

August 2025

Issue 1



OFFICE OF  
ACADEMIC AFFAIRS

# Querencia at UNM

THE PROVOST'S PERSPECTIVE FROM THE HEART OF UNM

## Welcome to a new perspective



Welcome to *Querencia at UNM*, a new monthly communication from the Office of Academic Affairs. Querencia is a Spanish word that means a place of belonging and deep roots. That sentiment — which is at the heart of both UNM and the state of New Mexico — is one I seek to foster as we come together to meet the challenges we encounter with solutions that honor our place, our people, and our shared path.

Each month, this publication will showcase a diverse range of topics — celebrating the achievements of our staff, faculty, and students, while also spotlighting initiatives within Academic Affairs. From our ongoing commitment to student success to efforts that support faculty wellbeing, my goal is to keep you informed and inspired by the impactful work happening across our campus.

However, in this first edition, I would like to take a slightly different focus and devote some time to our recent change in leadership in Academic Affairs. I

became interim provost and executive vice president for academic affairs at the beginning of July, after the departure of James Holloway, who dedicated six years to the role and is now making his mark as the 19th president of the University of Toledo.

Some of you know me and have worked with me in various capacities over the years, but for many in the UNM community, I am a new face and name. For those who don't know my story, I would like to share it, because I think it is an important part of why I am passionate about UNM.

I am a proud “Norteña” from Española, N.M., born one of eight children. I am a double Lobo alumna, earning both my bachelor's and master's degrees from UNM. At UNM, I have been in many roles, including as a work-study student and a staff employee. I worked as a speech-language pathologist in the Department of Speech and Hearing Sciences, as well as a clinical supervisor and director of clinical services. I have served in a variety of capacities — from student to staffer to faculty — at this great university, and that has provided me with a unique perspective.

In 1994, I left New Mexico to earn my Ph.D. from the University of Washington. I returned to my native state in 1999, where I became an assistant professor in the Department of Speech and Hearing Sciences, embarking on my academic career as a researcher in the area of bilingualism in Spanish/English-speaking preschoolers. One of my proudest accomplishments was helping to develop a collaborative program in bilingual speech-language pathology with New Mexico State University.

As I moved my way up the ranks as a professor, I became department chair, then in 2018, made the leap to Scholes Hall, where I became senior vice provost, a role I enjoyed and took great pride in. I held that position until July of this year, when I was honored to be appointed as interim provost.

The nonstop pace, the various demands and requests, and the ever-shifting landscape in higher education is undoubtedly challenging to navigate. There are early mornings, late nights, events, and responsibilities — planned and unplanned — where I must rely on the counsel and expertise of countless partners inside and outside the university. In a role like this, there is very little down time, as so many people are counting on you and your ability to make prudent and timely decisions.

I often am told, “You work so hard.” But for me, this is a labor of love. What inspires me to work so hard for this institution? The fact is that UNM changed the trajectory of my and my family’s life. I know first hand the importance of this institution to our students, faculty, staff, and to the broader community. I am proud to have received my degrees from here, proud to serve on the staff and faculty, and very honored and invigorated to serve as interim provost, a role that can have lasting, positive impacts on this institution I love.

During the next few weeks, I and members of my leadership team will be visiting schools, colleges, and our four branch campuses to listen, learn, and strengthen the collaboration with Academic Affairs. Insights gained from these meetings will be used to shape our goals for the 2025-26 academic year.

I am excited to embark on these goals and ideas, but I am not unaware of the fact that higher education — as well as UNM specifically — faces real challenges. To meet these challenges, we need to rely upon the assets of our shared community — our innovation, persistence, resilience, collaboration, and communication. Following these guiding principles, I am confident we can strengthen UNM — now and for the future.

I look forward to working with all of you to address today’s challenges and strengthen the path forward.

**Barbara Rodriguez**

**Interim Provost and Executive Vice President for Academic Affairs**

## About the name ...

At UNM, our strength comes from a deep connection to place, people, and purpose. In New Mexico, the word *querencia* describes more than a location. It is the spot where one feels most at home, the source of one’s strength, and the place from which we draw our deepest sense of belonging.

By naming this monthly communication *Querencia at UNM*, I hope to reflect that spirit — to honor our shared roots in this Land of Enchantment while celebrating the rich tapestry of voices, experiences, and contributions that make our university community thrive. My goal is to use this space to share updates, reflections, and stories that connect us, strengthen us, and remind us of the community we are building together.



**I would like to recognize** how our Lobo community came together in response to the events of July 25. In particular, I commend the staff of New Student Orientation; Counseling, Assistance and Referral Services (CARS); the College Enrichment Program; the Student Health and Counseling Center; the Parking and Transportation Center, and the many others from a variety of offices around campus who demonstrated the Lobo spirit in a stressful and unexpected situation.



## Faculty in Focus: Carl Willis

After years in the making, **Carl Willis, a professor of practice in the Department of Nuclear Engineering**, finally got his Experience Nuclear Engineering camp for high-schoolers off the ground this summer. The residential camp, held on campus July 20-26, attracted 19 students from around the country, with an agenda that included operating UNM's nuclear reactor (under strict authorized supervision, of course). The events of July 25, however, meant a deviation from schedule.

As students passed the hours stationed in their Laguna dorm rooms, getting food delivered while playing games and watching movies, Willis was stationed in his office in the nuclear reactor

building, texting with both students and concerned parents. Despite the disruption in schedule, Willis was able to pivot later that afternoon, using UNM vans to transport students off campus to a field trip to the Sandia crest instead of the previously scheduled second chance to operate the nuclear reactor. On July 26, the closing event took place on campus as planned, where families attended student presentations.

Through it all, Willis maintained a cool head (we wouldn't expect anything less from UNM's chief nuclear reactor supervisor), but admits that he has a "familial connection to this group" of campers. "When I think back on my formative years, it's not always the details of the events I remember, but who took care of me," he said. Despite the difficult circumstances, Willis said he feels good about the educational robustness of the camp, including being able to send each camper home with a scintillation detector so they can explore ionizing radiation on their own.

**New Student Orientation (NSO)**, which involves onboarding thousands of first-year students each year, requires an enormous amount of coordination and hard work under normal circumstances. But when events require a change of course, as they did on July 25, it means team members must go above and beyond. Two of the student volunteers involved in NSO that day did just that: **Brianna (Bri) Joseph**, a junior majoring in architecture with a concentration in design studies and a minor in management; and **Alberto (Berto) Castro Mendoza**, a junior majoring in exercise science.

"They each played a key role by organizing how food would get distributed to the students while we were in our shelter in place," said José Villar, director of the College Enrichment and Outreach Programs. "In a safe and timely manner, they were able to escort students (five rooms at a time) to get them some breakfast in the Hokona Cellar and then back to their rooms. They did this at least 30 times!"

Mendoza, from El Paso, Texas, works for the College Enrichment Program as a peer-learning facilitator. His roles with NSO that day included working with other leaders to coordinate food delivery for students in their dorms during the lockdown and taking groups of students back to the Welcome Center to reunite them with their families.

"The opportunity to make incoming students feel more excited and comfortable arriving on campus is what makes New Student Orientation so special, because by doing so we can help an entire class of students feel connected to the University and hit the ground running once they begin their semester at UNM," he said.

## Student Spotlight



Alberto Castro  
Mendoza



Brianna Joseph

Joseph, who is from St. Thomas, U.S. Virgin Islands, has been involved as with NSO the last two summers, where she was incoming students' first contact with UNM. "It was my job to get them comfortable with this campus and to also guide and educate them on some of the things UNM has to offer them."

On July 25, she worked to support students to make sure they felt a sense of calm and security while they waited for further instructions. "I didn't want anyone to panic, and I tried my best to show them that I was calm and there to help and support them through the event."

In addition to NSO, Mendoza and Joseph are both actively involved in leadership with several student organizations. Thanks to these amazing student leaders who help our students feel like they are part of a supportive community!



**As we all come back together** as a Lobo community, let's remember to keep safety at the forefront. [Campus Safety Week](#) will be Sept. 7-13, part of the National Campus Safety Awareness Month, which focuses on safety-related topics and events.

**And, the Office of Academic Affairs is now on social media!** Follow us on [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#), and [YouTube](#) to keep up with our latest news and announcements.

---

*Querencia at UNM* is a monthly publication of the Office of Academic Affairs.