

Academic Dispatch

Communication from the Office of Academic Affairs



University Communication and Marketing photo

On Feb. 28, 2020, President Stokes and a group of students donned red shirts to mark Lobo Day, UNM's birthday celebration. Within weeks, UNM would look very different.

March 6, 2025

Communication continuity during rapid change

March marks the beginning of meteorological spring, UNM Spring Break, the start of daylight-saving time, and warmer, albeit windy, weather that unleashes allergies for those who tend to suffer. In general, this is a month for renewal and looking forward with optimism.

But just five years ago, March 2020 marked something more: the beginning of the pandemic precipitated by what we then referred to as a “novel coronavirus,” now commonly known as COVID-19. The first reports about a mysterious virus in China started trickling out in late 2019, and soon the virus had made its way to the U.S. Pacific Northwest and then eventually to New Mexico.

The initial communication to the Lobo community about this emerging threat was sent Jan. 31, 2020, and several updates followed. Then, on March 13, President Stokes sent an all-campus message that beginning March 17, the UNM campus would be functioning on “limited operations,” with most staff and faculty sent home to work remotely, and that classes would pause for the week following spring break to allow us time to move to remote learning. Unfortunately, on that same day, I sent out a message that said some classes would resume in a remote format immediately following spring break. Oops. (And my fault.)

Communicating in a crisis is a delicate balance between communicating quickly, communicating usefully, and communicating consistently. We managed quick on that day, perhaps we managed useful, but we certainly did not communicate consistently. Over these years, we have improved our ability to coordinate our institutional communications. But this can take time, which leads some of our community — reasonably eager for updates and information — to wonder “What’s going on?”

Fast forward to this year and our current uncertain situation. On Feb. 3, 2025, UNM launched a website focused on [Updates and Provisional Guidance related to 2025 Federal Executive Actions](#). The initial content was focused on two matters about which the UNM community was particularly vexed: the potential impact of immigration enforcement actions and the impact on research of a federal funding pause. Since then, we have been working in a rapidly changing environment of shifting federal policies, priorities, and actions, as well as pulling together both a general response philosophy and providing responses for specific cases. These matters are fully documented on the website, and I encourage you to check out this updated material.

I've been sharing these updates with deans, department chairs, and the Faculty Senate, and will continue to do so. Another upcoming venue is the [State of UNM Research address](#), which will be held March 12. Rather than featuring only an address by Vice President for Research Ellen Fisher, we will include a panel comprised of Vice President Fisher, Vice President for Health Sciences Research Hengameh Raissy, Executive Vice President for Health Sciences Mike Richards, and myself.

A key overarching principle in our response is this: We will only respond to specific and actionable federal requirements or actions. We will avoid making rapid changes to University policies and programs where not clearly warranted. In many cases, no particular action is warranted. Our goal is to respond prudently, and not too hastily. We will avoid adding to the uncertainty created by too much rapid change.

We are fast approaching the anniversary of COVID in New Mexico — it was March 11, 2020, when the first four cases were reported to the New Mexico Department of Health. This launched us into an incredibly stressful time of uncertainty, rapid change, and challenges to deeply held assumptions and beliefs. While there are stark differences between our situation five years ago and the one we face in today, the last several weeks have been stressful for many on campus as new federal guidelines presage challenges to our mission. But New Mexico is special – we are a state in which strength comes from family and community. This is a time to lean into that strength.

The Pack's Got Your Back

UNM is a community where we look out for each other. The latest example is a new UNM initiative called [The Pack's Got Your Back](#). Look for us on March 7, 11, and 12 at various locations on both sides of Lomas. Thanks to a generous donation from UNM Food, we will be distributing healthy snacks and positive sentiments, just a small token to remind campus that although we may not have all the answers, as Lobos, we will face changes and challenges together with kindness, optimism, and the shared history that reminds us that when we stand together, nothing can stop us.



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