

“The Role of a Public University in New Mexico”: An Overview

On June 4, 2010 faculty, staff, and students of the University of New Mexico, state legislators, and community leaders gathered at UNM Law School to participate in a dialogue about “The Role of a Public University in New Mexico.” The dialogue focused on five topics:

1. New Mexico’s Needs
2. “The Public University”
3. UNM’s Mission
4. Defining Roles
5. UNM’s Contributions

Each of four breakout groups was asked to discuss topic 1, “New Mexico’s Needs,” in addition to one of the remaining four topics. A concluding report-back session revealed many themes and concerns common to all five topics. What follows is an overview of the dialogue. This overview is intended to serve as a springboard for work by the Governmental Relations Committee (GRC), in collaboration with faculty, staff, students, legislators, and community leaders, in strategic planning for 2010-2011.

New Mexico’s Needs

All groups observed several unique aspects of New Mexico. With dozens of different ethnic groups, New Mexico enjoys a cultural diversity not found anywhere else. One participant suggested that in 20 years the United States will look like New Mexico. Therefore, we have an opportunity to model for the rest of the country how best to integrate and to serve a diverse population. In addition, New Mexico’s geographical location allows for regional and international collaborations. We are in a position to contribute to hot-button issues, including immigration, international trade, energy technology, and the environment. These opportunities come with distinct challenges. In particular, New Mexico is an exceptionally poor state. The allocation of limited funds, especially in the current economic climate, troubles any effort to build upon the unique, promising aspects of our state.

Both New Mexico’s opportunities and challenges impact its needs for higher education. Many faculty and students are attracted to UNM because of the state’s cultural diversity. At the same time, more must be done to foster an environment that invites people of all backgrounds to work, study, and play collaboratively on campus. Participants commented, for example, that students lack adequate knowledge both of New Mexico and of the world. In order for UNM students to succeed locally and globally, they need to be aware of where they come from and of the larger world of which they are a part. In addition, more extensive support services are needed for UNM’s Native American, minority, and non-traditional student populations, including expanding the Children’s Campus, increasing graduate funding, and improving the ratio of students to faculty instructors and mentors. The academic preparation of UNM’s students is also a concern. Senator Eric Griego offered some sobering statistics: New Mexico ranks 49th of all the states in reading scores, is in the bottom 5 of the rankings for poverty and teen pregnancy, and invests the least in early childhood education and the most per capita in higher education.

As the President of the University of Arizona put it (quoted by one participant), “No flagship institution is as important to the state that hosts it as UNM is to New Mexico.” It follows that UNM has a responsibility to lead by taking up the unique opportunities and dealing with the pressing challenges that face the State of New Mexico. With its law school, medical center, and arts facilities, for example, UNM is in a position to provide expertise, services, and training not provided elsewhere in the state. At the same time, the loss of funding and/or faculty in other essential areas, such as engineering and English, undermines UNM’s capacity to recruit, educate, and graduate its students. Moreover, UNM cannot take on New Mexico’s needs alone. K-12 providers and other institutions in the state must be involved in more adequately preparing students for higher education; state government must assist in fostering and attracting industry and business so that students can remain in New Mexico upon graduation; and the community must collaborate with UNM in identifying immediate and long-term goals, securing funding for necessary programs, and rallying around it as the flagship institution of all of New Mexico.

“The Public University”

As a publically funded institution, UNM is responsible to the public of the State of New Mexico. Unfortunately, there is a perceived disconnect between UNM and the community it serves. In particular, some constituents feel that it is not the University of New Mexico but the University of the “Emerald City.” More must be done to reverse this perception. In particular, the community must have a strong sense of ownership of the university. New Mexicans from throughout the state must be able to identify shared core values in UNM’s mission, agenda, and activities.

The first step in redressing this issue is to improve UNM’s self-advertising. The university should identify what the community needs today and what it will need 10 years from now. Then, the university must demonstrate how it is serving those needs. For example, UNM must do a much better job showcasing its achievements in regards to educating New Mexicans. UNM’s General Honors Program is one of the leaders in the country for programs of its kind; the American Indian Summer Bridge Program and BA/MD Programs show impressive results; and the Freshman Learning Communities, Interest Groups, and Service Learning initiatives are having good success. Graduate education, especially at the Medical School and Law School has also done well. UNM’s challenge in the coming years is to look at how we can scale the programs we have that are succeeding, point unprepared students to resources to help them succeed, and engage with the community to recruit and graduate students who will stay in New Mexico.

UNM serves the community not only through outstanding undergraduate and graduate education and through its health, legal, and other services but also through nationally- and internationally-recognized research. UNM faculty serve the community as public intellectuals engaged in issues of their times. At the same time, there is an identified need for UNM as an institution, and not simply as select individuals, to be a resource for the community. Rather than making decisions for the public, that is, the university can be an effective advocate for New Mexico. The challenge for UNM is to show that it is not a corporation but an institution of learning, research, and service. To take on this challenge, a long-term strategy for dialogue among community members and UNM faculty, staff, and

students, both current and former, must be designed and implemented. Legislators must be involved in this dialogue, as well, as they represent the diverse population of New Mexico, can identify community needs, and may assist UNM's efforts of inclusivity. Some participants also advocated for the involvement of the university regents.

UNM's Mission

Discussion of UNM's mission focused on the vision for the university, on the one hand, and its pragmatic goals and objectives, on the other. What unified these conversations was an identified need to refine UNM's mission statement to reflect with greater accuracy the specific necessities and responsibilities of a public research university. At the same time, many participants stressed that the mission statement must continue to reflect the original intent of the university's founders, thus embracing the rich history of New Mexico.

The project of revising UNM's mission statement is troubled by the very terms we wish to use. An "educated population," "success," "enhancement"—these terms mean different things to different people. Moreover, how best to evaluate fulfillment of the mission remains contested. Graduation rates, external funding, and national statistics on health and safety are all legitimate modes of evaluation, although they focus on different elements of the mission—respectively, instruction, research, and service. One suggestion is to take an integrative approach. For example, UNM's mission statement can reflect how teaching is a form of service to the state; faculty research is crucial to undergraduate and graduate education; and community outreach is often made possible through external funding.

UNM's mission statement must also gesture to what the university does not aim to accomplish. As a Carnegie Mellon I Research Institution and a "Hispanic serving" university, UNM serves a need distinct from that served by New Mexico's two-year junior and four-year community colleges. There was general consensus that junior colleges are better adapted to give students work force training and opportunities, and community colleges help students to fill gaps in their secondary education. UNM gives students opportunities for higher learning by providing the general education that allows students to be leaders in their fields and their communities. This educational ideal is often perceived to be at odds with employment. As one legislator put it, "It all comes down to jobs versus education. Can we support so much general education opportunities at the expense of more job specific education?" UNM must demonstrate how it provides the glue between education, employment, and New Mexico's needs. The point is that an educated workforce, service professionals (doctors, lawyers, teachers, etc.), and relevant research are bound up with one another, especially in a poor and geographically dispersed state like New Mexico.

On a practical level, UNM's mission is troubled by the current economic climate on the university, state, and national levels. For example, some participants expressed concern over UNM's athletics budget and spending priorities. At the same time, the athletics program generates good will throughout the state, and there is a general love for the Lobos in New Mexico, both of which UNM could leverage to provide funding to the university. At a state level, there is a strong feeling that New Mexico has a "bloated state budget" and there are too many institutions and too many public employees per capita, especially in the higher education sector. Providing funding for facilities has traditionally been easier than

staffing. This can be seen both in terms of health care practitioners as well as in the fact that much of the teaching mission is now falling to adjunct faculty who cannot provide the same focus to the institution as tenure track professors. State tuition credits (SAD Pass-through) that ask students to pay a higher portion of their education costs are one way that the state is attempting to address budget deficits, and there is a legislative feeling that these are acceptable as long as we still have the Lottery Scholarship safety net. Fundamentally the state needs to address the issue of institutions of higher education competing for funding and the lack of a comprehensive collaborative plan for ensuring P-20 student success with limited resources. In the current funding climate, higher education funding comes at a cost to other programs in the state. UNM must demonstrate to legislators and the public the benefits that the state receives from the education, research, and service missions that UNM uniquely provides.

Defining Roles

The breakout group that discussed roles understood this topic to be about governance. Participants acknowledged that there are as many definitions of “shared governance” as there are invested parties. For example, some feel that “shared governance” includes faculty input on budgetary matters, while others feel that budget allocations are a solely administrative matter. Transparency and collaboration on financial allocations, which are essential to UNM’s mission, are salient examples of why the roles of the university’s constituents must be clearly identified and balanced.

The responsibility of the university to the community was at the center of the discussion of roles. There is a general consensus that the public should be involved in the process of selecting regents. At the same time, participants acknowledged that this process has been burdened by interference and imbalances of power. The vetting of candidates for regent was proposed, such as a merit selection process similar to that followed for judicial candidates or a faculty vote of “acceptable” or “not acceptable.” Other suggestions included: the creation of a public comment period, during which faculty, students, staff, and community members could propose qualifications for the appointment of a regent; the creation of a faculty regent, who would represent faculty interests; and training sessions for the regents, in which the role of the regents and each of the university constituencies is clarified. In fact, this move to clarify roles and the exact nature of shared governance would benefit not only the regents but also UNM’s other constituents, including the public.

UNM’s Contributions

As the flagship university for New Mexico, UNM needs to be more proactive in its relations with and outreach to the entire state. There is a sense that there are few faculty from New Mexico and that the émigré faculty do not understand New Mexico, appreciate its uniqueness, or feel a connection to its community. It follows, on the one hand, that legislators and the public need to be informed of the importance of UNM’s national and international standing (for which it is necessary to hire faculty who are not UNM graduates) and, on the other, that faculty must be more vocal about their interest in and commitment to the community they serve.

UNM's standing as a research institution is crucial to the services it provides to the state. The responsiveness of UNM faculty and staff to requests for research is recognized, although legislators acknowledge that they could be more proactive in seeking out expertise and information from UNM faculty and staff. There was some discussion of developing a statewide research agenda that would include representatives from New Mexico's various colleges and universities, the legislature, and the community. This research agenda would identify the immediate and long-term needs of the state as well as initiate plans to fund New Mexico-based research. This research agenda could also create opportunities for graduate students to be more involved, and better funded for their involvement, in faculty research. Whether this research agenda and UNM Tenure and Promotion requirements ought to prioritize "applied" research over theoretical research was discussed. The general feeling among the legislators is that "applied" research may have more value to New Mexico. UNM must assist faculty in showcasing their research to legislators and the public and in demonstrating how the community benefits from their research, especially if it is not "applied" in nature.

In terms of educating New Mexicans, legislators expressed a desire to expand UNM's online offerings. There is a perception that reluctance among UNM faculty to develop distance learning is due to concerns about loss of control of classes and reduction of faculty positions. It follows that UNM should better advertise the ongoing expansion of online instruction across the university. Moreover, faculty need to be more outspoken about those issues that impede the development of distance learning, including the quality of online versus classroom learning, students' lack of preparedness, and differences between UNM and for-profit online degree programs (e.g., University of Phoenix).

UNM is also in a position to make considerable contributions beyond New Mexico. Although there was general consensus that UNM's focus should remain local, participants agreed that the university should also aim to serve hemispheric and global roles. By building partnerships throughout the region and the world, UNM can share the expertise and research of its faculty, educate its students on global issues, and be a contributing member of larger communities.

Summation

New Mexico is a unique state with a rich history and diverse culture. It is also a state challenged by widespread poverty and an overburdened K-12 educational system. As the state's flagship institution of higher learning, the University of New Mexico has the capacity and the responsibility to foster this uniqueness and to address these challenges. This project should begin by refining UNM's mission. There is some tension between the academic, research, and service missions of UNM, especially where funding is concerned, but these can be ameliorated in part by focusing on the synergistic and interrelated pieces of the mission. Access and student success issues are paramount, but some of these cannot be addressed without innovative approaches that look at poverty and root causes for low achievement rates. Research and internships focused on addressing problems at local and state levels can increase access, improve quality of life, and provide unique opportunities to students, faculty, staff and their communities. By focusing on human capital, recognizing

internal talent, defining community service and legitimizing it, we can extend UNM's impact and influence on the issues that matter most to New Mexico.