop out,” Phil said. “Olga was able to give students the value of really being heard, and she really felt it was a privilege to be able to help someone.”

Phil said there is a natural link between counseling, healing and caring that supports the physical, mental and emotional stress and anxiety students experience while living away from home. “This connection has long been central to SHAC’s approach,” Phil said.

Dr. Eric Scott, vice president for Student Affairs, said that student well-being is a critical component of student success in postsecondary education and it’s only fitting that Olga continues to be a part of supporting well-being on campus.

“The services at SHAC, supported by the enhanced facilities in the Olga M. Eaton, M.D., ASAP Acute Care Clinic, ensure that UNM students will continue to have access to high-quality care for generations to come,” he said.

Renovation and installation are scheduled with the goal of opening to students in 2027. McIver welcomed the project, noting that the current clinic needs updates to meet modern standards for medical and treatment room space, as well as contemporary design for provider and support-staff areas.

“The redesign of the new clinic will improve patient flow for students, workflow for staff, be modernized, increase privacy, and is aesthetically appealing,” she said.

She said she is pleased that the memory box will help ensure every student who accesses these medical services learns about the significant contributions Olga made to SHAC and to the field of medicine.

“Even before I started here in 2012, I knew of Olga Eaton’s legacy,” McIver said. “The executive director who hired me, Dr. Beverly Kloeppel, was deeply mentored by Olga in the special nature of collegiate care—our responsibility to students, and her broad vision for how expansive our services can be—a ‘one-stop shop.’ Those remain my goals today.”

As for Phil, he embraces his life and continues to be grateful for the more than 60 years he shared with Olga. He said he never imagined that 90 years old would be so good. “Don’t feel sorry for me—I love to look back. That way you don’t forget anything.”

Fortunately, the students and everyone who utilize the new clinic will sense the impact she had not only on SHAC and UNM, but on everyone she encountered throughout her life.



photo credit: Hyunju Blemel

A Place to Land: Where Recovery Meets Community



By Dorene DiNaro

When students walk into the Collegiate Recovery Center (CRC), located in the Student Health and Counseling (SHAC) building at The University of New Mexico, they are met with openness, conversation and care—not lectures or labels.

Although the CRC is a recent addition to UNM, its roots extend back several years. The program began as a grant-supported student organization in the Department of Psychology, led by founder and advocate Marni Goldberg. In August 2024, the CRC was formally established under Student Health and Counseling, becoming the first official Collegiate Recovery Center in New Mexico.

The center offers a place to land—a space where students in recovery, or those questioning their relationship with substances, can find support and practical tools. Its people-centered mission focuses on connecting individuals, resources and opportunity while strengthening communities through collaboration and action.

At the heart of the CRC is Liliana Spurgeon, the program's coordinator and self-described “department of one,” whose work spans peer support, harm reduction and outreach. “We’re here to support students at any stage of recovery,” Spurgeon said. “If a student self-identifies as having a problematic relationship with drugs or alcohol, we’re here for them.”

photo credit: Hyunju Blemel

Support includes peer-to-peer engagement, recovery groups and individualized conversations. Programming offers traditional 12-step recovery spaces, SMART Recovery and hybrid groups that blend lived experience with clinical insight. The center’s drop-in model allows students to participate at their own pace.

Harm reduction is one of the CRC’s most visible efforts. Through free, campus-wide distribution of naloxone (Narcan), fentanyl testing strips and overdose response education, the center reinforces its commitment to student safety.

“I give students a kit with naloxone and clear, step-by-step instructions on what to do in the event of an overdose,” Spurgeon said. “One side of the card explains how to administer Narcan, and the other explains rescue breathing—so students aren’t just given a resource; they know how to use it.”

Student response has been overwhelmingly positive, with many unaware naloxone was available at UNM or accessible without question or cost. CRC leaders emphasize that harm reduction does not encourage substance use.

“We rely on the data, and the data consistently shows that talking about something doesn’t make it more likely to happen,” said Lesley McKinney, SHAC director of clinical counseling. “In fact, it reduces the likelihood of a negative outcome. Secrecy is what makes these situations risky.” Spurgeon also leads Narcan trainings and stigma-reduction workshops addressing substance use disorders and problematic relationships with drugs and alcohol.

“I’m here to support students and help reduce that stigma,” she said. “There’s no shame in asking for help.” Drawing on lived experience and professional training, Spurgeon takes a community-focused approach, prioritizing partnerships beyond UNM.

“If a resource isn’t available here, we help students find support elsewhere,” she said. “It’s about looking at the bigger picture of supporting students.”

As a first-generation Latina, Spurgeon ensures CRC materials are bilingual, inclusive and reflective of UNM's diverse student population. "Recovery doesn't discriminate," she often says. "Access to recovery does."

She is especially committed to amplifying underrepresented voices in recovery spaces, including women, parents and students of color. The CRC works closely with campus and community partners to expand awareness and collaboration.

"The more collaborative we are, the more students hear the message that it's okay to ask for help," Spurgeon said. "This isn't an individual issue—it's a community one."

The CRC plans to expand services to UNM's branch campuses and create additional sober social opportunities. "Addiction and recovery affect academic success, retention, equity, safety and community belonging. Supporting a student often means supporting their family, friends or roommates. That reality intersects with every part of the university's strategic priorities," McKinney said.

The CRC is located inside SHAC and can be accessed through the pharmacy entrance. Students may visit during drop-in hours, connect virtually, or learn more at recovery@unm.edu and on Instagram @UNM_CRC.



photo credit: Hyunju Blemel

UNM Voted Best for Vets

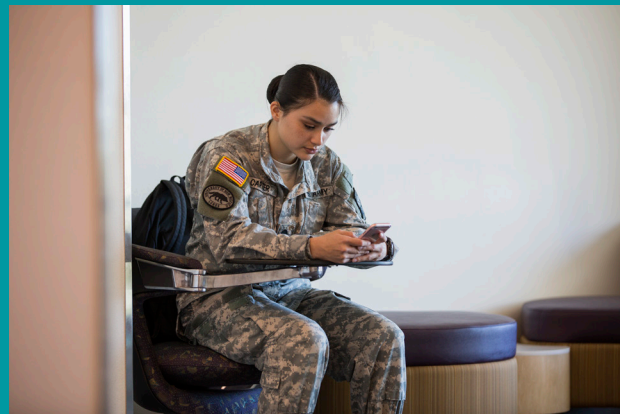


photo credit: UNM Communications & Marketing

By Dorene DiNaro

The University of New Mexico earned the 2025 *Military Times* Best for Vets College designation, ranking No. 1 in New Mexico, No. 3 in the Southwest, and among the top institutions nationwide: No. 6 among public schools, No. 8 among traditional schools, No. 9 in general education, and No. 10 overall.

This prestigious recognition underscores UNM's unwavering commitment to military-affiliated students. According to *Military Times*, rankings are determined through an extensive survey evaluating academic quality, student support services, affordability, and veteran outcomes such as graduation and retention rates. Student success metrics weigh most heavily, followed by military-specific resources, financial assistance, admissions policies, and other key factors.

At the heart of this achievement is the Veteran and Military Resource Center, led by Dr. Alonzo Maestas, director. The center provides comprehensive support for veterans, active-duty service members and their families. This recognition positions UNM as a top choice for military-affiliated students in New Mexico and across the country.

"I am at a loss for words. The dedication of the VMRC staff and our student employees to serving military-affiliated students inspires me every day, and UNM's strong support for this community makes achievements like this possible," Maestas said. "Our students are our 'why.' We want every military-affiliated student to feel seen, respected, and valued. Our mission is simple: help them transition into college life, support them throughout their academic journey, and empower them as they advance to graduate school or into their chosen professions."



photo credit: Niko Martinez

Building a More Family-Friendly Campus for Parenting Students

By Megan Borders

The University of New Mexico's commitment to supporting students is embedded in its mission and reinforced by leadership—so much so that student success is written into the University's strategic plan, UNM 2040: Opportunity Defined.

In keeping with that goal, a cross-campus interdisciplinary team has spent the past two years working to make UNM a more welcoming campus for students who are parents. Led by Daniela Baca, director of UNM's Children's Campus, the team includes Megan Chibanga, executive director for Residence Life and Student Housing; Charla Orozco, director of the office of Institutional Analytics; Elizabeth Amador, director of Student Financial Aid; Áine McCarthy, director of the Women's Resource Center; and Heather Sweetser, representing Academic Affairs.

Nationally, one in five students is a parent. At UNM, early estimates suggest the number may be closer to one in three—nearly 9,000 students. Research also shows that 42 percent of parenting students withdraw from school due to dependent-care responsibilities. In response, this team is working to ensure parenting students' voices are heard, their needs are addressed, and they are able to pursue their academic goals.

To support this work, the team applied to Generation Hope's FamilyU program, a two-year coaching cohort that helps institutions transform their campuses by developing plans centered on four pillars: data, people, policy, and culture.

"One of the biggest obstacles for parenting students is that there isn't a systematic way of tracking them and highlighting their needs," said Baca. "This program is helping us change that and move the work forward in a meaningful way."

In June 2024, UNM was selected as one of only five institutions nationwide to participate in the FamilyU cohort. President Garnett S. Stokes supported the initiative from the outset, traveling with the team to a national gathering in February 2025 and participating—along with executive leadership—in a Generation Hope-facilitated executive session that same month. Through workshops, mentorship, and coaching, the program has helped UNM strengthen support for parenting students and advance meaningful change.

One early focus has been data collection. During Fall 2025 New Student Orientation, more than 500 attendees identified as parenting students, and research showed that nearly 40 percent report feeling isolated at some point during their academic journey.

That insight helped drive tangible improvements, including the opening of UNM’s first parenting student study room in the Student Union Building in September 2025. Designed to promote connection and reduce isolation, the space provides a welcoming environment for parents and children alike.

“One of our primary goals is to truly enhance their experience and ensure they are seen and heard on campus, and that they are represented,” Baca said. “Having a dedicated space in the Student Union Building, which we often refer to as the heart of campus, helps ensure they are accurately represented here.”

The room includes desks, chairs, toys, books, and learning materials, with additional family-friendly study rooms currently in development at Zimmerman Library.

“This space is about centering parenting students on campus and adding visibility to their experience,” McCarthy said. “So that our partners across campus see how connected this work is to access, equity and student success.”

The team has also added a Student Parent Fellow to help build community and reduce feelings of isolation. Melanie Shenberger, a second-year psychology major and student

parent, was selected for the role. “The biggest thing I want to create is a community that doesn’t necessarily require more from these parents,” said Shenberger. “I want this to give back to them in a way that makes them feel it’s adding value to their daily lives instead of taking more from them, because school can feel very isolating for a parent. They rush to campus for class and immediately rush home to care for their children. There is no time in between.”

Shenberger’s first initiatives included chartering the parenting student organization Powering Up Parenting Students (PUPS), organizing family-friendly events with both in-person and virtual options, and launching UNM’s first parenting student listserv to ensure timely access to resources and campus communications.

Additional supports include a reserved parking spot outside the Women’s Resource Center, allowing parenting students to make quick campus visits without the added challenge of locating and paying for parking.

Together, these efforts reflect a growing commitment to equity and student success—recognizing that supporting parenting students strengthens not only individual outcomes, but the broader campus community.

Mentoring Through the Lens of the SAMHSA Eight Dimensions of Wellness

By Dorene DiNaro

At The University of New Mexico, mentoring supports well-being in ways that closely align with the SAMHSA Eight Dimensions of Wellness: social, environmental, physical, emotional, spiritual, occupational, intellectual, and financial. Through the work of the UNM Mentoring Institute, mentoring functions as a multidimensional support system while remaining grounded in education and workforce development.

Mentoring strengthens emotional and physical wellness by reducing stress, improving work-life navigation, and fostering resilience through supportive relationships. Social wellness is advanced through developmental mentoring networks that extend beyond one-to-one pairings, creating connection and belonging across disciplines and roles.

Through research-informed training, certifications, and micro-credentials, mentoring promotes intellectual and occupational wellness by supporting

continuous learning, skill development, and professional identity formation. While the Institute does not offer direct financial education, mentoring contributes indirectly to financial wellness by improving persistence, graduation, and career readiness—especially for first-generation and underrepresented students.

The Institute advances environmental wellness by promoting inclusive, respectful, and psychologically safe learning and work environments through standards for mentor preparation and program evaluation. Spiritual wellness is reflected in mentoring conversations that encourage reflection on values, purpose, and long-term direction.

Together, these outcomes show how mentoring at UNM aligns naturally with all eight dimensions—supporting holistic well-being while guiding long-term academic and professional success.

SAMHSA Eight Dimensions of Wellness



Social



Spiritual



Environmental



Occupational



Physical



Intellectual



Emotional



Financial

Guiding Growth: LoboGROW® Relaunch Expands Student Development Across Campus

By Dorene DiNaro

The LoboGROW® (Guided Reflection on Work) program returned this semester with renewed purpose and a permanent home in Career Services. After briefly losing its departmental base following the departure of a previous coordinator, campus leaders agreed the program was too valuable to discontinue. Career Services—already centered on career readiness and holistic student development—proved a natural fit, giving LoboGROW® a new direction and broader campus engagement.

Modeled after the Iowa GROW® program and adopted by UNM in 2017, LoboGROW® helps student employees connect their academic coursework with on-campus job experiences. At its core is the belief that reflection strengthens learning, an approach that aligns closely with UNM's priorities around student success and belonging.

This year's relaunch includes participation from both returning and new departments, such as the Student Union Building, Recreational Services, African American Student Services (AASS), and the Veteran and Military Resource Center. The LoboGROW® team plans to expand gradually across Student Affairs, allowing departments to thoughtfully integrate reflective conversations into existing workflows.

Currently, about 180 young professionals participate in the program. LoboGROW® centers on four guiding questions that prompt students to examine how their work connects to academic learning, transferable skills, and long-term goals.

"It sounds simple, but those four questions open up real conversations about learning and growth," said Beverly Bracker, director of UNM Career Services.

Before the semester began, supervisors attended a kickoff training and received a new supervisor handbook, complete with follow-up prompts and strategies for deepening reflection. The updated approach provides flexibility, allowing larger units such as Recreational Services to facilitate group discussions, while smaller units adapt conversations to individual schedules.

For Dennis Ray Armijo, director of the Student Union Building—one of UNM's largest student employing units—the language supervisors use plays a critical role in shaping student identity. His team intentionally avoids the term "student employees."

"We refer to them as young professionals—you get such a better return from them," Armijo said.

That shift reinforces one of LoboGROW®'s central goals: encouraging students to view their jobs as opportunities for professional development. Reflective conversations often help participants reframe learning beyond the classroom and build confidence in their abilities.

"LoboGROW® boosted my confidence and helped me realize that no matter the position, showing a willingness and readiness to learn is what matters most," said Darrian Smith, a junior majoring in journalism and mass communications.

Alex Wright, a young professional in the Student Union Building, said her first LoboGROW® conversation as a sophomore helped her see the real-world relevance of her coursework.

"I was able to see how entry-level courses supported my professional development just as much as upper-level courses," Wright said. She later recognized that those competencies aligned closely with UNM's leadership framework. "That connection gave my coursework and student job far more meaning than I ever expected. I felt supported in every aspect of my student life."

"Reflective practice gives students the language employers want to hear," Bracker said.

That sense of respect and support lies at the heart of LoboGROW®. When students feel trusted, they begin to see themselves as emerging leaders with valuable skills. Through guided conversations each semester, students learn to translate daily responsibilities—answering questions, resolving conflicts, managing projects—into core professional competencies, boosting confidence in interviews, resumés, and future opportunities. For Reyn Cook, a first-year biology major working at AASS, the impact has been both personal and professional.

Supervisors are already seeing tangible results, with students taking more initiative and seeking new learning opportunities. One student, after discussing skill-building during a LoboGROW® conversation, asked to learn Excel and later helped analyze departmental data.

As LoboGROW® continues to expand, the program plans to elevate additional student voices across campus—highlighting how guided reflection helps young professionals build confidence, develop leadership skills, and prepare for life after graduation.



photo credit: Mark Sanchez

LoboGROW®

4 Guiding Reflection Questions

1. How does your job connect to your academics?
2. What are you learning at work that helps you in class?
3. What are you learning in class that you apply on the job?
4. How will the skills you're gaining support your future career?

“I’ve become a resource for my peers—someone they can approach with questions. This experience connects directly to the career I want to pursue, where being knowledgeable and able to support others is essential.”

Reyn Cook
First Year Biology student

Not a Straight Path, but an Upward Trajectory

By Kim Delker

When Emily Sanders was in high school, she didn't envision that one day she would be receiving her bachelor's degree and preparing to embark on her Ph.D. journey. But flash forward to 2026, and that is exactly what Sanders, a McNair Scholar at UNM, is doing. For the psychology major, the path to where she is now is not a straight one, nor a traditional one.

Sanders is from Carlsbad, N.M., and suffered a variety of hardships early in life. In addition to losing her father when she was a young adult, her journey was made more difficult by her autism and severe dyslexia. Those difficulties played a big role in her dropping out of high school at 16 after trying two different high schools, then holding a series of jobs, before her natural-born curiosity got the best of her.

She earned her GED, then during the pandemic started taking various classes—on popular media, literacy and research. She first took classes at CNM for two years, then made the leap to UNM, which she admits was “pretty scary.”

“UNM was so big,” she said. “I remember feeling dumb in my research methods class.” UNM staff helped her during the transition. She was encouraged to apply for scholarships, including the Ronald E. McNair Scholars Program, a federally funded program offering high-achieving undergraduate students faculty-mentored research opportunities, community support, travel, a stipend, and specialized programming about research, application support, and the rigors of graduate school. She applied, received it, but didn't know much about it.

“I accidentally applied. They told me, ‘Let's do an interview.’ I wouldn't have applied if I knew at the time what it was!”

**“With research, I can be part of the conversation.
If I have a question, I can answer it.”**

McNair opened the world of graduate school and research to her, which changed her plans—and her life. “That was one of the greatest accidents. It's been really amazing and crucial to my success.” Sanders feels that becoming a researcher is a perfect fit for her.

She has been working with Sarah Ericson, associate professor in the Department of Psychology, on body image in adolescents and internalized weight bias with a Hispanic population. She will be studying racial discrimination and weight bias in graduate school.

The McNair community at UNM and nationwide provided her with support and education that has made her feel more confident all around.

“It's really amazing,” Sanders said. “There are monthly seminars on topics like research and applying to graduate school. It's made me feel competent going on interviews for graduate programs.” Sanders also worked as a teaching assistant, gaining experience and being able to lift up other scholars.

She has been accepted to the Ph.D. program at the University of Alabama, with a full ride, beginning in fall 2026. She credits her family's support as she navigates college as a first-generation student. Her brother lives in Colorado, and her mother is in Carlsbad. “My mother is the most supportive person in the world,” she said.



photo credit: Liz Lopez Photography

Nusenda Center for Financial Capability Enters Its Next Chapter



photo credit: Megan Borders

By Dorene DiNaro

With the addition of Nusenda to its name, the Center for Financial Capability (CFC) has entered a new chapter—marked by expanded support, a newly renovated dedicated space, and continued alignment with the Division of Student Affairs' Innovating the Student Experience Strategic Plan. That evolution was highlighted by the unveiling of the Center's new space during a grand opening on Monday, June 15. Since its launch in fall 2018, the Center has steadily

broadened its services and impact across campus. "The focus has always been improving financial literacy for the broader New Mexico community and assisting students with these critical life skills," said Michael Martinez, program manager for CFC.

That commitment to student well-being is reflected in the Center's growth. What began with one student employee has expanded to a team of three, along with a part-time social worker and a marketing assistant. The recent renaming also signals increased investment in the Center's mission.

"This increased award allows for full-time support in my position," Martinez said, adding that Nusenda's strong reputation brings "additional financial credibility" to the Center's work. That support has already made an impact, funding the long-awaited renovation that provides CFC with its first dedicated space within the Dean of Students Office.

"We've never had a dedicated space," said Greg Golden, associate dean of students. "Now we have an area where students can focus on their financial well-being here on campus."

While students can look forward to a new location and enhanced outreach efforts, Martinez emphasized that the Center's core mission remains unchanged. "It's the same great service that they've always received," he said. "A change in name, but not in quality."

Create a Legacy for the Student Experience

» Dr. Kim Kloeppel (BA '80, MPA '05, PhD '11) ◀

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– Dr. Kim Kloeppel

Retired Associate Director

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UNM Division of Student Affairs
Office of the Vice President
Scholes Hall, Suite 229, MSC05 3410
1 University of New Mexico
Albuquerque, NM 87131

✉ vpsa@unm.edu

🌐 studentaffairs.unm.edu

📞 505.277.0952