

New Mexico's Colleges, Universities Must Adapt to Students' Changing Needs

By Senator Pete Campos

Our colleges and universities are, and have always been, an integral part of New Mexico's economic development plans for preparing young adults and retraining older New Mexicans for jobs around the state. But our higher education system is staid and close to moribund, reluctant to shed the model and processes that have worked well in the past.

Higher education must change, and we must help it change, to meet the changing needs of students and their future employers.

New Mexico and New Mexicans are unique, which is something we all treasure, and we have more than our share of non-traditional students: those who seek evening or weekend classes; who didn't get the preparation they needed in elementary or high school; who are the first in their families to attend college; who are raising a family as single parents; who must travel long distances to attend class; who don't have the money to attend college; or who learn best through fieldwork and experiential learning. Our colleges and universities are being challenged to meet the needs of those students. Too often, that challenge is not being met.

The faculty, staff and leadership of our universities, community colleges and special schools in New Mexico, some funded by the state, some by the tribal governments, are doing the best they can with the resources they have. But those resources are changing. Enrollment and state funding at our two dozen state colleges and universities are down — although funding had been increasing until this year — and we must take advantage of the state's current economic crisis to reexamine our higher education system. We cannot afford to waste time. We must immediately:

- * stabilize rising tuition and fees so that a college education is more accessible and affordable to more students;

- * develop a statewide curricula so students can seamlessly transfer from one college or university to another within New Mexico and ensure better coordination among New Mexico's colleges and universities;

- * expand tutoring, counseling and guidance services so that struggling students aren't left behind, becoming discouraged and dropping out;

* personalize learning so students can learn at their own pace, take more weekend, evening and online classes and choose from classroom learning and fieldwork by putting learning at their fingertips;

* realign teaching methods with students' learning methods, offering more micro-learning and high-velocity learning opportunities, helping students hone their problem-solving and critical thinking skills; and

* encourage students to share their experiences with their peers and the community, to both expand and enhance community knowledge and instill in students an appreciation for sharing what they know.

Higher education faces many challenges. Declining enrollment and drastically dropping revenue force us to reexamine the entire system. Students rightfully expect that the tens of thousands of dollars they pay for a college education will be worth it. As customers, their high expectations for a dynamic, relevant learning experience that makes the best use of available technology deserve to be met.

Higher education, business, community and student leaders should immediately bring forward their ideas to reinvigorate our higher education system.