



# PRESIDENT'S WEEKLY PERSPECTIVE



May 18, 2020

Good afternoon.

For more than a year, The University of New Mexico, as the State's only R1 institution, has dedicated itself to examining and addressing problems of global, national and regional significance—problems that require researchers to work together across disciplinary boundaries to develop and implement solutions. Beginning in February 2019, UNM researchers committed themselves to addressing what we identified as [three Grand Challenges: Sustainable Water Resources, Successful Aging, and Substance Use Disorders](#).

In March 2020, however, we came up against perhaps the grandest and most complicated challenge of all: a radically-altered world in which most operations shifted either online or remotely—or sometimes closed down entirely—due to the COVID-19 pandemic. However, even with most of the world on hold, our research community never quit working, never quit conducting the research vital to our University and critical to the well-being and future of our State.

All three of our research teams are looking to add researchers to their ranks as they dig deeper, for instance, into: the causes of Alzheimer's Disease; determining the best ways to ensure more sustainable water resources for our State; and examining how COVID-19, and social distancing/isolation, affects both physical and mental health of our citizens. Grand Challenges broaden our student and faculty perspectives to better serve New Mexico and provide opportunities to collaborate through interdisciplinary research and problem solving. When we work together to solve our greatest challenges, we achieve the amazing. Even in the face of a pandemic.

## **Wearing a Mask in the Face of Cultural Biases**

As of May 16, Governor Lujan Grisham asked all new Mexicans to please wear a mask when out in public to help prevent the spread of coronavirus. We take our responsibility to public health seriously at UNM, and expect anyone on any of our campuses to comply with this directive, but as Dr. Assata Zerai, Vice President for Equity and Inclusion, and her colleagues point out in their [recent op-ed in the Albuquerque Journal](#), for some people of color, wearing a mask in public can often mean contending with ugly, racial biases. As one colleague of Mexican descent shared, "I was worried not only for my safety but the safety of others that could be profiled as a threat simply by having their faces covered by a mask. I realized that to many people I look like a threat, and it means that I would be putting my well-being at risk due to their overreaction."

Mask-wearing is one of the adjustments, among many, that we have been making in response to the pandemic, especially as restrictions are relaxed. We all need to beware of – and be aware of – these kinds of unconscious cultural biases. We're all in this together.

## **Be Inspired by the Class of 2020**

The UNM Class of 2020 will be one for the history books—the class that saw its final months of classes conducted via Zoom windows, and watched as the athletic seasons and celebrations of their final year were cut short or cancelled. Through it all, our students have been patient, flexible, courageous and, most of all, inspiring. They are, plainly put, the class that prevailed.

Each year, UNM's Communication and Marketing team selects several graduates to represent the drive, determination and dedication of UNM's graduating class. The students highlighted here represent only a fraction of those who embraced change, stared down societal shift and prevailed against all obstacles to earn their degrees. This week, the [UNM Newsroom spotlights two inspiring graduates](#), with more to come in the days ahead. Please keep checking—and keep being inspired by their stories.

Have a good week, stay safe, and stay healthy.

Garnett S. Stokes  
President