



HLC Accreditation Evidence Document

Title: The Academic Mission During the Transition

Office of Origin: Office of the Provost

Description: A 2018 communiqué from Interim Provost Richard L. Wood regarding the university's transition to the leadership of then-forthcoming president, Garnett Stokes. Included is an articulation of some major concerns the Office of Academic Affairs has for the future of the university, including building an equitable campus culture (pg. 3) and ensuring funding to support the Academic Mission (pg. 1).

Date: 2018

The Academic Mission During the Transition
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January 2018

This communiqué comes as we anticipate the arrival of President Garnett Stokes on March 1; such a time of transition brings real opportunities, but also a risk: A complex organization such as the University risks strategic drift and lack of focus if everyone simply awaits the arrival of new leadership. I here lay out for the campus community how the interim leadership in Academic Affairs are thinking about and strategically approaching our work for the academic mission, and some of the specific priorities on which we are focusing.

Three introductory notes: First, I write in the spirit with which Academic Affairs seeks to pursue its work, treating others in the University as intellectual colleagues in leading the academic mission. Thus, I invite responses and dialogue regarding the themes laid out here, both via the official decision-making structures of the university and via online feedback at this [portal](#). Second, few of the priorities discussed below are restricted to Academic Affairs or necessarily originate in this office; some have been brought forward by partners all over the university, who continue to play key roles in them. Third, the themes below are by no means the only strategic priorities of the university; rather, I focus on those that make sense to be pushing forward during this time of transition, knowing that other crucial priorities require engagement with long-term leadership as that comes into place under President Stokes.

Current Areas of Focus:

I. Envisioning the Future of UNM's Academic Mission:

Academic Affairs' central role lies in leading the university's academic mission, in collaboration with the faculty, chairs, and deans. This role is particularly challenging in this period of deep political polarization and profound fiscal challenges to public higher education—both of which threaten to distort university life and to undermine the academic mission via orientations that are at stark odds with the research-, teaching-, and service-oriented culture of higher education. Noting these dynamics is not to suggest that UNM has always embodied an ideal culture of higher education; we face ongoing challenges in living up to that ideal. But we will only make progress if we address the challenges of our fiscal and political context *precisely by being what research universities most fundamentally are*: centers of creativity, innovation, and disciplined learning, with an appetite to address new challenges while staying focused on evidence-based and value-based decisions that reflect our mission.

Past examples of that kind of work at UNM are many; here are three:

- Ten years ago, amid profound shortcomings in institutional support for our research mission at the levels of policy, funding, and faculty hiring, UNM constituted the Research Study Group under faculty leadership, with a mandate to examine those shortcomings. The resulting proposals significantly improved the infrastructure of support for our research and creative work.

- At the beginning of Chaouki Abdallah’s term as Provost, Academic Affairs worked with the Faculty Senate, campus leaders, and the Board of Regents to create a [five-year Academic Strategic Plan](#) that funded a wave of new initiatives (including advising improvements and faculty hiring) that significantly transformed the UNM student experience and the intellectual profiles of many departments. Unfortunately, fiscal challenges meant that only the first two years of that plan were funded, but those investments invigorated our research, teaching, and student support and laid the groundwork for the impressive [improvements in student outcomes](#) we have achieved in recent years.
- Currently the ADVANCE at UNM project funded by the National Science Foundation is working to recruit, retain and advance women and minority STEM faculty, while creating an equitable and inclusive environment that will broadly benefit faculty, staff and students.

Thus, *UNM has experience* with the kind of disciplined organizational work required to meet challenges to our mission as a research university; we have done it before, we can do it now.

A case in point: The Task Force on DEI recently [proposed](#) a broad vision of UNM’s future, suggesting that we have for too long pursued two important goals on separate tracks.¹ On one hand, UNM has pursued excellence in research, teaching, and service via the traditional channels for doing so, with some success but also serious limitations. On the other hand, UNM has strived to create a campus climate that embodies inclusiveness and equity. But the two goals have often been pursued in ways that failed to take advantage of UNM’s strategic opportunities and sometimes undermined both goals. Instead, the task force articulates a vision of **excellence-and-equity** as UNM’s best strategic opportunity and the heart of our academic mission going forward. [Private industry](#), the [National Science Foundation](#), the [National Institutes of Health](#), the [National Endowment for the Humanities](#), other federal funders, and major [national](#) and [state](#) foundations all currently see diversifying future intellectual and societal leadership as key strategic priorities. Universities that can truly deliver on excellence-and-equity will thus be positioned for national prominence. Pursued vigorously and carried into the day-to-day work of units all over the university, excellence-and-equity thus represent UNM’s best route to national prominence—and, more crucially, serving New Mexico’s diverse communities most effectively.

In my current role, I am convening conversations in a broad set of arenas of university governance—with Academic Affairs leadership, the Deans, the Faculty Senate, interested chairs and faculty in colleges/schools/departments, and the Board of Regents—to discuss the task force’s recommendations and how we can build pipelines for the diverse intellectual and societal leadership that the U.S. and New Mexico need.

Other key areas of current Academic Affairs work include:

1. Work in the Office of the Vice Provost for Research to finalize the [Research Strategic Plan](#), the [Research Focus Areas](#), and the [Emerging Areas of Research](#), support cutting-

¹ Full disclosure: in my role as interim senior vice provost, I chaired the task force. But its work and the final report reflect contributions from its expert members representing staff, faculty, deans, and students. I hereby commend the members [separate link to list of members] of this task force for their work on behalf of the University.

- edge inter-disciplinary research, and to deepen research relationships with the national laboratories and national funding agencies.
2. Working with the Faculty Senate to implement an innovative approach to meeting the new GenEd requirements from the State of New Mexico, articulated by the [Faculty Senate Task Force on the General Education Core](#). This approach will position UNM to meet the new requirements *in ways appropriate to a research university*, with value added to student's educational formation and to our future graduate and professional programs.
 3. Work to better document and coordinate the widespread efforts by faculty, staff, and students to engage with communities in New Mexico and elsewhere in our research, teaching, and service missions. Community engagement done well can shape new knowledge in disciplines, define new problems for interdisciplinary research to solve, produce classrooms that better engage students and thus produce deeper learning, and meet the social and health needs of local communities. Such efforts will continue to be decentralized and flexible but will now be better documented and coordinated. Dr. Monica Kowal, Director of Community Engagement Initiatives, will lead this effort and will coordinate UNM's application for Carnegie Endowment status as a community-engaged university. I have requested (via the Deans) that each academic department develop a statement regarding how community engaged research, teaching, and service will be treated in their tenure, promotion, and annual review processes. Associate Provost Alex Lubin is also available to work with departments as they develop those guidelines.
 4. Time-sensitive efforts by a large number of campus leaders to develop UNM's key documents in preparation for our reaccreditation by the Higher Learning Commission.

II. Building a Campus Culture to Systematically Support the Academic Mission

This represents a long-term effort, but we can continue to make strides during this transition. A campus culture that more strongly supports excellence in research, teaching and service *and* embodies equity and inclusion for all members of the campus community will not come easily. As noted by the task force discussed above:

The watchwords for this dynamic, sustained effort should be transparency and accountability, with everyone involved held to high standards of excellence and commitment to equity. Succeeding in the effort will involve both drawing on and re-shaping the core skill sets of *everyone* in the institution. We will all need to learn new competencies at the overlap of equity and excellence; we will all need to incorporate new practices into our work routines.

That is, on the terrain of academic excellence and equity, neither UNM as an institution nor any of us as individuals have it all right: getting it right will require hard work and a willingness to listen and learn from others' experience.

We are engaged on several fronts to foster the growth of such a campus culture:

1. The University has embarked on collaborative efforts at restorative justice for past inequities, building on the model developed at UNM by the Maxwell Museum, the Alfonso Ortiz Center for Intercultural Studies and the Department of Anthropology that returned ownership of major artwork (a totem pole) appropriated from a Pacific Northwest aboriginal people to their descendants. Current efforts focus on developing innovative ways to change how historic murals in Zimmerman Library are presented and interpreted, with Dean Kymberly Pinder (Fine Arts) and Associate Provost Alex Lubin coordinating a course to propose the best ways forward.
2. This Spring, the Academic Affairs leadership will engage in a conversation with the Deans and the ADVANCE team to consider how our faculty search, promotion-and-tenure, annual review, and other decision-making processes can better undergird inclusive academic excellence across the university.
3. We are continuing long-established efforts at UNM to embody transparency regarding commitment to Title IX, Dreamers and other immigrants/refugees, military veterans, underrepresented populations, support for homeless and socially at-risk students, for first-generation college and low-income students, and for students at academic risk.
4. Major work across many units to assure that UNM is not only complying with Title IX requirements, but rather fully engaging in assertive efforts to assure a campus climate that systematically rejects sexual and gender-based harassment, discrimination, and violence.
5. Most broadly but perhaps most crucially: Any large complex organization must constantly balance human, legal, bureaucratic, fiscal, and political challenges as it goes about its work. That is not wrong; it is simply reality. But those factors—albeit crucial to sustaining our mission over the long term—if taken to extremes can become obstacles to the mission. So Academic Affairs is striving, in all university decision-making, to put the long-term academic mission at the forefront of every decision, even as we also responsibly address those other factors.

A campus culture that truly supports the academic mission and the excellence-and-equity vision discussed above cannot be dictated. It only emerges with sustained focus, commitment, and dialogue regarding the best way forward. Thinking together about ongoing challenges and how to meet them—both inside the university and in the wider world—represents one of the riches of university life at its best.

III. Developing the Infrastructure to Support the Mission

The campus culture is crucial but can only take us so far; ultimately, we need policies, structures, and funding flows to support the academic mission.

Policy:

On the policy front, a variety of initiatives have in recent years better aligned policy and practice with the academic mission. Among these are assertive new policies to protect pay

equity, undercut sexual harassment, systematize faculty and staff hiring processes, and align Institutional Review Board policies and practices with UNM's broad and complex research mission. We will continue to support those efforts, while also developing new policy in a few crucial areas (but avoiding over-reaching in a way that generates policy overload):

- The guidelines that shape faculty hiring practices have not been revised since 2009; we will be working with the Deans to implement new guidelines, drawing on input from the Chairs, ADVANCE, DEI, good hiring practices drawn from other institutions, etc.
- The OVPR has developed guidelines regarding the funding of startup packages for new faculty that are designed to buttress cutting-edge interdisciplinary hires and research agendas.
- On the basis of UNM's experience with the totem pole and mural issues discussed above, we intend to draft Academic Affairs policies regarding consideration of restorative justice issues within the university.

Structure:

Several efforts seek to make structural shifts that will institutionalize needed changes:

- UNM Press reflects the academic publishing environment in the country as a whole: It plays an indispensable role in fostering learned discussion but has run consistent large deficits for many years that are unsustainable given other fiscal pressures on the university. We are close to resolving this situation via significant restructuring within the operational side of the Press; moving the Press under the oversight of University Libraries; and a move toward ongoing reasonable subsidy for the Press within the regular UNM budget (not yet finalized).
- The reporting burden on faculty has become truly onerous over the years, with multiple different reports due at different times of year and covering different time periods, sometimes collecting the same data. This will worsen soon due to new accreditation requirements that mandate tracking of "faculty credentials." Academic Affairs, the OVPR, and UNM-IT are exploring new approaches to faculty activity reporting (including commercial solutions or developing our own software) that would actually reduce the total reporting burden.
- We have revived Chairs' School under the leadership of Associate Provost Alex Lubin with collaboration from Advance @ UNM, the Center for Teaching and Learning, CARS, and the University Ombuds to assure that chairpersons have the knowledge they need to effectively lead academic departments.
- Academic Affairs has restructured the [office](#) that handles Academic Program Review and university-level "Assessment" efforts. Under the leadership of Associate Provost Pamela Cheek, new staff have been hired into restructured roles in that office, and we are reviewing how assessment and the APR process might best be refocused to contribute to excellence in teaching and research.

Budget:

In these constrained times, budget challenges loom large. Much of UNM will be active during the current session of the Legislature, articulating the deep fiscal challenges facing the University and the centrality of higher education if New Mexico is to meet its challenges and fulfill its promise. President Abdallah and the Office of Governmental Relations will continue regular updates to the campus community as the state budget develops between now and mid-

February; once the Governor signs or vetoes specific funding lines, that budget then will flow into UNM's final budget proposals and the Board of Regents' final budgetary decisions. Good news has emerged: the state now foresees more "new money" for the coming budget, and both the Legislative Finance Committee and the Department of Finance & Administration are now proposing small compensation increases for university employees. Bad news continues in that there are many sectors arguing for that new money, and in any case the University must now find continuing money to meet *past* budget cuts that were addressed with one-time money in order to protect the academic mission. Bottom line: Generating sufficient fiscal resources to undergird the academic mission of a modern research university will continue to be a serious challenge, and we will need to find ways to generate new funding and re-prioritize extant funding if we are to sustain ourselves. Stay tuned.

These are the key priorities on which the interim leadership in Academic Affairs is focusing at this time. Underlying them is our determination to prioritize academic values, the academic mission, and our service to the people of New Mexico in all facets of our work. In the midst of the presidential transition, please consider this communiqué a double request: a call to dialogue regarding the road ahead and an invitation to participate. Amid change, the academic mission remains the North Star to guide everything we do. Let's use this time to double down on research, teaching, and service as the heart of the university.