

A Natural Progression *PETE CAMPOS*



If you had told me thirty years ago that I would become a college president, I don't think I'd have given it a second thought. I had my hands full. I was teaching, tutoring, and counseling "at-risk" youths, running a restaurant with my parents, and involved in local civic organizations. July 1, 2008 was light years away.

Fresh out of UNM with a degree and double major in economics and philosophy, I came home in 1974 to work in the family business and a few years later, began my career in education. But the time away had given me a new perspective and upon my return to the area, I saw the harsh realities of life in northeastern New Mexico. I wanted to make positive changes in the lives of others!

My "at-risk" students had been raised in demoralizing poverty. They were children with little or no self-esteem... frightened adolescents cowed by domineering bullies... young girls who got pregnant and started families while they were still kids... and intelligent young men who defied every attempt to provide them an education.

They faced complex issues, but lacked the tools to help them break the cycle of poverty. Several dropped out of school and wound up in dead-end jobs, hoping the next generation would do better. Far too many died tragically – through accident, violence or suicide.

Determined to make a difference, I began to work with them one-on-one, tutoring them in the subjects they found most challenging. I encouraged them to make sound decisions, worked to build their self-esteem, and helped them find employment and educational opportunities. Most of all, I tried to help them understand that hard work would be the basis for their future success.

For some, it made no difference – they couldn't see a way out. But others accepted the importance of education and overcame difficult personal situations to become today's community leaders, teachers, business owners, and successful farmers and ranchers.

That's how my career in education began. Even after earning a master's in counseling from New Mexico Highlands University and a doctorate in educational leadership from UNM, those early experiences never left me... and so I chose to stay close to home and focus on helping northeastern New Mexico's students learn to succeed. My desire to improve education, healthcare and employment opportunities in our small communities spurred me to seek elective office as well.

Education is both my career and my passion. I love being a school superintendent and the decision to leave my current post was incredibly difficult. In my fourteen and a half years at Las Vega City Schools, I've had the good fortune to have an incredibly supportive board. In every capacity I've worked – from curriculum to counseling, personnel, budgeting, facilities development, maintenance, extra-curricular activities, food service, technology, transportation, to overseeing it all – I've been privileged to work with exceptional people.

Now I have been afforded an extraordinary opportunity to bring my passion, energy, knowledge, and experience to a regional community college that serves both youth and adult learners. It is a challenge I embrace... but I would not have made this leap without the overwhelming encouragement and support I have received from this community.

I believe Public Schools and Higher Education are two sides of the same coin. Each is unique with its own set of challenges, but they have much in common. The two sectors are now addressing many of the same issues – declining enrollment, deteriorating facilities, tight money and ever-growing needs. Both are responding to a heightened emphasis on institutional accountability, academic and vocational technical rigor, and improved student success. And both are working to create a seamless transition.

High school students can now take college classes – on campus, at their own schools or through technology-based distance education. Some "concurrent enrollment" students graduate from high school with enough credits to start college as sophomores. On the flip side, so many high school graduates show up academically unprepared that colleges now provide classes to prepare them for college-level work.

The landscape is changing rapidly. Education and training have become even greater factors in success and economic well-being. Tomorrow's jobs will bear little resemblance to those we knew yesterday. Institutions must adapt or be left behind.

To best serve Luna Community College, I must have a full understanding of its current position. I have begun a review of student enrollment trends, course preferences, institutional policies, capital projects, program and operational costs, and communications between students, faculty, staff and the public.

But good research is never done in a vacuum. I have always believed in empowering and involving people in shaping their own future. The more we learn and share with each other, the better we all become. Faculty satisfaction, student success and academic rigor go hand-in-hand. To create the best teaching and learning environment we must develop our vision together, and commit ourselves to achieving it as a team.

Toward that end, I look forward to establishing an ongoing dialog with the Luna Community College community. I plan to meet with students, faculty, staff, institutional and community leaders to listen intently and learn their expectations, inventory and evaluate what we have now and what we can attain. Only then can we understand what we can accomplish, in the short- and long-term, what it will cost, and how to best work together to accomplish our vision.

I am certain Luna Community College will remain on the path of a stable and solid institution that provides affordable education, top-notch healthcare education and technical/vocational programs, GED services and adult basic education, enrollment opportunities for high school students, and much-needed outreach to neighboring communities such as Vaughn, Anton Chico, El Valle, Wagon Mound and Watrous where satellites currently do not exist.

Luna Community College is on the cusp of exciting changes. Its faculty and staff are heavily invested in student success and achievement. I look forward to engaging them in many discussions about programs and accountability, facilities and compensation, and our hopes and dreams for the future.

I seek answers to many questions. Can our small business development center help more individuals develop business plans, get approved for financing and open their own businesses? Should Luna build stronger links with the business, healthcare, education and government sectors to better train workers or prepare them for postsecondary education? Should we have a program division that adjusts and tailors educational offerings to meet requirements set by employers? Do our employees need to protect intellectual property – the things they invent – so they can reap the profits? What if Luna had a “think tank”?

To create a true shared vision, there must be integrity in the whole process – openness and truth, professionalism, reasonable decision making, listening, caring and treating each other with respect. At the core, it has to be about shared governance, not ego – about setting goals and achieving them together... about helping people and trusting those that you work with to do the very best they can. No one benefits from micromanagement – and any good manager knows you can't make sound decisions without the input of those most involved.

This is not about what a president can do alone. It is about having a strong, bold, shared vision and accomplishing what we can as a community and a college together.

I believe Luna Community College deserves a president who is permanently invested in northeastern New Mexico... someone with a passion for education who is committed to assisting our next generation of leaders in improving healthcare, education and the economy. I am grateful, proud and humbled to be that person.