

October 2025

Issue 3



OFFICE OF
ACADEMIC AFFAIRS

Querencia at UNM

THE PROVOST'S PERSPECTIVE FROM THE HEART OF UNM

Pausing to reflect on how our community strengthens our spirit



October is a season of gathering – of harvest, reflection, and gratitude. At UNM, this time of year reminds us of the deep connections we cultivate through scholarship, teaching, service, and community engagement.

Our faculty and staff are at the heart of this work. Their commitment to community — through research, advising, teaching, and outreach — continues to shape the landscape of learning and belonging across New Mexico. One powerful example is Professor Moises Gonzales, this year's honoree for **UNM's Community Engaged Research Lecture**. His upcoming talk, *Querencia: Reciprocity through the Co-Production of Knowledge*, explores how traditional and land-based

communities embody resilience and how academic partnerships can honor and amplify that strength. His work exemplifies the kind of scholarship that grows from and gives back to the communities we serve.

Across campus, faculty are sowing seeds of impact. Sarita Cargas brings human rights to her work that illuminates the problem of food and housing insecurity. Cash Clifton's and Jake Greenberg's work with first-year students builds academic foundations and confidence, especially in math — often a barrier to success. Szu-Han Ho's creative work invites reflection on migration, memory, and justice, while Matthew Hurteau's ecological research connects climate science to forest stewardship and policy.

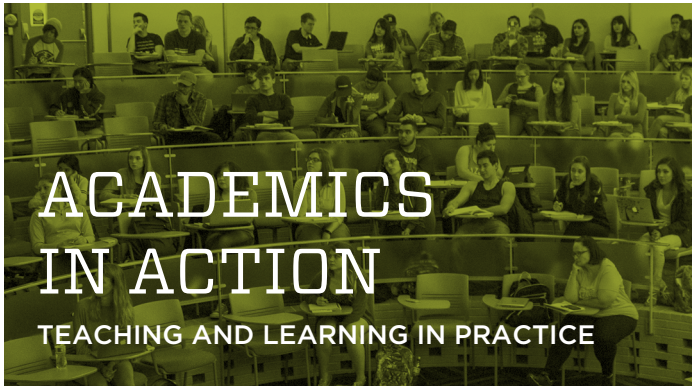
I'm reminded of my early days as a speech-language pathologist, visiting families in living rooms across New Mexico, working together to support their children's bilingual language development. In those intimate spaces, I learned that communication is not just about language — it's about connection. Each conversation, each shared goal, became a bridge of trust and understanding. Those experiences taught me that meaningful progress is rooted in relationships, and that our greatest harvests come from the communities we nurture and build together.

As we continue building community together at UNM, I am deeply grateful to collaborate with faculty, staff, and students whose dedication to community not only enriches our academic mission but also shapes the future we are creating — together. Attending events like the Predock Center opening, the ROTC Navy & Marine Corps Ball, and a spirited UNM Football game has brought me real joy — and more importantly, they've deepened my appreciation for the vibrant, multifaceted community we're all part of.

With gratitude,

Barbara Rodriguez

Interim Provost and Executive Vice President for Academic Affairs



Our faculty are working continuously to cultivate community through their research that reaches beyond the classroom and into the lives of those we serve. In this month's Academics in Action, we spotlight a few faculty members whose work exemplifies the power of scholarship and teaching in fostering belonging, resilience, and connection.

Sarita Cargas, associate professor in the Honors College, turned a simple question – Is there a problem with food and housing insecurity at UNM? – into a statewide movement. Her initial research in 2019 revealed significant unmet student needs prompting further data collection and culminating in the creation of the **Basic Needs Consortium**, a collaboration among higher education institutions in New Mexico.

Grounded in the belief that “people have a basic right to food and shelter,” Cargas emphasizes that basic needs insecurity is a major barrier to student success. The consortium partners with UNM Student Affairs, UNM Food Services, and various student and community groups to address these challenges.



In November, Cargas will present findings at the National Association of College Auxiliary Services conference alongside UNM colleagues Amanda Girard, director of dining and hospitality at UNM Food, and Alicia Solano, assistant vice president of campus business services. The presentation will highlight their partnership with Aramark and efforts to improve student support.

Szu-Han Ho, professor of art and ecology in the Department of Art, builds community through artistic expression rooted in her lived experience as a Taiwanese American. Her work explores political resistance and historical memory through performance, video, sound, and installation.



A UNM faculty member for 14 years, Ho is committed to making art accessible to all students. “Working with our students inspires me every day,” she said. “I hope to motivate them to think creatively and expansively on how to create connection with others.”

Born in Taiwan and raised in Texas, Ho deeply understands the concept of *querencia* and finds belonging in the UNM and New Mexico communities. She encourages students to pursue their passions and research interests in creating ambitious artworks.

“In a time when free expression is being questioned, I believe it is even more crucial to find and build community. Hope is essential.”



Matthew Hurteau, professor of biology, is dedicated to caring for the land through wildfire research. His team is developing models to predict fuel moisture – critical for prescribed burns and wildfire management – and improving reforestation strategies in severely burned areas by identifying where seedlings are most likely to survive.

“We are trying to understand how water moves between the soil, dead wood, and the atmosphere so that we can build a model to predict fuel moisture,” Hurteau said. “This will help with both prescribed burning and managing wildfires.”

“We have built a model and are conducting experiments to improve the model that land managers can use to identify the places where a planted seedling is most likely to survive. The idea of this work is that if we can get the survival rate higher, it will help compensate for the fact that we do not grow enough seedlings given all of our severely burned forest.”

This work is connected to the land, and to protecting our natural resources, which as a byproduct, protects community and culture.

“Everything we do is related to improving land management and conservation outcomes. We have amazing landscapes in New Mexico and, as someone who loves forests, I would like to see the mountains continue to be forested. In the end this work is really about better preparing us to live in a flammable world.”

Academic Communities: Fostering belonging from day one

Academic Communities at UNM is dedicated to helping first-year students build a sense of belonging and academic support. Through social and academic engagement, cultural connection, and close relationships with faculty and staff, the program lays a strong foundation for student success.



Jake Greenberg, Lecturer III of Foundational Math, combines teaching with mentorship and leadership, guiding 18 undergraduate research scholars. “My role is multifaceted,” he said. “By fostering collaboration, open communication, and mentorship, I aim to help students develop a strong sense of belonging at UNM, which ultimately supports their academic and personal growth beyond the university.”

An Albuquerque native, Greenberg values *querencia* and sees his work as contributing to New Mexico’s cultural and intellectual future. “Helping students develop confidence in their identity and abilities contributes to strengthening New Mexico’s unique cultural and intellectual landscape.”

Cash Clifton, director of Academic Communities and coordinator of Academic Foundations, oversees courses that support college readiness and connection. He emphasizes that success goes beyond academics. “Whether it’s joining a club or attending an event, students need to feel connected to campus.”



While academic success is important, Clifton encourages students to go a step further. “It doesn’t matter what the connection is — from the UNM Dungeons and Dragons Club to attending an athletic event — it’s important for students to do more than just attend class. One of the most important things we can do for student retention is help students connect to campus.”

Clifton emphasizes that Academic Communities’ home within University College is a key strength, offering a wide range of programs that support belonging. “I hope my work brings a diverse group of people together, whether they’re born and raised in New Mexico or a recent transplant. I’m proud to be a director in University College because it’s a place for students who feel like they ‘don’t belong’ to find a home.”



Research is a vital part of building connection in the Lobo community, and the annual **Research and Discovery Week**, sponsored by the Office of the Vice President for Research, puts a well-deserved spotlight on a diverse range of projects across our campus. From Nov. 5-14, the community is invited to participate in exhibitions, workshops, lectures, performances, and other activities. From discussions about developing solutions to substance abuse to how AI is changing our lives, I invite you to participate in this opportunity to connect with projects around our UNM landscape.

We are very proud of the vibrant community of **Distinguished Professors** in our ranks, which dates back over two decades. Every year, the Office of Academic Affairs and the Office of the Executive Vice President for Health Sciences, in consultation with the Faculty Senate Operations Committee, recognize exceptional faculty with the highest faculty title the University bestows. It’s time once again for departments to nominate candidates, which will be selected in late spring. Complete criteria, deadlines and a nomination form can be found **at this link**.

UNM is proud to host the **2026 Western Academic Leadership Forum (WICHE) Annual Meeting**, April 1-3, 2026, under the theme “Facing Complexity, Finding Solutions.” This event offers a unique opportunity to showcase the strengths of UNM and Albuquerque while fostering academic community. Campus leaders, researchers, and administrators are invited to submit session proposals addressing topics such as policy shifts, workforce needs, enrollment trends, and technological change. Proposals are due Nov. 21 and can be submitted online. More detailed information, including a registration link, will be available later this year. Please keep an eye on announcements at **provost.unm.edu** or our **Facebook** and **Instagram**.

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.