



THE UNIVERSITY of  
NEW MEXICO

Office of the Provost



### WEDNESDAY COMMUNIQUÉ

**February 11, 2015**

In thinking about the wider context of higher education today, I am increasingly convinced that we have to strategically balance (1) a push toward innovative approaches to advancing our academic mission, while (2) preserving and reinforcing the best practices that have underwritten the academic mission of American research universities for decades. For all those involved in the governance of the university at all levels, from departmental self-governance to coordination of state-wide higher education initiatives, one key task in coming months will be sifting all the ideas for innovation in higher education in order to discern which ones will best allow us to balance these two complementary needs. Failure to innovate may condemn universities to gradual marginalization and eventual mediocrity; unwise innovation may undermine the very things that make research universities vital institutions contributing to the common good of society. On the other hand, the right balance pursued vigorously holds promise to position UNM for years to come as a center of excellence in producing the new knowledge and the new graduates needed for emerging national and global realities.

To get the balance right, we will sometimes need to be open to questioning long-held assumptions. Some are raising questions about core elements of the existing model of higher education, under the rubric of the "open loop university," and by questioning the purpose and practices of academicians.

**Open Loop University:** What do you think universities will look like in 2025? While many of our faculty might be retired by then, 10 years from now, at least half will be continuing their teaching and research. If current trends continue, we will have many more non-traditional students, and the financial model of the public university will probably be under further stress given the increase in the [higher education price index](#).

How about in 50 or more years? At Stanford University, the [Open Loop University](#) initiative looks back from the year 2100. It states that "around 2015, it became clear that only about a quarter of college graduates worked in a field that was directly related to their college major — either students weren't choosing well, or the majors themselves did not correspond to the new kinds of professions emerging. The advent of online learning showed a taste of the vast hunger for knowledge and skills from unexpected populations at various times over the course of their lives." Looking back from the future (the year 2100), here is what they believe: "Students applied when they were ready — some earlier, and some later than age 17. Upon enrollment, students received six years of access to residential learning opportunities to distribute across their lives as they saw fit. Many students chose to concentrate their on-campus stint for a few years on the earlier side, as the social process of maturation within a peer group remained important. Others, freed from social stigma, attached to taking gap years or years "off" during their educations. They dove enthusiastically into applied environments—doing internships and in-country language immersion, reporting back that these experiences sharpened their desire for and ability to select majors and classes that were relevant. Faculty began to report a generally higher level of intellectual engagement from students in their introductory and advanced courses."

**Brick Makers or Builders:** A [recent article](#) in the Chronicle of Higher Education reminds us that academicians must re-engage in the public debates around science and policy. The article points back to a [1963 letter](#) in Science magazine where the author states that "academic scholarship had become fixated on generating lots of pieces of knowledge — bricks—and was far less concerned with putting them together into a cohesive whole. In time, he said, brick-making had become an end in itself."

Where do you see American research universities in 50 years? Is the Open Loop University the solution to issues with our current model of higher education? What other or better ideas might best shape our future? Are we, faculty researchers, making more bricks than buildings? I invite the campus community to join me in an ongoing dialogue about these and other debates and potential innovations, with an eye toward reinvigorating UNM and its academic mission.

Chaouki Abdallah

Provost & Executive Vice President for Academic Affairs

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