



Recognizing the graduate work that grows here

As March comes to a close, I've been reflecting on the role graduate education plays at The University of New Mexico and the many ways it connects our teaching, research, and service to the needs of the state. In *Querencia*, we often return to the idea of place and responsibility — what it means to belong here and to contribute meaningfully to our community. Graduate education is one of the clearest expressions of that commitment. Graduate students are deeply woven into the life of this university. They support teaching and learning, advance

research and creative work, and contribute to initiatives that address complex challenges facing New Mexico and beyond. Their work strengthens UNM every day — often quietly, sometimes behind the scenes, but always with purpose.



Opportunities ahead, grounded by Lobo spirit.

collaborative efforts underway through initiatives such as Grand Challenges. The conversation was a reminder that progress at a public research university is built over time, through collective effort and sustained commitment to people and place.

Graduate education also plays an important role in New Mexico's economic vitality. Through research, workforce preparation, and partnerships across sectors, graduate programs help develop expertise in areas critical to the state's future. Graduate students bring advanced skills and fresh ideas that support innovation, attract investment, and strengthen the talent pipeline that benefits communities across New Mexico.

Many of these connections were reflected in "Opportunities Ahead," UNM's 2026 State of the University address with President Garnett Stokes and University leadership, which offered an opportunity to reflect on UNM's ongoing work, including the importance of graduate students and the

What grounds all of this work is *querencia*. Our sense of place reminds us that graduate education is not just about credentials or individual achievement. It is about contributing knowledge, creativity, and care to the communities we serve, and about ensuring that UNM remains a strong, responsive public institution.

The rest of this issue highlights several graduate students whose work reflects these values and contributions. As we approach Graduate Student Appreciation Week, I invite you to take time to learn their stories and to join me in thanking graduate students across campus. Their dedication sustains our university and strengthens the work we do together — rooted in *querencia*, and connected to the people and place we call home.

With much appreciation,

Barbara Rodríguez

Interim Provost and Executive Vice President for Academic Affairs

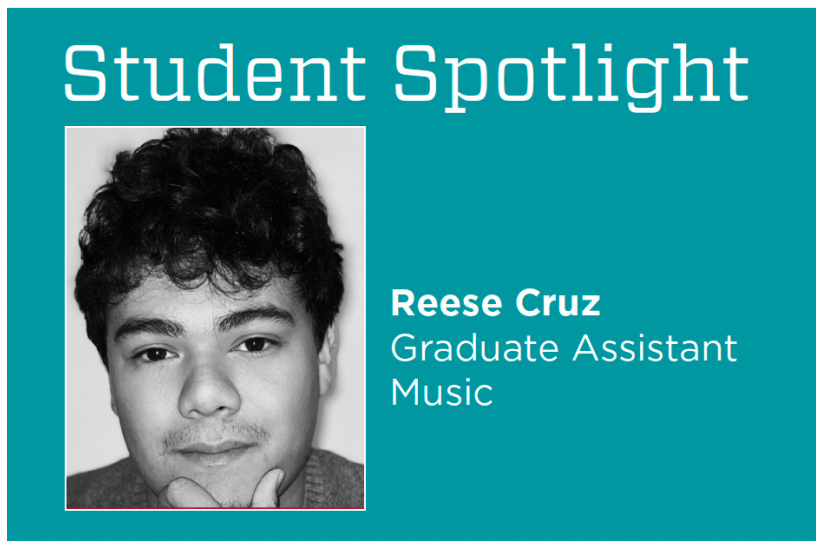
This month, we are dedicating our Student Spotlight to highlighting graduate assistants. Graduate assistantships are competitively awarded at the department level and typically require 10 to 20 hours of service per week. These student employees teach, mentor students, work on research projects, and assist in a wide variety of capacities while progressing on their graduate degrees. Let's meet a few of the graduate assistants who are students themselves, but are also able to inspire, teach, create, and discover.

What if you had the opportunity to do what you love most in life, perfect your skill, teach others to develop and grow in their passion, and get paid for it at the same time? Welcome to the life of **Reese Cruz**, a master's student and graduate assistant in the Department of Music with a concentration in vocal performance.

Cruz, who is from Highlands Ranch, Colo., earned his bachelor's degree in music from the University of Northern Colorado (UNC). While attending a vocal masterclass at UNC, he met Jamie Flora, an assistant professor in voice and opera, who persuaded Cruz to apply to UNM for graduate study.

For performance students, getting admitted to a program involves meeting academic qualifications as well as another bar: a live audition. "That's what makes it different," Cruz said. After passing the audition, he was accepted into the master's program in fall 2025.

As a graduate assistant, Cruz teaches two sections (about 30 students total) of voice classes focused on non-voice majors (instrumental majors). He also has a studio of two students for lessons once a week (he's even taught a faculty member in another department who was interested in improving their vocal abilities).

A teal-colored graphic with the text "Student Spotlight" in white at the top. Below the text is a black and white portrait of Reese Cruz, a young man with dark, curly hair, resting his chin on his hand. To the right of the portrait, the text "Reese Cruz" is written in white, followed by "Graduate Assistant" and "Music" on separate lines.

Cruz, a tenor, said that music has always been part of his life: “I’ve been singing ever since I was young.”

Although he loves a wide variety of music, he became enamored with classical music in high school. “There’s something so magical about its history.”

Even though he has performed and studied vocal for years, being a graduate assistant has been a useful experience. “I learn the basics of singing, really. It’s forced me to go back to the basics and help solve problems I may be having now.”

Cruz said being a graduate student at UNM has also educated him in areas beyond music. “I’ve met so many colleagues from other graduate programs that I never would have met. There’s such a strong community.”

This summer, he is looking forward to spending five weeks at the Taos Opera Institute, a competitive program for young artists that offers specialized lessons, concert performances, singing in a masterclass with guest artists, and attending a performance at the Santa Fe Opera.

After earning his degree, he plans to enter vocal competitions and become a professional operatic performer.

Student Spotlight



Vikas Buchemmavari
Research Assistant
Physics and Astronomy

India native **Vikas Buchemmavari** was always interested in physics, and thanks to UNM’s innovative program in quantum that prepared him to be a leader in the field, he’s receiving his Ph.D. this spring and immediately heading into a new job as a theoretical physicist at a company called Atom Computing in Berkeley, Calif.

Buchemmavari completed his undergraduate work in physics at IIT-Madras, working with his UNM advisor Ivan Deutsch’s previous Ph.D. student for his senior project before moving to UNM to pursue to his graduate degree. He left his home country to study at UNM because he heard great things about

the quantum physics program, in addition to the possibility of collaborating with national laboratories, which he was able to do.

“I have been very lucky to collaborate with excellent researchers at both Sandia and Los Alamos National Laboratory. In a recent project with Sandia, we addressed atom-loss errors, where the atoms held by optical tweezers might be lost over the course of a computational cycle.” More about that project can be found [here](#).

Buchemmavari’s Ph.D. dissertation is titled “Neutral Atom Quantum Computation,” where he explains “qubits (quantum versions of bits) are stored in individual atoms (similar to transistors) held in place and manipulated using focused laser beams known as optical tweezers. I am working on the theory of how to control them more efficiently and more effectively.”

His work as a research assistant was key in his success. “My main duty is to generate novel research. This includes keeping up with the state-of-the-art research by reading recent papers. ... We also discuss these topics with my advisor and other students and postdocs. When an idea presents promise, we consider it a ‘project’ and set goals and work toward achieving them and writing a paper about the results.”

He praises the Department of Physics and Astronomy, as well as the Center for Quantum Information and Control (CQuIC), for inspiring him both personally and professionally. “They made me feel a part of a real community. The leaders of the center also provide us guidance on how to give good research talks, how to network, and be a better part of the scientific community.”

Madeline Mendoza, an Albuquerque native who grew up in Rio Rancho, is from the Pueblo of Laguna and Ohkay Owingeh. As a teaching assistant in the Department of English, her position as a TA was a perfect fit, allowing her to grow as an educator that prioritizes Indigenous ways of knowing in the classroom.

“Because UNM is located on the ancestral homelands of Pueblo peoples, specifically, Sandia and Isleta Pueblos, I’ve had the opportunity to teach and learn alongside Indigenous students from surrounding the Pueblos and Nations across New Mexico. The knowledge and lived experiences they bring into the classroom are incredibly important, and they continue to inspire and motivate me as a Pueblo educator and scholar.”

She received her undergraduate degree from Austin College in Sherman, Texas, where she double majored in English and psychology.

For her, UNM was a natural choice for graduate school. “New Mexico is home for me. Both sides of my family have lived here for generations. After being away for my undergraduate studies and then in Canada for my master’s program, I knew it was time to return home.”

Her dissertation explores Indigenous futurisms as a pedagogical practice in the writing classroom, and her co-chairs are Sarah Hernandez and Bethany Davila.

As a TA, she has taught a variety of composition courses, and in her final year, she had the opportunity of teaching English 320 and Native American Studies 450, focusing on the rhetorics of Indigenous futurisms. Mendoza’s plan after earning her Ph.D. is to continue her career in academic and as book review editor for *Wicazo Sa Review*.

Student Spotlight



Madeline Mendoza
Teaching Assistant
English

Student Spotlight



Shewar Khan
Project Assistant
Global Education Office

Shewar Khan, a native of Pakistan, had never been to Albuquerque or New Mexico before becoming a Ph.D. student in linguistics at UNM in the spring of 2024. But just seeing the place she had been assigned to as a Fulbright student was persuasion enough for her to leave her home country.

“I fell in love with the picture of the Sandias as the backdrop,” she recalls of New Mexico. That love has only deepened since becoming a resident: “I love how geographically beautiful Albuquerque is.”

Although moving to the United States alone was a major life transition, Khan quickly found a supportive community as an international

student at the Global Education Office (GEO). “GEO helped me so much, so I wanted to give back,” she said of her decision to work there as a project assistant. “I was very happy to apply to GEO because, as an international student myself, I can share my experiences with others — and they relate to me.”

Shewar enjoys working at GEO, where there is a strong culture of support for students’ needs, a genuine sense of camaraderie, and a deep sensitivity toward the experiences of international students. She said the office is a vibrant and engaging workplace that brings together students from diverse international backgrounds, fostering a strong sense of community — one that she herself found as a student.

Her role at GEO has also provided her with valuable exposure to workplace discourse and professional interactional norms in the United States. In line with the goals of her Fulbright scholarship, it enables her to actively engage in cultural exchange while deepening her understanding of cross-cultural communication, pragmatics, and the subtle sociolinguistic dynamics that shape everyday interactions in multilingual and multicultural settings.

As a project assistant, her responsibilities include programming and communication for International Students and Scholar Services, as well as supporting international graduate student orientation and workshops.

Shewar earned her master’s degree in linguistics and teaching English as a Second Language from Beaconhouse National University, Lahore, Pakistan, and was awarded a Fulbright scholarship to pursue her doctoral studies in the United States. She said she greatly admires UNM for its “wide range of student support services, its vibrant campus life, and its uniquely inclusive environment — truly a world of its own within Albuquerque for international students.”

For her Ph.D. research, Khan studies sociolinguistics, with a particular focus on how groups construct meaning and negotiate identities, beliefs, and norms through discourse on social media and in everyday interaction. After earning her Ph.D., she plans to return to Pakistan and pursue a career in academia.

The U.S. Department of Justice’s digital accessibility regulations, which revise the Americans with Disabilities Act, are changing next month. [The Title II Regulation Final Rule](#) takes effect on April 24 and applies to digital materials used in public institutions. To assist teaching faculty and instructors, the [Center for Teaching and Learning \(CTL\)](#) has a suite of resources available for developing course content that meets digital accessibility standards and incorporates best practices to complement their pedagogy. Please visit CTL’s [digital accessibility website](#) for additional resources and guidance. For the latest on UNM’s Title II compliance efforts, see the [UNM Newsroom article](#).



Big Give is April 9: If you have not already, please mark your calendars for the UNM Big Give on April 9. Beginning at midnight for 24 hours, we have the opportunity to make powerful impacts to programs, colleges, schools and departments through donations both big and small. Each gift is powerful and contributes to our One University goal to support our Lobo community. [Learn more at the Big Give website and dashboard.](#)

Spring Teaching Conference and Teaching Excellence Awards: It’s not too late to sign up for this annual event April 8-9, organized by the Center for Teaching and Learning. [Learn more and register here.](#)

Welcome to WICHE: UNM is proud to be the host for the 2026 Western Academic Leadership Forum (WICHE) annual meeting taking place in Albuquerque from April 1-3. WICHE is a membership organization that serves as a collaborative network to exchange ideas and information, share resources and expertise among provosts, academic vice presidents, chief executives and chief academic officers at the 16 member institutions. Thank you to those who are attending, and special appreciation to those who are presenting. We look forward to this enriching and educational experience that allows us to showcase our research and campus to some of our peers in the region.