

September 2025

Issue 2



OFFICE OF
ACADEMIC AFFAIRS

Querencia at UNM

THE PROVOST'S PERSPECTIVE FROM THE HEART OF UNM

Belonging and becoming: Mentorship as a path to querencia

In this edition of *Querencia at UNM*, we turn our attention to a theme that resonates deeply across our campus: mentoring. At its heart, mentoring is more than guidance — it's about creating spaces of belonging, trust, and growth. It's about helping others find their footing, their voice, and ultimately, their own querencia.



Students connect during the 2025 Welcome Back Days.

Querencia, as we've explored before, is that place where one feels most themselves — safe, empowered, and rooted. Mentoring, when done with intention and care, becomes a pathway to querencia. It's where students, faculty, and staff alike can discover not just what they are capable of, but where they truly belong.

At UNM, mentoring takes many forms — and its impact is felt across every corner of campus. This month, we celebrate three individuals whose commitment to mentoring embodies the spirit of querencia. Bailey Rutherford, an undergraduate student in the College of Education and Human Sciences, imparts positive change on the world through their chosen field of secondary education. Dr. Laura Haniford, professor

and chair in the Department of Teacher Education, Educational Leadership and Policy in the College of Education and Human Sciences, has spent decades mentoring emerging educators, fostering inclusive classrooms, and empowering future leaders. And Alejandro Mendiaz-Rivera, a dedicated staff member in El Centro de la Raza, is known for his powerful mentorship of students and colleagues alike — always ready with a listening ear and thoughtful guidance. Together, they remind us that mentoring is not just a role — it's a relationship rooted in trust, belonging, and the shared pursuit of growth.

This issue celebrates the mentors among us — those who offer not only their expertise but their presence. It also invites reflection: How do we cultivate querencia through our mentoring relationships? How do we ensure that every learner, every colleague, feels seen, supported, and inspired?

A proverb from the Ubuntu tradition reminds us that our individual growth is deeply rooted in our relationships. In mentoring, we find not only guidance, but a shared space of strength — a querencia — where both mentor and mentee flourish through connection:

"I am because we are." — African proverb (Ubuntu philosophy)

Let's continue building a campus where mentoring is not just a practice, but a culture — one that nurtures querencia in every corner.

Warmly,

Barbara Rodriguez
Interim Provost and Executive Vice President for Academic Affairs

Querencia in practice: Student, faculty, staff

Ask those who know **Bailey Rutherford**, and it's likely you'll get some variation of the same reaction: Amazing; involved in everything; superstar.

The College of Education and Human Sciences junior from Artesia, N.M., aspires to be a leader who imparts



positive change on the world through their chosen field of secondary education. Specifically, Rutherford is interested in teaching high school English and music, and ultimately continuing to research inclusive teacher education that incorporates culturally relevant pedagogy. "I love getting to teach people how to communicate, and I want to help people how to thrive who are struggling."

Although Rutherford is now known as a leader at UNM, getting there wasn't easy. They describe growing up as a queer and progressive person in the Permian Basin region "a struggle." But they credit their resilience and persistence to their mother, a UNM grad and educator, who is the inspiration for a career in education. And once at UNM, Rutherford has had the opportunity to spread their wings with numerous leadership opportunities, mentorship, and support.

During their time at UNM, Rutherford's list of activities has been extensive and ever-expanding. It is through these various activities that Rutherford has learned to grow and develop as a mentor. A not-exhaustive list includes being a New Student Orientation leader; Phi Iota Alpha fraternity vice president, secretary and treasurer; academic director of United Greek Council; MEChA student organization co-chair; RISE Lab undergraduate research assistant; a Golden Apple Scholar; and leadership positions in ASUNM beginning when they were a freshman, including finance chair, president pro tempore, and their current role as director of diversity, equity and inclusion. Additionally, Rutherford is a 2023 Chase Scholar and a recipient of the El Puente Research Fellowship. They have also had an inspiring study abroad experience in Austria that opened their eyes to the world.

Rutherford said UNM is a special place, not because it is perfect and without conflict, but because when difficulties arise, the community comes together to develop solutions. "When there are conversations to be had, we seek to understand what the community really needs and give everyone an opportunity to listen and be heard."

The idea of *querencia* and mentoring resonates strongly with Rutherford, running through everything they do at UNM. Without skipping a beat, when asked who at UNM have been their primary mentors, Rutherford named faculty member Laura Haniford and staff member Alejandro Mendiaz-Rivera.

Community keeps Rutherford going, as does music. In addition to teaching high school English, they would also like to teach music. They have enjoyed participating in band (they play clarinet) and choir (they are a tenor). And despite obstacles, Rutherford stays focused with a lot of hard work and a positive attitude. "I try to bring the smile when no one wants to smile."

Faculty in Focus

Laura Haniford



Rutherford's faculty mentor, **Laura Haniford**, is chair of the Department of Teacher Education, Educational Leadership and Policy in the College of Education and Human Sciences. For her, it was practically impossible to not meet Bailey Rutherford. Their boundless energy literally burst into her office one day, and she knew they were special from that first meeting.

"Bailey was going door to door, interested in finding a faculty mentor for undergraduate research as an El Puente Scholar. Their research proposal topic was understanding the impact of Yazzie/Martinez education equity case on future teachers." Haniford was able to help them connect with several faculty and others to help guide the research and also met with them twice a month all year to to work with them on their understanding of culturally sustaining pedagogy and on understanding the background of the Yazzie/Martinez lawsuits.

Haniford was immediately impressed with Rutherford's initiative in seeking out a research mentor — especially being an undergraduate. "They are the first undergraduate I've seen seek out a mentor for research in our department. Bailey has reinvigorated my passion for the work."

Haniford enjoys mentoring and helping students get around barriers they encounter. This allows students to focus on their interest of being future teachers and not mired in bureaucratic details.

Being a faculty member and a department chair have always been challenging and have only gotten more so in recent years. But what keeps educators and mentors like Haniford going is her passion and care for the institution and its students.

"I have a real love for this place, and I have a real love for our students," said Haniford, who is a native of Indiana but has been at UNM for 18 years and in the field for 30. "It matters *where* you teach." A place like UNM, where students come from a wide array of socioeconomic, geographic, cultural, and racial backgrounds requires a different kind of attention, she said.

For Haniford, *querencia* is a concept that she has thought about deeply (and, in fact, has co-authored papers on). Like Rutherford, *querencia* runs through everything she does, which is how she keeps her inspiration after so many years in the field. "You have to want to be a teacher," she said. "It's about seeing what students have — the differences in experiences and backgrounds — as assets, not deficits. And it's about listening to students, not just talking."

Alejandro Mendiaz-Rivera, associate director of El Centro de la Raza, is deeply rooted in UNM, working here for 18 years (including five as a student). He credits the community and mentorship he found at El Centro with seeing him through his undergraduate years as an undocumented and queer student.

Staff Shoutout



Alejandro Mendiaz-Rivera

“When you talk about *querencia* — El Centro *is* *querencia*.”

Last academic year, El Centro served 1,800 unique UNM students through their various services, he said.

He became connected to Rutherford when he was a coordinator of the El Puente Research Fellowship and was impressed by the passion that Rutherford kept in completing their research proposal, despite the fact that they learned that they would be leaving for Vienna for a study abroad experience in the summer.

“Scholars usually complete their proposal in the spring around the time of the Undergraduate Research Opportunity Conference. But instead of

dropping it when they knew they would be gone for a semester, Bailey worked extra hard to present it months early before they left. That showed a lot of commitment.”

Mendiaz-Rivera said that through various extracurricular activities, Rutherford is an advocate for those who need a voice. He has seen Rutherford grow during their time at UNM, from a student who was a mentee and is now passing that on by themselves becoming a mentor, in addition to a strong scholar and researcher. “Bailey is super involved and cares deeply. Getting to work with students like Bailey and knowing that I can contribute to someone’s success — that’s what clicked for me. That’s what brought me into higher education and what has kept me here.”

In addition to a commitment to education and mentoring and the stress of juggling it all, Mendiaz-Rivera loves that Rutherford always is happy to be right where they are. “It’s important to mention that Bailey is a very joyful person. In trying times, it’s important to center joy, and Bailey brings the joy.”

Take note

Brief news you need to know

As you can see in this edition, making sure each member of our community feels supported is important to us. That’s why **we are once again hosting a “Know Your Rights” presentation at 5:30 p.m. Oct. 14 in SUB Ballroom A.** It will be led by Amber Weeks and Olsi Vrapı, attorneys with the Vrapı Weeks law firm in Albuquerque. All students, faculty, and staff are welcome to attend, and no RSVP or registration is required. Along with our office, this is a joint initiative of the Graduate and Professional Student Association and United Academics of UNM (UA-UNM).

Data of course involves numbers, but it is also an essential part of telling our story and understanding how communities are connected. On Oct. 16-17, the Office of Institutional Analytics and the Office of Assessment/Academic Program Review is hosting the **Art & Science of Data: From Numbers to Narratives!** This event is open to the entire UNM community to help everyone from undergraduates to data experts learn how to find and use data (including data that UNM offers) to inform decision-making and advance student success.

At UNM, we are fortunate to have extraordinary faculty leaders whose work is deeply rooted in purpose and place. We are committed to cultivating even more by investing in leadership development. Tenured faculty on central campus who are interested in transforming their leadership effectiveness are invited to submit applications to the [WeR1 Leadership Innovation for Faculty Transformation \(LIFT\) program](#) for the 2026 calendar year. The Office of the Vice President for Research and the Office of Academic Affairs have partnered to expand and further develop this program. The deadline for applications is Oct. 16.

Accessibility is a foundational element in creating digital spaces where everyone can experience a true sense of belonging and empowerment — spaces that reflect their *querencia*. A new federal requirement will mandate that all public universities ensure their websites and mobile apps are fully accessible by April 2026. To make sure that UNM is prepared to meet this requirement, the University has created a new Digital Accessibility Committee — bringing together a wide variety of groups from both Albuquerque and the branch campuses — that meets regularly to discuss issues and implementation of this rule. Please see the recent [UNM Newsroom article](#) for additional important information on this effort.

Querencia at UNM is a monthly publication of the Office of Academic Affairs. Find previous issues at provost.unm.edu. Do you have ideas for content? Please send them to querencia1@unm.edu.