



# Academic Dispatch

May 29, 2020

## A Smile

Today a colleague sent me an article from The New Yorker, “Why Remote Work is So Hard — and How It Can Be Fixed,” by Cal Newport. I was struck by this observation, “An e-mail that reads ‘Job well done!’ is not the same as a smile.” Newport goes on to say, “these subtle affirmations of our humanity ... were easy to overlook, until we abruptly found ourselves deprived of them.” Even though we have learned to do many things online through zoom and email, these mediated experiences cannot replace the benefits that come to us, as physical beings, from *presence*.

There are many experiences critical to learners that require certain kinds of presence. Some are easy to see, such as those requiring access to specific special facilities like laboratories or maker spaces. Others are slightly more subtle, such as the learning that comes within a string quartet, where feeling the presence and actions of the other members is key to the artistic expression. Even more nuanced, yet incredibly important, is the development and transmission of culture. The love and devotion of students, staff, and faculty to UNM, for example, comes from the engagement and interaction of all these individuals with each other and with the physical campus environment. And the evolution of an understanding of the unique culture of a discipline — be it Law, or American Studies, or Mechanical Engineering — happens inside informal interstitial spaces as much as in formal educational venues. My parents transmitted values to me as much by being with me, being observed by me, as they did by instructing me. And so it is with the faculty and staff of a university. We transmit the values of educational and disciplinary cultures, as much as we transmit information and technique. Before us now lies the daunting task of sharing university cultures — affirming humanity through engagement in learning, creation, and inquiry — when we can no longer take presence for granted.

UNM occupies a special place. Unlike many research-intensive universities, UNM provides an accessible education to many, rather than just the privileged. We support many students who have been denied opportunity prior to joining UNM, and, through education, we provide a ladder of social mobility, benefitting both them as individuals and our state and world. Research has shown for all students that engagement is the secret to success. Every active engagement measure taken by staff and faculty provides a rung on the ladder that underserved students can successfully climb toward graduation.

As we plan for the fall term, we have asked chairs to work with their faculty and to organize each of their courses across a palette of five pedagogical categories — ranging from small in-person sections, to hybrid delivery, to remote modalities — in order to provide a balance of the best social distancing protocols with engagement for students. No matter which of these modalities we select, our education programs still need to engage our learners in the cultures of UNM, of their disciplines, and of success. Even if all the courses in a particular program are designed as remote instruction, the program must build the student engagement that, in easier times, occurs in those heart-to-hearts in the hall, in those chats before class, and when a student

receives a supporting smile.

### **Job Well Done and the Road Ahead**

Tomorrow, on Saturday May 30, thanks to the hard work of UNM staff, faculty and students, our graduating class of 2020 will celebrate via a virtual ceremony at [graduation.unm.edu](https://graduation.unm.edu). This is not the graduation we expected or wished for, but it's the right thing to do at our current moment. We hope that we will be able to celebrate this class in person sometime soon. As we welcome our next class in the fall, we will bring students into a burgeoning UNM culture of mutual responsibility for community health. For main campus, Fall term starts on August 17 and runs through December 12, 2020. To protect the health of the UNM community from travel exposure, UNM is considering foregoing the traditional fall break of a four-day weekend in October (October 8-12). Instead, we would have two separate weekdays off: Wednesday, October 7 and Tuesday, November 3 (Election day). In addition, classes after Thanksgiving could then continue entirely remotely, so that after November 24, all classes, including classes that were conducted face-to-face or hybrid from weeks 1-15, would finish the term remotely for the sixteenth and seventeenth weeks, comprising the last week of instruction and exam week, from November 30 to December 11, 2020. These changes would limit long travel breaks that might return newly infected individuals to campus, and better position us should a seasonal return occur in November or December. Branches and some particular professional disciplines would have variations on this schedule, according to their unique needs.

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