

Academic Dispatch

Communication from the Office of Academic Affairs

May 15, 2025

Pomp and circumstance and reforming minds

There is ample debate of late about the function of universities in our society. From the founding notion in 1636 of creating an educated clergy, to “directing the train of thought” as the Yale report of 1828 said, to the teaching of skills needed to pursue a career. But today universities are so much more. They are protectors, creators, and disseminators of knowledge and cultural creations. They are powerful economic engines, where ideas begin in a classroom, a lab, or in the field, and then become the next technology or cure that spawns businesses and changes lives. They are centers of healing where diseases are cured and lives are saved. Universities make lives more comfortable and productive, keep us healthy, help us connect with each other, and in the case of UNM, [Advance New Mexico](#).



The power of postsecondary education has many benefits that are not tangible in dollars and cents, but reside rather in personal transformation. The pursuit of knowledge, whether that is knowledge gained through a course in French literature, Roman civilization, the study of C* algebras, or a study of Nietzsche’s philosophical thought, provides the “furniture of the mind” that allows us to develop the “discipline” of the mind, as the Yale report would put it. Higher education rewires our brains to think critically and deeply and expand our own capacity for creativity.



Dynamic duo: Anjali Mulchandani and Kamryn Zachek

This week, [more than 3,600 students from the UNM campuses will be ceremonially recognized for completing their degree requirements](#). When they march across the stage at University Arena and are handed a diploma cover (the real thing of course arrives in the mail a month or so later) in front of thousands of friends and family, it is a moment to be cherished. Commencement is a milestone to be proud of, a beginning as graduates “commence” the next phase of their lives. But aside from attending enough lectures, labs, and satisfactorily completing all the requirements to earn sufficient credits for a degree, what does one take away from the college experience? Is it really just a piece of paper that allows you to put a couple of lines on your résumé or an entry in LinkedIn?

Those of us who have committed our careers to higher education of course hope that it is much more than that. The very experience of being on a campus, with fellow learners from all areas of the world and backgrounds, is an education in itself. And the relationships you build — with professors, graduate assistants, classmates, roommates, teammates — have lasting impacts that cannot be measured through a grade posted in Canvas.

Learning is a social event. The people with whom you connect challenge your thinking and create the desirable difficulties which stimulate the development of your mind. [One of the 2,172 bachelor's degrees to be awarded on Saturday will be to Kamryn Zachek](#), an economics and philosophy student who found a mentor in the field of civil engineering. Thanks to her early involvement in the Grand Challenges Undergraduate Water and Climate Science Communication Fellowship, she met Assistant Professor Anjali Mulchandani. Zachek's dedication and interest in undergraduate research left an impression on Mulchandani, so she hired Zachek as the undergraduate lead for the fellowship. They continued to work together over the next three years. Now, Zachek will be receiving her bachelor's degree and pursuing a law degree, but that powerful mentoring relationship will be something they will both remember for the rest of their lives.

"I was a supremely unconfident freshman student, and I attribute much of my increases in self-confidence over the last three years to Anjali's mentorship," Zachek said. "She saw my potential and pushed me to become the student/researcher that I am today. I remember thinking, if she could believe in me, then I could believe in me."

This is a powerful reminder of the impact that educators have on students — as role models, teachers, and mentors. So while I am proud of our students for their accomplishments and eager to see their future impact, I am equally grateful to our faculty and staff who do so much to support our students and to Advance New Mexico.

New leader selected for Center for Teaching and Learning

The art and science of teaching is central to everything we do at UNM, and good teaching practices are essential to ensure that our students learn, grow, and ultimately develop the discipline of the mind that enriches their careers and lives. Making sure our dedicated Center for Teaching and Learning has strong, innovative leadership is extremely important to this effort. That is why I am thrilled to announce that after a national search, [we have selected a new executive director for CTL](#). Erin Shortlidge, an associate professor of biology and biology education and interim vice provost for student success at Portland State University, will bring to UNM a unique set of skillsets (including her time as a professional dancer!). She will be transitioning into the role beginning in August. Welcome to UNM, Dr. Shortlidge!



'Changing the culture and mindset of UNM': The impact of Kiyoko Simmons



As we say hello to a new member of the Lobo family, we also are bidding farewell to a very valued member of our UNM community, [who is retiring June 1](#). Many of you have had the pleasure of working with Dr. Kiyoko Simmons over her two decades here. As director of the Center for Academic Excellence and Leadership Development (CAELD), Dr. Simmons has worked steadily to increase the numbers of students who apply for and receive nationally competitive scholarships, such as Fulbright, Truman, Rhodes, Marshall, Goldwater, Udall, and Churchill. This work has put UNM on the map as an institution that generates and attracts the highest-achieving students, who then become further enriched through their experiences in our programs. Under her watch, Dr. Simmons saw our first Churchill Scholar, and our first Rhodes Scholar since 2001. By listening to each student's experiences and

ideas, she prioritized human connection and conveyed to students a sense that, yes, even UNM students can compete on this most prestigious stage. Thank you, Kiyoko, for helping our incredible students believe in themselves, and for all you have done for the academic mission at UNM. I am proud to count you among my colleagues.

And as I sign off this spring 2025 semester, I thank you all for the amazing work you do. The uncertainty and rapid change that has been swirling around us the last few months has tested our patience and heaped even more work on your overflowing plates. I appreciate all of the support, feedback, and ideas I have received from all of you as we navigate in this unprecedented time. Take care of yourselves, and have a restful summer.

James Paul Holloway

Provost and Executive Vice President for Academic Affairs

Professor of Nuclear Engineering



Comments or questions? Contact us at academicdispatch@unm.edu