

## BUILD BELONGING, NOT BARRIERS, IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Today, the U.S. Supreme Court issued a decision in the *Students for Fair Admission v. Harvard* and University of North Carolina cases invalidating their specific admissions programs in relation to how they consider race and severely restricting the consideration of race in admissions generally. The Court ruled that Harvard's and UNC's admissions practices in relation to race violate the Equal Protection Clause of the 14th Amendment. The Court did not entirely ban the consideration of race in admissions, however, stating that "nothing in this opinion should be construed as prohibiting universities from considering an applicant's discussion of how race affected his or her life, be it through discrimination, inspiration, or otherwise."

This ruling has far-reaching implications affecting access to higher education for countless students for generations to come. We have yet to understand what the full impact will be, but we in academia must carefully and creatively consider how we respond to this important question: by further limiting affirmative action, what message is being sent to current and future students regarding their sense of belonging in our classrooms and on our campuses? More importantly, what must we do as institutions of higher education to make sure that students are not dissuaded by such messages? At UNM, we will lead.

U.S. colleges and universities provide an unparalleled system of higher education; but they also offer bountiful opportunities and experiences, including diverse campus communities, in which to develop critical thinking skills, challenge assumptions, and communicate and collaborate effectively with people of different backgrounds, cultures and worldviews.

We will continue to preserve these critical opportunities for learning and for personal and intellectual growth in spite of socially and politically constructed challenges and barriers, whether it's the affordability of a college degree, challenges to curriculum, misunderstanding of higher education, or skepticism that diverse students belong in college. Here at UNM we will ensure that our students know that they belong and that we will do everything we can to make sure that they thrive here.

Higher education may not be the optimal path for everyone, but it should always be an accessible and well-lit path for anyone who wants to take it. When we limit access to education, we shackle the nation. Our nation's history has included systems that claim to support equality, while, at the same time, sadly, constructing barriers for those who are most vulnerable and disadvantaged by those same systems. Again, in 2023, American higher education cannot afford to restrict access, or to be perceived as a place where certain people can't or don't belong. Here at UNM we will do and be better for our students, for their sake and for the sake of the nation.



June 29, 2023

I was a first-generation college student more than 50 years ago, and I know what it's like to think you don't belong in college. It doesn't take much to convince someone they can't or shouldn't pursue a higher education. The result can be thwarted aspirations, deferred dreams and unrealized potential that sets back not only individuals, but our communities and our nation. I am glad I was told that I do belong...and that I listened. Here at UNM we will not send messages that some do not belong, and we will especially not send such messages to those whose path may be the most challenging.

As the University *for* New Mexico, we fully and openly embrace the cultural diversity that has made UNM, and our state, such a unique place to live and learn and grow for generations. With one of the most diverse campuses in the country, we strive to give our students the vital sense of belonging to the Lobo community, which understands, values, and respects them.

Through our participation in the Student Experience Project (SEP), a collaborative committed to innovative, research-based practices that foster a greater sense of student belonging, we know the impact that being valued, included, and accepted on our campuses has on our students, especially those who come from communities traditionally underrepresented in college. Since 2020, we have seen failure and withdrawal rates drop, as well as an increase in the number of students receiving As and Bs. Just as important, students have told us that their sense of identity safety, social connection and belonging improved notably under SEP practices. SEP is just one way we are investing in a healthier, more productive, and more successful campus environment for everyone.

I strongly believe it is our obligation to ensure our doors, experiences, and culture remain accessible and open to everyone. We owe all students full access to a college education and the gateway to a life of endless opportunities that such an education provides. Maya Angelou said that "you may not control all the events that happen to you, but you can decide not to be reduced by them." We will continue to champion and lead in what we already do - build belonging through inclusivity; we will not be reduced. At UNM we don't create barriers...we are committed to removing them. As per our institutional mission, we will continue to provide an unfettered path to higher learning, personal fulfillment, and a better future for our students.

Garnett S. Stokes, President

