



# THE TAOS NEWS

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## UNM-Taos Report

### Telling our story to the Legislative Finance Committee

By Bill Knief

*The Taos News, 9/3/2015*

This past August the Legislative Finance Committee (LFC) — one of the most influential and wide-ranging committees in state government — met for three days at UNM-Taos' downtown Rio Grande Hall facility.

The committee is the fiscal and management arm of the New Mexico State Legislature, and Rep. Roberto "Bobby" Gonzales and Sen. Carlos Cisneros, who is the vice chair of the committee, are both members.

The LFC handles appropriations, budget recommendations and guidelines, fiscal performance accountability and audits while providing legislators with fiscal and public policy analyses, and UNM-Taos was asked to present opening remarks on the first day's session.

After Executive Director Dr. Kate O'Neill gave a welcome and summary of activity at UNM-Taos, she turned the microphone over to Accelerate Program coordinator and advisor Avelina Martinez and three Accelerate students.

"The reason behind the program is to grow our own workforce in New Mexico," Martinez said. "It's a unique collaboration between the Regional Development Center in Espanola, LANL and six community colleges including UNM-Taos helping non-traditional students to succeed in college and be able to get jobs in their career fields after graduation.

Cecilia Pacheco, who just received her associate degree in business administration, was the first student to speak, because she had to get to a class that morning.

"Having a community college here in Taos has benefited me not only financially," she said, "but academically as well. I had planned to go to a four-year university, but the cost of tuition, room and board and other expenses were more than I could afford. But right now my current student debt is zero. This was possible because of the low tuition rate at UNM-Taos plus being able to live at home and work while going to school.

"I have benefited greatly from the smaller class size and the ability to have one-on-one instruction. My instructors and advisors know my name and I have been able to build relationships with them, and this personal attention has kept me from becoming discouraged. I'm not just a number, I'm a student with goals. This summer I received an internship at Los Alamos National Labs, and I will be transferring to New Mexico Tech this coming spring."

Martinez said that UNM-Taos and the Accelerate Program are building a pipeline of students from Northern New Mexico who can obtain degrees in the state that will make them competitive in the STEM fields: science, technology, engineering and math. “This spring 19 percent of UNM-Taos graduates were Accelerate students, so the program is really having a huge impact,” she said, and introduced Adonis Romero, a non-traditional student who started going to college as an adult. He is a single father with full custody of a son.

“It would have been hard to afford even to go to Albuquerque,” he said, “and the fact that UNM-Taos is here provided me the opportunity to go to school and raise my son here, and it has made all the difference in my life. I hope to make an impact with everything I have learned with my degree in biology. I appreciate the opportunity you have given me, and I ask you to continue to support the state’s community colleges.”

“Adonis has successfully completed his associate’s in pre-science and has transferred to UNM main campus in pursuit of a biology degree,” Martinez said. “But because we have courses offered through our bachelor and graduate programs, he will be able to stay in his community while completing his BA degree and use his skills in math and science as a work study to tutor high school students and help prepare them for college.”

Ricardo Leon just graduated with an associate degree in pre-science, and like Adonis Romero and Celia Pacheco he is a nontraditional student. He went to a four-year school right out of high school, but he maintains that he didn’t have the support network that he needed to succeed, and meanwhile the costs were mounting. Like many students, he acquired a lot of credits, but didn’t succeed in securing a degree.

“I started a family and I had to work, so I came back home and started working at the Questa mine. But in 2009 I was laid off, and I started taking classes at UNM-Taos. But some opportunities I had at the time didn’t turn into a career, and I ended up having to go back to the mine. Then last year when the mine shut down again, I realized that if I had kept at it, I would have finished my degree by then. Now I’m pursuing my bachelor’s degree in forestry and I’ve secured a permanent position with the U.S. Forest Service in a nation-wide competition, that will one day lead to my becoming a Forester.

“UNM-Taos has helped me provide for my family, it has replaced the job I lost, I’m still in the community I love and my family and I get to be a part of this beautiful place. That’s the way I was brought up and that’s something special to me, so thank you, Legislators, for meeting with us today, and listening to our stories.”

*Bill Knief is a project coordinator at UNM-Taos.*

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From left, Ricardo Leon, Adonis Romero, Avelina Martinez and Celia Pacheco appear before the Legislative Finance Committee.