

COMMENTARY STEPHANIE RODRIGUEZ

Collaboration is way forward for colleges, universities

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When I joined the New Mexico Higher Education Department as acting secretary in the late summer, I witnessed firsthand the many challenges facing higher education in our state, and most importantly, the difficulties many students face in accessing and completing a college degree.

There is no question that higher education is valuable to New Mexicans.

Over 30,000 of our citizens graduate from our public colleges and universities with degrees and certificates annually, and a majority of voters have supported higher education initiatives on state and local ballots over the past year.

However, as we face the need to revitalize our economy in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic, education and training programs that prepare New Mexicans for family-sustaining jobs and grow our workforce are more critical than ever.

Financial aid programs like the New Mexico Opportunity Scholarship have expanded access and supported college students experiencing financial hardship during the pandemic, and we are committed to preserving the funding for these programs as New Mexicans seek to retrain and return to the workforce.

I recently learned about Ramon Trujillo, a student at the University of New Mexico's branch campus at Los Alamos who, because of the Opportunity Scholarship, was able to continue his education this semester despite making the difficult decision to leave his job and becoming a first-time father. We must continue to sustain these programs.

Our agency is committed to providing access to affordable and quality educational opportunities for as many New Mexicans as possible, and doing so requires developing and enacting policies that set students up for success in higher education and beyond. To create positive change in our system, these policies must be informed by strong data, professional expertise, and most importantly, the needs of the students themselves.

For this reason, the New Mexico Higher Education Department has been working to increase opportunities to partner with other state agencies and to facilitate collaboration among higher education experts across the state and across sectors. One key initiative is the creation of a Longitudinal Data System, which will help us gain a greater understanding of student's experiences from early childhood into the workforce and close the achievement gap to support New Mexicans from cradle to career.

In the past few months, we have convened advisory groups including professionals in the fields of academic policy, data analysis, equity and inclusion, and communication, in addition to meeting with student groups to guide higher education initiatives moving forward. These leaders have already begun the significant work of informing the agency's forthcoming strategic plan and priorities for the upcoming legislative session, and raising awareness among New Mexicans about the benefits of higher education.

However, nothing has underscored the need for collaboration more than the COVID-19 pandemic. In partnership with all public colleges and universities, tribal colleges and special schools across New Mexico, we have navigated the many challenges posed by the virus to ensure that students can continue to pursue higher education while keeping our communities safe.

Our agency worked directly with the 33 public institutions we oversee to develop COVID-safe operation plans, with every public college and university in the state moving all nonessential operations and instruction online following the Thanksgiving holiday.

Some have also put their resources to work in support of the communities they serve, like Northern New Mexico College and Mesalands Community College, which designed and printed masks for health care workers in New Mexico. San Juan College, Clovis Community College and many others have partnered with the New Mexico Department of Health to open parts of their campuses as drive-thru testing sites, making testing accessible to rural communities.

Faculty members from across that state have answered the call to serve in the state's Medical Reserve Corps, and medical programs continue to train and graduate professionals who will treat New Mexicans in the near future.

Many institutions are also taking the lead in collaborating with one another. Navajo Technical University entered into an agreement with the New Mexico Institute of Mining and Technology to provide the Navajo Nation with drinking water that can also be used for livestock and agriculture, and several colleges submitted a joint proposal for funding via the Governor's Emergency Education Relief Fund, resulting in \$2.3 million awarded to expand technology access and online learning statewide.

While we may not know what a post-COVID New Mexico will look like, our state and our citizens are resilient, and education holds the key to transforming futures, creating opportunities, and reinvigorating our economy.

With the commitment of Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham, the New Mexico Higher Education Department, our legislators, and our citizens, we can work to ensure that students have every chance to pursue and gain the skills they need to thrive right here at home. Doing so will secure New Mexico for the future, whatever it may hold.

Stephanie Rodriguez is the acting secretary for the New Mexico Higher Education Department. A longer version of this article is available at [santafenewmexican.com](https://www.santafenewmexican.com).