

WESTERN ACADEMIC LEADERSHIP  
FORUM **ANNUAL MEETING**

APRIL 1-3, 2026

**Facing Complexity,**

*Finding Solutions*





## About WICHE

The Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE) is a regional interstate higher education compact of 15 Western states and the U.S. Pacific Territories and Freely Associated States. Since 1953, WICHE has focused on its mission of expanding educational access and excellence for all residents of the West. By promoting innovation, cooperation, resource sharing, and sound public policy, WICHE strengthens higher education’s contributions to the region’s social, economic, and civic life.

## Accessibility Statement

This document has been created with accessibility in mind. Consideration of heading structure, content labels, and alternate descriptions have been carefully applied to maximize both usability and accessibility of the information within this publication. Effort has been made to follow recognized accessibility standards and best practices, ensuring that content is perceivable, operable, understandable, and robust for everyone regardless of platform or assistive technologies. While no document can be guaranteed to be entirely barrier-free for all people, every effort has been taken to minimize obstacles and provide content that supports the widest possible audience. For more information, email [info@wiche.edu](mailto:info@wiche.edu).

# MESSAGE FROM THE CHAIR

I'm very happy to join my voice in offering a warm welcome to everyone participating in the 2026 Western Academic Leadership Forum Annual Meeting, hosted by the University of New Mexico in beautiful Albuquerque, New Mexico.

Our overarching theme this year is "Facing Complexity, Finding Solutions." The complex and shifting currents of today's higher education landscape certainly appear daunting and will likely continue to challenge many of the ways in which we operate.

But what complexity does not challenge is what drives us: our commitment to preparing students for careers of consequence and lives of purpose, advancing the frontiers of knowledge, serving the communities we call home, and shaping the next generation of engaged citizens.

When facing complexity, being a part of a collaborative and supportive community is an essential advantage, and not a luxury, for increasing resilience in our leadership and the institutions we serve. Building this community is the central goal behind the Forum and what motivates the hard work by our colleagues on the Forum Executive Committee and WICHE's Academic Partnerships staff.

We look forward to coming together with each of you in Albuquerque and, through our work together, finding opportunities among uncertainties and transforming thought into solutions.



**John Georgas, Ph.D., Forum Chair**

Senior Vice Provost for Academic Operations, Northern Arizona University

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## About the Western Academic Leadership Forum

The Western Academic Leadership Forum (Forum) is a membership group housed at the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE). The Forum serves to advance WICHE's mission and vision by fostering a collaborative community of provosts and other senior academic leaders across the region. The Forum enables institution-level, system-level, and state-level academic leaders to directly connect with peers across the West. Forum members get to learn with and from each other as they collectively navigate contemporary challenges, evolving policy landscapes, and opportunities for innovation in postsecondary education. Together, we will help build a stronger future for higher education in the West.

# SCHEDULE AT A GLANCE

## Wednesday, April 1

*University of New Mexico, Student Union Building (shuttle provided)*

**11:30 a.m. – 3:30 p.m.**      **Registration Open for 2025 Academy Cohort and Executive Committee**

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**12:00 p.m. – 1:30 p.m.**      **Lunch**  
2025 Academy Cohort and Executive Committee only

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**1:30 p.m. – 3:30 p.m.**      **Concurrent Sessions**

- Forum Executive Committee Meeting (Executive Committee members only)
- Closing Session—2025 Leadership Academy (Academy cohort and faculty only)

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*Hotel Chaco Ballroom and Garden*

**5:00 p.m. – 6:30 p.m.**      **Registration Open / Welcome Reception at Hotel Chaco**

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## Thursday, April 2

*University of New Mexico, Student Union Building (shuttle provided)*

**7:30 a.m. – 5:00 p.m.**      **Registration Open**

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**7:30 a.m. – 8:30 a.m.**      **Breakfast**

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**8:30 a.m. – 9:00 a.m.**      **Welcome and Meeting Overview**

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**9:00 a.m. – 10:00 a.m.**      **Keynote Address: Academic Leadership in the AI Era: Turning Challenges into Competitive Strengths**

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**10:00 a.m. – 10:15 a.m.**      **Break**

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**10:15 a.m. – 11:05 a.m.**      **Concurrent Sessions**

- Cut and Reappropriate: Strategic Reinvestment in the Utah System of Higher Education
- WeR1: How to Develop a Strategic, Multi-Faceted, and Adaptive Faculty Research Success Program through Effective Organizational Partnerships

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**11:05 a.m. – 11:20 a.m.**      **Break**

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11:20 a.m. – 12:10 p.m.	<b>Concurrent Sessions</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How Investing in Faculty to Improve Student Experience Can Build Institutional Trust</li> <li>• Transforming Graduate Education: Collaborative Solutions to the Complexities of Student Success</li> </ul>
12:10 p.m. – 1:15 p.m.	<b>Networking Lunch</b>
1:15 p.m. – 2:20 p.m.	<b>University of New Mexico Flamenco Performance Ensemble</b> <b>Plenary Session</b> When Everyone Plans to Grow: Examining Enrollment Goals and Market Capacity in WICHE States
2:20 p.m. – 2:35 p.m.	<b>Break</b>
2:35 p.m. – 3:25 p.m.	<b>Concurrent Sessions</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Preparing Faculty and Staff to Support Student Learning and Career Readiness</li> <li>• Micro-Pathways: A Model to Drive Statewide Transformation Efforts in Montana</li> </ul>
3:25 p.m. – 3:40 p.m.	<b>Break</b>
3:40 p.m. – 4:30 p.m.	<b>Concurrent Sessions</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Student-Centered Innovation at Scale: Recruitment, Program, and Success Strategies at the University of New Mexico</li> <li>• Maximizing Institutional Capacity Through Shared Services: A Collaborative Approach</li> </ul>
4:30 p.m. – 4:45 p.m.	<b>Break</b>
4:45 p.m. – 6:00 p.m.	<b>Graduation and Awards Reception with support from the Mellon Foundation</b>  <i>Dinner on your own</i>

## Friday, April 3

*University of New Mexico, Student Union Building (shuttle provided)*

8:00 a.m. – 9:00 a.m.	<b>Breakfast</b>
9:00 a.m. – 9:30 a.m.	<b>Forum Membership Meeting</b>
9:30 a.m. – 10:30 a.m.	<b>Plenary Session</b> Using Alternative Futures Scenario Building to Envision the Futures of Higher Education
10:30 a.m. – 10:45 a.m.	<b>Wrap Up &amp; Adjournment</b>
10:45 a.m. – 11:00 a.m.	<b>Break</b>
11:00 a.m. – 12:00 p.m.	<b>Optional: UNM Public Art Walk</b>

# PROGRAM SESSIONS AND SPEAKERS

## Wednesday, April 1

*University of New Mexico, Student Union Building (shuttle provided)*

**11:30 a.m. – 3:30 p.m.**      **Registration Open for 2025 Academy Cohort and Executive Committee**

*Outside Ballroom B-C*

**12:00 p.m. – 1:30 p.m.**

**Lunch**

*Ballroom B*

2025-26 Academy Cohort and Executive Committee only

**1:30 p.m. – 3:30 p.m.**

**Concurrent Sessions**

*Lobo B*

Executive Committee Meeting (Executive Committee members only)

*Lobo A*

Closing Session - 2025-26 Western Academic Leadership Academy

*Hotel Chaco Ballroom and Garden*

**5:00 p.m. – 6:30 p.m.**

**Registration Open / Welcome Reception at Hotel Chaco**

*Hotel Chaco Gathering  
Room and Garden*

Join us for a lovely evening reception where you can meet up with old friends and make new ones!

## Thursday, April 2

*University of New Mexico, Student Union Building (shuttle provided)*

**7:30 a.m. – 5:00 p.m.**

**Registration Open**

*Outside Ballroom B-C*

**7:30 a.m. – 8:30 a.m.**

**Breakfast**

*Ballroom B*

**8:30 a.m. – 9:00 a.m.**

**Welcome and Meeting Overview**

*Ballroom C*

John Georgas, Forum Chair

Barbara Rodriguez, Annual Meeting Host, University of New Mexico

Garnett S. Stokes, President, University of New Mexico

Stephanie Rodriguez, Cabinet Secretary, New Mexico Department of Higher Education

<p><b>9:00 a.m. – 10:00 a.m.</b> <i>Ballroom C</i></p>	<p><b>Keynote Address</b></p> <p><b>Academic Leadership in the AI Era: Turning Challenges into Competitive Strengths</b></p> <p>Higher education institutions face mounting pressure to navigate an AI landscape that is reshaping teaching, learning, and academic operations faster than most can adapt. This keynote examines how chief academic officers can move beyond reactive responses to AI and build institutional frameworks that transform disruption into strengths. Together, we will explore the current state of AI, the challenges it is creating for institutions, and how to deliberately leverage AI rather than merely respond to it.</p> <p><b>Introducer:</b> John Georgas, Forum Chair, Northern Arizona University</p> <p><b>Speaker:</b> Van Davis, Executive Director, WCET – WICHE Cooperative for Educational Technologies and Vice President, Digital Learning, WICHE</p>
<p><b>10:00 a.m. – 10:15 a.m.</b></p>	<p><b>Break</b></p>
<p><b>10:15 a.m. – 11:05 a.m.</b> <i>Ballroom C</i></p> <p><i>Lobo A&amp;B</i></p>	<p><b>Concurrent Sessions</b></p> <p><b>Cut and Reappropriate: Strategic Reinvestment in the Utah System of Higher Education</b></p> <p>In 2025, the Utah Legislature required public institutions to cut 10% of their budgets and reinvest in high demand programs. This session will describe how institutions in the Utah System of Higher Education are finding solutions while facing this complex new requirement and will discuss potential implications for other states.</p> <p><b>Speakers:</b> TJ Bliss, Utah System of Higher Education Chris Guymon, Utah Tech University Steven Hood, Utah System of Higher Education</p> <p><b>WeR1: How to Develop a Strategic, Multi-Faceted, and Adaptive Faculty Research Success Program through Effective Organizational Partnerships</b></p> <p>This session presents UNM’s WeR1 framework, a strategic approach to designing and sustaining a multifaceted faculty research success program built through organizational partnerships. Attendees will explore our modular approach used to address faculty needs across career stages and disciplines and how to adapt this structure to their institution’s needs and priorities.</p> <p><b>Speakers:</b> Melissa Emery Thompson, University of New Mexico Ellen Fisher, University of New Mexico</p>
<p><b>11:05 a.m. – 11:20 a.m.</b></p>	<p><b>Break</b></p>

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**11:20 a.m. – 12:10 p.m.**

*Ballroom C*

**Concurrent Sessions**

**How Investing in Faculty to Improve Student Experience Can Build Institutional Trust**

How can institutions prepare faculty for the complex life and belonging challenges that routinely interfere with students' engagement in learning? We describe a program at scale enabling faculty to design equitable classroom learning environments — a program that 98% of students respond to with a positive "trust and fairness" rating of their instructors.

**Speakers:**

Pamela Cheek, University of New Mexico  
Sushilla Knottenbelt, University of New Mexico  
Erin Shortlidge, University of New Mexico

*Lobo A&B*

**Transforming Graduate Education: Collaborative Solutions to the Complexities of Student Success**

Graduate student needs are increasingly complex, demanding holistic and culturally responsive solutions. This panel showcases how one R1/MSI is transforming support through cross-campus partnerships that strengthen belonging and reduce barriers. Panelists will share emerging models and engage attendees to envision collaborative approaches to build impactful and integrated support systems.

**Speakers:**

Rodolfo Becerril, University of New Mexico  
Travis Broadhurst, University of New Mexico  
Maria Lane, University of New Mexico  
Eric Scott, University of New Mexico  
Allison Shaddox, University of New Mexico

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**12:10 p.m. – 1:15 p.m.**

*Ballroom B*

**Networking Lunch**

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1:15 p.m. – 2:20 p.m.

Ballroom C

**Welcome from Demarée Michelau, President, Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE)**

**UNM Flamenco Performance Ensemble**

The University of New Mexico Flamenco Performance Ensemble is composed of advanced dance students in the Department of Theatre and Dance. Directed by Associate Professor Marisol Encinias, the ensemble operates within a professional rehearsal and performance model in which students learn and perform repertory created by faculty and visiting artists. Flamenco has been part of the UNM dance curriculum since 1976 and remains a distinctive area of study within the department's BA and MFA degrees in Dance. UNM is the only accredited university dance program in the United States offering a concentration in flamenco.

**Introducer:** Barbara Damron, WICHE Commissioner, University of New Mexico



*Photo credit: Liam Dubois, Courtesy of the UNM Department of Theatre and Dance.*

**Plenary Session — When Everyone Plans to Grow: Examining Enrollment Goals and Market Capacity in WICHE States**

As Western states face declining high school graduate populations, what enrollment futures are institutions planning? When we add them up, is the math even possible? This session presents findings from a comprehensive analysis of strategic enrollment plans at WICHE public comprehensive universities, combined with demographic projections and institutional market share data. By comparing institutional enrollment goals against WICHE demographic projections and calculating needed market-share shifts, the analysis reveals where regional capacity exists for growth and where institutions may be planning for students who don't exist—or planning to take them from each other without acknowledging the competition.

These findings will serve as a springboard for discussion about the results, pressures on institutional leaders to increase enrollment, and potential, realistic alternatives.

**Introducer:** Colleen Falkenstern, WICHE

**Speaker:** Gwen Sharp, Nevada State University

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2:20 p.m. – 2:35 p.m.

**Break**

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2:35 p.m. – 3:25 p.m.

*Ballroom C*

**Concurrent Sessions**

**Preparing Faculty and Staff to Support Student Learning and Career Readiness**

As the needs of our student body rapidly evolve, it's essential to understand who we serve, integrate their needs into the classroom and campus experience, and embed career readiness from orientation to career. This session will focus on practical tools to enhance student success outcomes and make work-engaged skills visible on your campus.

**Speakers:**

Pamela Cheek, University of New Mexico

Cait Lippitt, University of New Mexico

Chelsea Mellenthin, University of North Dakota

Karyn Plumm, University of North Dakota

*Lobo A&B*

**Micro-Pathways: A Model to Drive Statewide Transformation Efforts in Montana**

This session will highlight the Montana University System partnership with Education Design Lab to transform their work with employer partners to design and deliver in demand micro-pathways that lead to good paying jobs. Presenters will describe this first of its kind effort and share newly designed micro-pathways in healthcare, technology, the trades, and education. Participants will describe the neutral convener approach through the facilitation of a 5-phase human-centered design process.

**Speakers:**

Angela McLean, Montana University System

Minzi Thomas, Education Design Lab

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3:25 p.m. – 3:40 p.m.

**Break**

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**3:40 p.m. – 4:30 p.m.**

*Ballroom C*

**Concurrent Sessions**

**Student-Centered Innovation at Scale: Recruitment, Program, and Success Strategies at the University of New Mexico**

This panel showcases how a large HSI/MSI is rethinking recruitment strategies, program delivery, and student success services to support learners' evolving needs. It also addresses the balance between fostering innovation and maintaining coherent institutional guidelines - an essential component of student-centered innovation at scale.

**Speakers:**

Elisha Allen, University of New Mexico  
Pamela Cheek, University of New Mexico  
Alina Chircu, University of New Mexico  
Donna Riley, University of New Mexico  
David Weiss, University of New Mexico

*Lobo A&B*

**Maximizing Institutional Capacity Through Shared Services: A Collaborative Approach**

This session presents innovative approaches from the University of New Mexico to sustain institutional capacity amid financial constraints. Through shared service case examples and lessons learned, participants will gain practical strategies for maintaining or expanding capacity, even when facing staff reductions, limited resources, and increasing operational demands in higher education.

**Speakers:**

Nicole Dopson, University of New Mexico  
Charla Orozco, University of New Mexico

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**4:30 p.m. – 4:45 p.m.**

**Break**

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**4:45 p.m. – 6:00 p.m.**

*Ballroom B*

**Graduation and Awards Reception with support from the Mellon Foundation**

All are welcome, please attend and celebrate our community achievements!

**Acknowledgement of the Forum's Colleagues' Choice Innovation Award**

**Presenter:** TJ Bliss, Forum Vice Chair, Utah System of Higher Education

**Graduation of the 2024–26 Cohort of the WICHE Academy for Leaders in the Humanities**

**Presenter:** Nick Fuselier, Director of Academic Partnerships, Learning, and Development, Programs and Services, WICHE

**Graduation of the 2025-26 Cohort of the Western Academic Leadership Academy**

**Presenter:** Raymonda Burgman Gallegos, Vice President, Programs and Services, WICHE

**Acknowledgement of Academy and WICHE Academy Alumni**

**Presenter:** Raymonda Burgman Gallegos, Vice President, Programs and Services, WICHE

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*Dinner on your own*

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## Friday, April 3

University of New Mexico, Student Union Building (shuttle provided)

<b>8:00 a.m. – 9:00 a.m.</b> <i>Ballroom B</i>	<b>Breakfast</b>
<b>9:00 a.m. – 9:30 a.m.</b> <i>Ballroom C</i>	<b>Forum Membership Meeting</b> Learn about what is happening at WICHE in relation to programs, events, and opportunities for your institutions. <b>Speakers:</b> Ray Burgman Gallegos, Nick Fuselier, Olivia Tufo
<b>9:30 a.m. – 10:30 a.m.</b> <i>Ballroom C</i>	<b>Plenary Session — Using Alternative Futures Scenario Building to Envision the Futures of Higher Education</b> This workshop introduces participants to alternative futures thinking to better understand and plan for uncertainty in higher education. Using the Mānoa School’s four generic scenarios, participants will explore trends, envision preferred futures, and identify strategies to navigate trends and emerging issues shaping higher education over the next 20–50 years. <b>Speaker:</b> Debora Halbert, University of Hawai’i System
<b>10:30 a.m. – 10:45 a.m.</b>	<b>Adjournment</b>
<b>10:45 a.m. – 11:00 a.m.</b>	<b>Break</b>
<b>11:00 a.m. – 12:00 p.m.</b>	<b>Optional: UNM Public Art Walk</b> Major works of public art on the UNM Main campus engage with the legacy of the different peoples who have lived in the region, the relationships among them, and the impact of how they have been represented. Exploring the evolution of public university art and the responses to it in an urban university, this walk will stop for contemplation of murals and sculptures while traversing some of the historic pueblo-revival style buildings and the sustainable arboretum on UNM’s main campus.

# SPEAKERS

## Keynote Speaker



**Van L. Davis, Ph.D.**, serves as the executive director of WCET (WICHE Cooperative for Educational Technologies) and vice president of digital learning for WICHE (Western Interstate Commission on Higher Education). Before joining WCET, he served as founder and principal at Foghlam Consulting, working with colleges, universities, and nonprofits on digital learning, strategic planning, higher education policy, and research. Previously, Davis served as associate vice president for policy and research at Blackboard Inc. and director of innovations at the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board. Davis began his career as a professor and academic administrator and has 30 years of experience in higher education. He holds a Ph.D. and M.A. in 20th Century United States history from Vanderbilt University.

## Session Speakers



**Elisha Allen** serves as the director of online strategies and academic technologies at the University of New Mexico. With over 20 years experience in higher education, he holds an M.B.A. and is an alumnus of the Institute for Emerging Leadership in Online Learning and the Educause Executive Leadership Academy. Allen's focus includes classroom technologies, effective pedagogies, online teaching and learning tools, emerging trends such as AI, curriculum development, and online academic program delivery. An advocate for lifelong learning, he is involved with statewide P-20 learning initiatives in New Mexico with a focus on digital inclusion, equity, and literacy.



**Rodolfo D. Becerril** serves as program manager at El Centro de la Raza at the University of New Mexico, where he oversees student success initiatives and directs the El Puente Research Fellowship Program. He mentors students in undergraduate research and supports their graduate exploration while developing programs that foster academic achievement and community engagement. Previously, he launched Graduate Initiatives to support underrepresented graduate students and coordinated the Summa Academia graduate program. He received his B.A. in criminology from the University of New Mexico.



**Tj Bliss, Ph.D.**, is the associate commissioner for academic affairs and chief academic officer for the Utah System of Higher Education. He is also a clinical assistant professor in education leadership at the University of Idaho. Previously, he served as the chief academic officer for the Idaho State Board of Education and has held several other executive leadership positions in governmental, philanthropic, and non-profit sectors. Bliss received a Ph.D. in education research, B.S. in microbiology from Brigham Young University, and an M.S. in biology from the University of Nebraska.



**Travis Broadhurst** is a current Ph.D. student in civil engineering at the University of New Mexico (UNM) and serves as president of the graduate and professional student association (GPSA). He completed a B.S. in geophysics at UNC-Chapel Hill and worked for four years for a geothermal energy services company before starting at UNM. He has extensive experience representing students both at his undergraduate institution and at UNM, having served previously as sustainability director and director of boards, commissions, and elections for GPSA. He has also been an active member and advisor for the student committee of geothermal rising for seven years.



**Pamela Cheek, Ph.D.**, is vice provost for student success and professor of French at the University of New Mexico (UNM). She leads programs to improve educational opportunity and access and to enable faculty and students to thrive in the classroom. She is recognized outside of UNM for her work on the Student Experience Project (Urban Serving Universities/APLU). She earned her B.A. from Harvard University and her Ph.D. from Stanford University as a Mellon Fellow in the Humanities. Her second book received the Laura Shannon Prize in Contemporary European Studies. She enjoys biking, hiking, and paddling in the beautiful Southwest.



**Alina Chircu, Ph.D.**, has served as the dean of the Anderson School of Management at the University of New Mexico, where she is also a tenured professor in the marketing, information and decision sciences department, since April 2024. Previously she served in several capacities at Bentley University, including as interim dean of business, associate dean of graduate programs, and department chair. Chircu holds a Ph.D. in business administration from the Carlson School of Management at the University of Minnesota, and bachelor's and master's degrees in computer science and systems modeling and simulation from the University "Politehnica" of Bucharest (Romania).



**Nicole Dopson** is assistant vice president for academic resource management in academic affairs at the University of New Mexico (UNM), overseeing finance, academic facilities, capital planning, and the Fiscal Shared Service Center. She leads fiscal and planning activities for schools, colleges, and divisions reporting to the provost, serving as academic affairs' voice on budget and planning matters across UNM. Dopson previously worked in corporate accounting and has held various fiscal and management roles during her 20-year UNM tenure, including 15 years in academic affairs. Dopson holds a bachelor's in business administration and a master's in accounting from UNM.



**Melissa Emery Thompson, Ph.D.**, is a professor of anthropology and has served as assistant vice president for research at the University of New Mexico since 2021. She focuses her efforts on reducing barriers to research participation and developing programming that celebrates and enhances research success and professionalization of students, postdocs, and faculty. As a faculty researcher, she has published over 160 original research articles and received over \$10 million in grant funding. Emery Thompson received her B.S. in anthropology and human biology from Emory University and an M.A. and Ph.D. in anthropology from Harvard University.



**Ellen Fisher, Ph.D.**, serves as the vice president for research at the University of New Mexico. She provides leadership for the research enterprise, oversees research compliance, research development, and faculty and student success initiatives, collaborating broadly to enhance, enable and advance the research and scholarship of students, faculty and staff. Previously, she served as assistant vice president for strategic initiatives at Colorado State University and has been a professor in chemistry since 1993. Fisher received her B.S. in chemistry and math (double major) from Texas Lutheran College (now University) and Ph.D. in physical-analytical chemistry from the University of Utah.



**Christopher Guymon, Ed.D.**, serves as interim provost and vice president of academic affairs at Utah Tech University. He has been privileged to serve at two distinctive universities — the University of Chicago and Utah Tech University — and in these universities, he has served as an interim provost, associate provost, assistant provost, dean, senior associate dean, and director of graduate studies. During his tenure, he has led the development and administration of several degree programs, significantly increased enrollment, built strategic relationships in Europe, East Asia, and South Asia, and led a \$3 million fundraising campaign to support students and faculty.



**Debora J. Halbert, Ph.D., J.D.**, is the vice president for academic strategy for the University of Hawai'i System (UH System) and professor of political science at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa, where she currently serves as the senior executive responsible for academic planning, policy development, and student success across the state's ten public higher education institutions. In this role, Halbert is responsible for oversight of academic affairs, student affairs, institutional research, and statewide initiatives. Previously, Halbert served as associate vice president for academic programs and policy at the UH System and associate vice chancellor for academic affairs at UH Mānoa. She holds a Ph.D. in political science and a J.D. from the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa. She has published extensively on intellectual property, technology policy, and global political economy.



**Steven Hood, Ph.D.**, is assistant commissioner for academic affairs in the Utah System of Higher Education (USHE). His responsibilities include oversight of new academic program proposals, general education, credit for prior learning, and student transfer within the eight public colleges and universities in USHE. He served as the academic vice president and provost at Snow College in Utah and as the director of the first-year core curriculum program at Ursinus College in Pennsylvania. He serves on the Utah Launch Years Math Task Force in conjunction with the Charles A. Dana Center at the University of Texas.



**Sushilla Knottenbelt, Ph.D.**, is a principal lecturer in the Department of Chemistry and Chemical Biology, faculty lead for the UNM Student Experience Project, and associate dean for student success in the College of Arts & Sciences. Her work focuses on improving retention and expanding resources available to faculty and students to ensure that every student is supported to reach their full potential. Previously, she served as undergraduate director of the combined BA/MD degree program, a pipeline program to address the physician shortage in New Mexico. She received her Ph.D. and master's in chemistry from the University of York, United Kingdom.



**Maria Lane, Ph.D.**, has served as dean of graduate studies at the University of New Mexico since 2023. Her team supports graduate education across the institution, with a particular focus on admissions, scholarships/fellowships, degree completion, and student success programming. Previously, Lane served as chair of the Department of Geography & Environmental Studies for five years and as director of the R.H. Mallory Center for Community Geography for four years. She is a tenured professor in geography and author of two books: *Geographies of Mars* (2011) and *Fluid Geographies* (2024), both published by the University of Chicago Press. Lane received her B.A. in Latin American studies from the University of Virginia, an M.S. in community and regional planning, and Ph.D. in geography from the University of Texas at Austin.



**Caitlin Lippitt, Ph.D.**, is a senior lecturer in the Department of Geography and Environmental Studies at the University of New Mexico. Lippitt leads Elevate Gen Ed, a faculty-led initiative advancing general education through skill-based learning, digital badges, and experiential approaches that strengthen curriculum innovation and student success. She serves as a University Innovation Alliance fellow and chair of the Faculty Senate Teaching Enhancement Committee, where she supports faculty development and evidence-based teaching practices. Her work advances cross-college collaboration and sustainable academic change. She received a B.A. in geography, an M.S. in geographic information science, and a Ph.D. in geography.



**Angela McLean, Ed.D.**, is the director of American Indian and Minority Achievement and K-12 partnerships at the Montana University System Office of the Commissioner of Higher Education. McLean previously served as Montana's 31st lieutenant governor and was a classroom teacher for 20 years. McLean is also a former vice chair of the Montana Board of Public Education and a former chair of the Montana University System Board of Regents. McLean received a B.S. in secondary education from Western Montana College, her M.A. in curriculum and instruction from the University of Montana, and her Ed.D. in educational leadership from Montana State University.



**Chelsea Mellenthin** has served as director for career engagement at the University of North Dakota for the past three years, leading a team of professional staff and supporting students as they develop career readiness. She oversees the Experiential Learning Center, which includes career services, internships, co-ops, job shadowing, undergraduate research, and study abroad. Previously, she worked in financial aid, academic advising, and career services. Mellenthin received her B.S. in psychology from the University of North Dakota and an M.S. in higher education from the University of North Dakota.



**Charla Orozco** serves as director of institutional analytics at the University of New Mexico, where she leads strategic data initiatives to support student success and institutional effectiveness. With more than a decade of experience in research and analytics, she specializes in data visualization, equity-focused analysis, and advancing evidence-informed decision making in higher education. She holds two master's degrees: an M.A. in Latin American studies and an M.S. in cybersecurity and business analytics. Her work centers on leveraging data to illuminate student experiences and strengthen institutional policy and practice.



**Karyn Plumm, Ph.D.**, is currently serving as the vice provost for undergraduate studies and student success at the University of North Dakota (UND). She leads a large and dynamic unit and has played a key role in unifying student success efforts that have contributed to increased enrollment and retention. She has previously served as associate dean for student success in the College of Arts & Sciences and as a faculty member in the Department of Psychology at UND. She earned her B.A. in psychology, M.A. in general psychology, and Ph.D. in experimental psychology at the University of North Dakota.



**Donna Riley, Ph.D.**, is Jim and Ellen King dean of engineering and computing and professor in the Gerald May Department of Civil, Construction and Environmental Engineering at the University of New Mexico. She previously served as Kamyar Haghighi head and professor in the School of Engineering Education at Purdue, professor and interim head of engineering education at Virginia Tech, program director for engineering education at the National Science Foundation, and founding faculty in the Picker Engineering Program at Smith College. Riley earned a B.S.E. in chemical engineering from Princeton and a Ph.D. from Carnegie Mellon in engineering and public policy.



**Eric Scott, Ed.D.**, has served as vice president for student affairs at the University of New Mexico since 2022. He leads a division of dedicated student success practitioners to create and sustain a premier, culturally responsive student experience and support systems for a vibrant community of learners. Previously, he served as associate vice president for student affairs at Boise State University and dean of students at the University of Alaska Southeast. Scott received his B.A. and M.Ed. from the University of South Carolina and Ed.D. in adult and higher education from Oregon State University.



**Allison Shaddox** is coordinator of student and graduate services in graduate studies at the University of New Mexico where she supports students through advising, program coordination, and community-engaged projects. Previously, she worked at the University of North Texas as a college recruiter for the College of Education's online graduate programs. She holds a master of legal studies from the University of Oklahoma College of Law and is currently pursuing a Ph.D. in Native American studies at the University of New Mexico.



**Gwen Sharp, Ph.D.**, is interim provost and vice president of academic affairs at Nevada State University (NSU), providing leadership for the Division of Academic Affairs and serving as the accreditation liaison officer. She previously served as vice provost of faculty affairs and research, associate dean, and a department chair at NSU. Sharp is also a professor of sociology; she received her B.A. in sociology from the University of Oklahoma, her M.S. in rural sociology, and Ph.D. in sociology from the University of Wisconsin-Madison. She is interested in evidence-based, ethical leadership and transforming career pathways for the wide array of students looking to higher education as a ladder to social mobility.



**Erin Shortlidge, Ph.D.**, is the executive director of the Center for Teaching and Learning and professor of biology at the University of New Mexico. She is a STEM education researcher who focuses on studying and implementing best practices in teaching and learning. Shortlidge comes to the University of New Mexico from Portland State University where she was an associate professor of biology and biology education and an interim vice provost for student success. Shortlidge earned a B.F.A. in dance from the University of Missouri-Kansas City, an A.S. in biology from Harold Washington College in Chicago, and her Ph.D. in biology at Portland State University in Oregon.



**Minzi A. Thomas, Ed.D.**, is a senior education designer at Education Design Lab. She is currently leading the design of micro-pathways for the Montana University System in the Year-to-Career initiative, which includes tribal colleges. Thomas previously served as director of professional development and enrollment management at Meharry Medical College and held roles at the Tennessee Higher Education Commission and the Tennessee Department of Labor. Thomas received a B.S. in journalism and electronic media from the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, an M.A. in communication studies from the University of Louisiana, Monroe, and an Ed.D. in higher education leadership from Tennessee State University.



**David Weiss, Ph.D.**, is dean of university college at the University of New Mexico. In that role, he collaborates with the leaders of each of UNM's colleges and schools on a variety of student-success initiatives. Previously, Weiss served as chair of UNM's Communication & Journalism Department and as a faculty member at Montana State University-Billings and Mount Union College. Before returning to academia, Weiss was a senior executive at several New York City-based global advertising agencies. He holds a B.A. in psychology from Cornell University, an M.A. in journalism from the University of Oregon, and a Ph.D. in communication from the University of New Mexico.

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## Colleagues' Choice Innovation Award 2026 Runner Up

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STEPHEN SCHATZ**

University of Hawai'i System

# LOCAL ATTRACTIONS

[Historic Old Town](#) has been the heart of Albuquerque since the city was founded in 1706. Today, Old Town is the city's cultural center, with numerous museums and more than 100 shops, galleries, and restaurants.

Albuquerque features a multitude of museums. Highlights include:

- ▶ [ABQ BioPark](#) – The ABQ BioPark is four facilities: Zoo, Aquarium, Botanic Garden, and fishing lakes at Tingley Beach.
  - Zoo is located at 903 10th St. S.W.
  - Aquarium & Botanic Garden are located at 2601 Central Ave. N.W.
  - Tingley Beach is located at 1800 Tingley Dr. S.W. (South of Central Ave.)
- ▶ [Albuquerque Museum](#) – In the heart of Old Town just off Route 66, Albuquerque Museum is a leading institution for art, history, and culture in New Mexico and the American Southwest. This family-friendly museum has interactive spaces, a sculpture garden, store, and café.

Old Town Albuquerque is home to a variety of local food vendors, wineries and breweries, and local shops. Highlights include:

- ▶ [Noisy Water Winery](#) – Internationally award-winning wine is what we do. Family-owned local winery located in the heart of Old Town ABQ.
- ▶ [Level 5 Lounge, Hotel Chaco](#) – On the top floor of Hotel Chaco, experience a refined, chic, and contemporary atmosphere at Level 5. Enjoy creative culinary options for dinner and brunch with magnificent panoramic views of the Sandia Mountains, downtown skyline, and historic Old Town.
- ▶ [Sawmill Market](#) – Located just across the street from Hotel Chaco, the Sawmill Market is a great place to find plenty of comforting dishes. Sip on warming soups, enjoy crisp, hearty salads, or keep it light with fresh poke bowls and sushi, plus so much more. Whatever your mood, you'll find plenty of comforting flavors and feel-good options to enjoy.
- ▶ [Fire of Sandia](#) – Fire of Sandia candle bar is a social venue to create unique fragrance candles. Candle makers choose fragrance oils to mix together into melted wax that results in a one-of-a-kind candle.

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# CONTACT US

For further information, please contact:



**Nick Fuselier**

Director of Academic Partnerships, Learning, and Development  
[nfuselier@wiche.edu](mailto:nfuselier@wiche.edu)



**Kay Hulstrom**

Associate Director of Operations and Program Implementation  
[khulstrom@wiche.edu](mailto:khulstrom@wiche.edu)



**Onnika Hanson-White**

Administrative Assistant III  
[ohwhite@wiche.edu](mailto:ohwhite@wiche.edu)

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