

## **A Community College and University Collaboration: Building the Capacity of Our Latin American Studies Programs**

Erica Volkers

In 2014, the University of New Mexico's Latin American and Iberian Institute (LAII) received a Title VI National Resource Center grant to support collaborative activities with Central New Mexico Community College (CNM) for the purpose of increasing the pipeline of students engaging in Latin American studies, facilitating seamless transfer between the two institutions, and developing new and enhancing existing Latin American Studies (LAS) courses available to community college students. The now four-year collaboration has resulted in many successes, as well as provided new insights to the challenges of such a partnership. This paper, written from my perspective as Dean overseeing the Latin American Studies program at CNM, shares the characteristics and context of the two collaborating institutions, details the collaborative activities and their results, analyzes the challenges and potential obstacles for other institutions seeking to engage in this work, and offers possibilities for future directions based upon their experiences. It is my hope that this collaborative project can serve as a model for other institutions of higher education interested in expanding the capacity and impact of their Latin American Studies programs and enhancing scholarly exchange between community colleges and research institutions.

### **Institutional Characteristics and Context**

*Gettin' good players is easy. Gettin' 'em to play together is the hard part. —Casey Stengel*

The University of New Mexico (UNM), with its main campus located in Albuquerque, New Mexico, is one of only four Carnegie Very High Research Level universities with an Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI) designation. With a student enrollment of approximately

27,000 (not including its branch campuses), 53.3% are minority students. Approximately 43% of its students receive Pell Grants, and about 50% of students enrolled at UNM are “first generation” college students. Only 6% of students reside on campus, and UNM receives approximately 3,000 transfer students a year, with about one-third of these coming from CNM.

Located less than one mile from UNM, CNM offers over 150 associates degrees, certificates and training programs and is a designated HSI, with minorities comprising 62% of its approximately 25,000 students. About 60% of CNM students fall within the federal low-income guidelines, and approximately 60% are “first generation” college students. With an average age of 27, an estimated 80% of CNM’s students work while attending school, and 70% are part-time students. About 71% of CNM’s students who transfer to a four-year institution, choose to attend UNM, and additionally, an annual average of 1900 students attend both CNM and UNM concurrently.

Despite being in close proximity to one another, shared students, and a long-term transfer relationship, other obstacles have made developing and maintaining effective collaborative relationships between the two institutions difficult. As a four-year institution, UNM’s bachelor’s degree requirements were designed for students who enter UNM as freshmen. Although CNM is cognizant of the importance of a seamless transfer experience for its students and thus, deliberately designs its degree requirements to closely match those of its primary transfer institution (UNM), it has been difficult for CNM to collaborate with various departments at UNM in order to do so. With a limited number of transfer agreements between UNM and CNM and no comprehensive statewide transfer curriculum in place in New Mexico, the transfer process can become quite complicated, leaving some transfer students who completed an

associate degree at CNM having to take additional courses to meet UNM's undergraduate degree requirements.

One of the barriers to developing effective collaborative relationships between the institutions has been perceptions of faculty roles and responsibilities and expertise at each institution. UNM, a Research I institution, places great value on content expertise as evidenced by terminal degree completion and active research, publishing, and conference presentations required of its faculty. This has sometimes resulted in misgivings regarding CNM faculty having sufficient content expertise to effectively teach major-specific courses, given that many CNM faculty do not hold a Ph.D., nor are required to engage in ongoing research in their discipline. Community college faculty also have limited opportunities, due to funding, to attend discipline-specific conferences as a means of keeping current in their field. CNM, as a community college, places great value on teaching and applied experience in the discipline, as evidenced in its priority to hire faculty with significant teaching or practical experience. Likewise, faculty at CNM may question the level of expertise and training of UNM faculty in areas such as pedagogy, current best practices in teaching and learning, and strategies to effectively serve highly diverse student populations.

In addition to the faculty bias that students will be better served by their own institution, continuing declines in student enrollment at both institutions have increased the sense of competition and further heightened a reluctance to collaborate. UNM and CNM have, for the past few years, vied for the top spot in being New Mexico's largest institution of higher education. This, in addition to decreasing state funding for higher education and a funding structure that pits colleges against one another in an attempt to secure more funding by capturing

a larger portion of student enrollments and degrees granted, has resulted in other challenges to building effective collaborative relationships.

While CNM and UNM may be competing for enrollment among the same student populations, there is still a persistent belief among some that students making a choice to attend CNM are not as “academically engaged” as their counterparts at UNM. In practice, this might be true if measuring the predominantly part-time status of CNM students. This, in addition to the fact that many students at CNM work full-time and CNM is a commuter campus, also limits students’ engagement in “extra-curricular” activities such as student clubs, study groups, or lectures and special events. However, research conducted by CNM also revealed that students who completed their associate degree at CNM and transferred to UNM, on average, performed at the same academic level or better than those students who started as freshmen at UNM. Finally, it is important to note that the LAS (Latin American Studies) Collaborative Project shed new light on the academic engagement of CNM students; this dimension is discussed later in this paper.

### **The LAS Collaborative Project**

*The secret is to gang up on the problem, rather than each other. —Thomas Stallkamp*

In the fall of 2013, the Associate Director for Program Development of UNM’s Latin American & Iberian Institute reached out to me, in my role as the Dean of Communication, Humanities & Social Sciences at CNM, to discuss the possibility of partnering on a Title VI National Resource Center grant for Latin American studies. The timing was opportune, as I was working with a faculty member to develop a Latin American Studies Associate of Arts degree to present to their curriculum committee, and the grant would provide a unique opportunity to garner student interest in this degree pathway. During our initial meetings, in addition to

discussing ideas for the grant proposal, we were able to refine the degree/course requirements to assure a seamless transfer for those students who would transfer to UNM's LAS degree program. What was exciting for me was that the LAII Associate Director was encouraging the use of the grant to develop additional LAS courses at the 100 and 200 level, which UNM would accept as transfer credits to their program. This in itself was indicative of a desire for an authentic collaboration, in which both partners recognized the mutual benefits to student enrollment, retention, and success, and offering major-specific coursework within the associate of arts degree. With a commitment to a mutually beneficial project, we articulated our desired goals for this partnership. For me, the impetus to implement and promote a Latin American Studies degree at CNM was motivated by the desire to offer a degree pathway that leveraged the cultural capital of a significant percentage of our students as Hispanic heritage students. The LAII Associate Director and I were also both committed to equity of access through expanding international studies opportunities to minority and low-income and non-traditional student populations. We were also interested in creating opportunities for students from a variety of majors to develop international competencies through an internationalized curriculum and study abroad opportunities. Finally, we both believed that CNM students would be well-served by a major or minor in LAS due to current political, economic, and business contexts, particularly living in New Mexico, and therefore wanted to increase the pipeline of students transferring to the LAS program at UNM. With those goals serving as the framework, we developed proposed activities for the grant that included:

- 1) Finalizing a transfer agreement that outlined the courses CNM students can transfer and apply to the UNM LAS major/minor.
- 2) Developing a plan of action for advisement in which CNM students receive coordinated advisement while pursuing their CNM degree in preparation for matriculation to UNM.
- 3) Actively promoting CNM-LAS courses and advising UNM students to take whichever CNM courses are appropriate in any given semester, with an overall goal of creating a

seamless and meaningful cross-campus advisement structure that provides support and encouragement to students on both campuses.

- 4) Assisting in the expansion of LAS courses at CNM, by offering funds for CNM faculty to develop both core and elective courses.
- 5) Allocating funding for UNM graduate students to co-teach LAS courses with CNM faculty.
- 6) Allocating funding for CNM faculty to attend professional conferences focused on LAS and/or study abroad programs, in order to gain additional content expertise for teaching LAS courses and better acquaint themselves with the ins and outs of developing a study abroad program.
- 7) Developing and implementing a study abroad program at CNM that integrates general Latin American Studies (i.e. culture, language) and business management.

### LAS Curriculum Development

In 2014, CNM launched its LAS degree program. The curriculum included 35 credits of general education courses, 18 credits of Spanish and/or Portuguese language courses, and up to 18 credit hours of LAS related coursework that would transfer to UNM's LAS major. As part of the LAS core courses, CNM was offering a new course (the development of which was funded by the grant) called Introduction to Latin American Studies. The course was designed to take an interdisciplinary approach to a survey of Latin American studies that would not only introduce LAS majors to the diversity of the field, but to also allow students in a variety of degree programs such as liberal arts, communication, business, and culinary arts, to explore LAS as a possible major or minor. Unlike many of the courses designed for transfer, this course did not have a transfer equivalent at UNM, but UNM as part of the grant project, was not only willing to accept the course towards meeting their LAS major requirements but had encouraged its development and promoted the course to their students taking LAS as a major or minor. The first year the course was offered at CNM, enrollment was low at 9-10 students. Typically, CNM would cancel a course with fewer than 14 students, but because UNM was a committed partner in developing this course and program, CNM did not cancel the course. When the course was offered in 2017, 20 students enrolled. The increase in enrollment in this course is indicative of

the increase in the number of students who have declared LAS as a major at CNM. In 2014, we started with 14 students who declared LAS as their degree program and two years later the number has more than doubled.

In addition to the Introduction to Latin American Studies course, the grant also helped to fund the development of a Latin American film class, which we included as an elective in not only the LAS degree but also in our Spanish certificate and degree program. With the grant funding, we also developed the curriculum for an LAS study abroad course, and a topics course called, *Exploring Maya: History, Politics, and Culture*, which served as an on-campus precursor to our first study abroad trip planned for Guatemala in the summer of 2018.

### LAS Study Abroad

When we received the grant, CNM had never engaged in study abroad. We had just established an Office of Global Education to begin implementing international education opportunities, but the initial focus was on developing opportunities for international students to come to CNM. Once again, the timing of the grant was opportune, as it would be used to help CNM develop the infrastructure for conducting faculty-led study abroad programs. The first step to doing so was to develop our knowledge of study abroad programs, so we sent three CNM faculty who were engaged with the LAS collaborative project to a conference on study abroad programs. After attending the conference, the faculty put together a list of the types of policies we would need to have in place to support study abroad and, in collaboration with the LAII Associate Director, we began developing the curriculum for the LAS study abroad experience.

One of the goals we set for the curriculum was to provide students with an interdisciplinary experience that would give them an introduction to the history, culture (arts, food, language, customs, archeological sites, etc.), and business contexts of the Latin American

country they would be visiting. We spent a lot of time contemplating and refining the requirements of the curriculum: Would it be a co-requisite course or an alternative way to meet the learning outcomes for the Introduction to Latin American Studies course? Would we have a prerequisite Spanish proficiency requirement? Would the experience include a required language class? Ultimately, we decided to adopt learning outcomes similar to those we had developed for the Introduction to Latin American Studies course and agreed that students could either take the study abroad course as a stand-alone, or concurrently with the Introduction to Latin American Studies course. We also decided against having a language prerequisite. While having a prerequisite might encourage students to prioritize gaining the level of Spanish proficiency that was required for the major and would enable greater ability to navigate in a Spanish-speaking country, we felt it was perhaps more important to provide access to this type of experience to a greater number of students and be as inclusive as possible. Additionally, we predicted that they might become motivated to gain increased levels of Spanish or Portuguese language proficiency on their own, thanks to the experience abroad. We did decide to include a language component in the study abroad experience, but rather than trying to tie this to specific credits and proficiency level outcomes, we opted for daily lessons during the trip that would introduce students to relevant vocabulary and phrases reflecting the planned activities for that day.

We wanted to design a general framework that could be applied in diverse settings, so we focused on creating an outline of suggested student activities that would occur over the course of the study abroad and tied each to the learning outcomes. For example, when we were first exploring a trip to Mexico, we envisioned a day in Mexico City that would start with lessons on the Mexican government and politics and related Spanish vocabulary, followed by a visit to the Palacio Nacional and Legislature, and then a late lunch at Corazón de Maguey, featuring

traditional Mexican cuisine. Students would discuss their experiences in the afternoon and write a reflection paper on impressions of how the government is structured, what surprised or interested them, and what they deemed to be the most important concerns, problems and issues for the government to address. They would also be expected to intellectualize their dining experience and compare and contrast traditional Mexican food, contemporary Mexican food, and New Mexican food. All activities were designed to support the learning objectives of identifying “the principal events, problems, and concerns faced by Latin Americans today within a cultural, political and historical context” and “the political, cultural, and environmental developments that have contributed to interrelations among current Latin American communities and nations.”

Keeping in mind the goal of access to low-income and non-traditional students, we also were cognizant of how time and costs needed to be factored into our curriculum design and study abroad planning. Because so many students at CNM work full-time and an estimated 25% are parents, we felt we had to create an experience that was shorter in duration. Accordingly, our curriculum framework was designed for a six (full) day experience. We also knew that we needed to be very mindful of the types of daily activities and focus on low budget options to keep overall program costs down. Additionally, with plans to hold study abroad trips during the summer, we wanted to make sure students would still be eligible for financial aid, which, if students took both the study abroad course and the Introduction to Latin American Studies course, they would be.

With the help of UNM, we were also able to work with staff in UNM’s Global Education office to contribute to the development of the processes and policies that needed to be put in place for study abroad programs at CNM. This included the development of an online

application, processes for paying various vendors, a student orientation, and a policy handbook, as well as a risks and conditions form and emergency protocols. We also identified other possible sources of funding for student scholarships to support study abroad experiences.

Our choice of Guatemala for our first study abroad trip was influenced primarily by our desire to ensure the confidence of our faculty leading the trip. We had very few CNM faculty with experience leading study abroad trips for students, and of those that had experience at other institutions, less than a handful had done so in a Latin American country. However, one of our anthropology faculty had significant experience working with students from another college in Antigua, Guatemala, and as a result was very familiar with the location and had a number of local contacts within the city. Based upon this, I recruited her and a history faculty member who developed and taught our Latin American Studies courses and had also been a key contributor in the grant activities, to co-lead our first study abroad trip to Antigua, Guatemala. Using the curriculum framework we had developed, these two faculty created an itinerary for the trip. We decided to base costs on a maximum of 10 students, given this was our first trip. With LAII's help, we developed a budget and marketing materials, and began publicizing the study abroad to CNM students in the fall of 2017. While we were concerned about the level of interest (and had even anticipated needing to open spots for CNM faculty and staff), by November we had interviewed 16 CNM student applicants and ultimately selected the 10 who would go on the trip, who represented a diversity of majors (Anthropology, Latin American Studies, Liberal Arts, and Nursing). With our first study abroad still on the horizon, we anticipate more lessons to be learned and know it will inform future study abroad opportunities. We look forward to the program's impact on students' development of international competencies and their motivations to pursue additional LAS coursework and study abroad.

### LAS Speaker Series, Graduate Guest Lecturers, and Co-Teachers

Another strategy we implemented to introduce students to the field of Latin American Studies was a LAS Speaker Series. Each semester, the LAII Associate Director recruited three UNM professors or doctoral students to give lectures at CNM. She chose professors/graduate students who were engaging and had research expertise in potentially high-interest areas. Some of the speaker series lecture titles included: *Pacifying the Slum: Police and Gangs in Rio de Janeiro; Performing Resistance: Quanta and the Experimental Music Scene of 1970s Mexico; Pueblo Invisibilities in the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands*; and *¿Qué es Marihuana? And Why It's Important to Know*. UNM helped create fliers to publicize the event, and I sent the fliers out to the CNM faculty to share with their students. We had 15-35 CNM students attend each lecture, which equaled or surpassed typical attendance numbers at similar events at UNM. That was not the only surprise for the UNM guest speakers; they were also impressed by the level of thoughtful questions and insightful comments by the CNM students. For those from UNM, the speaker series helped dispel their misperceptions of CNM students as being less academically engaged, while the CNM students had new opportunities to access the types of extracurricular “academic” activities not frequently offered at CNM. Additionally, and perhaps most importantly, it provided CNM students face-time with faculty at UNM who might someday be their faculty, and offered them role models in different areas of study/research they could pursue if they continued their education.

The concept of UNM graduate students and professors serving as models for CNM students became the source of inspiration for an addition to the LAS Speaker Series: a panel of UNM LAS (major or minor) alumni sharing their stories of their academic and professional journey. Many CNM students are focused on career pathways, and careers associated with

degrees like LAS are not always evident. The alumni panel helped current students understand the wide range of career opportunities available to LAS majors and highlighted the enriching and unique nature of interdisciplinary studies within LAS.

In both an effort to increase CNM students' exposure to the field of Latin American Studies and enhance the professional development of CNM faculty and UNM graduate students, the LAS Graduate Guest Classroom Lecturer program was established. The program targets CNM faculty teaching courses (anthropology, economics, history, political science, sociology, and Spanish) with content that may be related to Latin American Studies and makes a general offer to provide them with a guest lecture by a UNM doctoral student whose research focuses on Latin America. If a targeted CNM faculty expresses interest in opening her/his classroom to a guest speaker from UNM, the LAII Associate Director works with the CNM faculty to identify possible topics related to their curriculum. Once potential topics are identified, the LAII Associate Director identifies a graduate student with the appropriate expertise and connects him/her with the CNM faculty to finalize plans. Examples of past topics include: *Household Archaeology: A Case Study of Ancient Maya Communities in Southern Belize*, in an Ancient Mesoamerica course; *What Does a Cultural Anthropologist Do? A Case of Local Tourism Development in Coastal Jalisco, Mexico*, in an Introduction to Anthropology course; and *Race and Racialization in the Americas*, in an Introduction to Sociology course. This program not only gives students (and the host faculty) the opportunity to learn about specialized research in various disciplines related to LAS, but it also exposes them to graduate student role models. Additionally, the program provides graduate students with a bit of teaching experience in the community college environment. This experience also serves to expose graduate students to the

richness of teaching at the community college level. Finally, it has provided a unique opportunity to infuse Latin American studies content into “non-LAS courses.”

To further develop LAS graduate students’ teaching skills in diverse student populations and at community colleges, we also experimented with UNM graduate students and CNM faculty co-teaching courses. UNM recruited and paid graduate students to co-teach an LAS course with a CNM faculty. Thanks to this initiative, a UNM LAS graduate student was even hired to teach an online CNM LAS course. Because the UNM graduate student was granted access to CNM’s online instructor training and then co-taught with a veteran CNM online instructor, she was able to gain new skills to effectively teach online and as a result, new unanticipated professional opportunities materialized.

### **Challenges**

*Coming together is a beginning, staying together is progress, and working together is success. — Henry Ford*

Our experience with this collaborative grant project revealed two primary challenges to our original objectives. We had intended to increase the pipeline of students transferring to UNM’s LAS program, and offer CNM students coordinated advising while pursuing their CNM degree in preparation for matriculation at UNM. Two challenges arose: 1) CNM students not engaging with LAII advisors; and 2) CNM students not entering the LAS bachelor’s degree program at UNM (it is important to note that at the time of publication, sufficient time has not yet passed to fully and accurately measure).

As part of the collaborative grant project, we invited students from LAS courses and LAS majors to meet with an LAII advisor at CNM’s campus and map out their degree plan at CNM to ensure seamless transfer to UNM. We also used the LAS Speaker Series to collect emails of student attendees and communicate LAS related activities to them, including the opportunity to

connect with an LAII advisor. Unfortunately, despite our efforts, we had little success. While we do not have specific data explaining the causes of these outcomes, given my experiences with CNM’s student population, I am able to identify probable underlying issues.

Until more recently, CNM did not require students to meet with an academic advisor. Even now, with limited staff resources and a large student population, we only require an initial academic advising meeting for new incoming students. While some students may continue to meet each term with an advisor, a significant majority engage in “self-advisement,” using the catalog and degree tracking software. In part, this may be because students are not assigned a specific advisor with whom they maintain a relationship throughout their educational journey at CNM. The commuter and part-time nature of our student population also requires many students to carefully manage their time on campus and prioritize required activities, such as attending class. As many of our students are also first-generation college students, they may be more hesitant to engage in, or are unaware of, traditional academic sources of support, such as faculty office hours, the tutoring center, or academic advisors.

Moving forward, we plan to invite an LAII advisor to LAS courses at CNM to not only introduce himself/herself to students and communicate the benefits of seeing an advisor, but to allow students to actually meet with the advisor during class. We are hoping this “warm handoff,” structured during class time will help students develop a relationship with the advisor for future meetings, and for when they are ready to make the transition to UNM.

Because of the predominantly part-time nature of CNM students and the resulting average time-to-degree-completion rates, we have also not yet been able to measure the relative success of this program with regards to matriculating students to UNM’s bachelor’s degree program with an LAS major or minor. One additional strategy we are implementing through

CNM's Fall 2018 catalog is to highlight the option of pursuing LAS as a minor. While we have been able to communicate this to students who are taking LAS classes, CNM degrees do not require that students specify a minor. We have language to indicate to students that some transfer programs require a minor and therefore, they may want to take courses within their degree to fulfill the requirement of a minor. However, we do not currently provide a list of the various minors nor the courses that will count. In the new catalog, we will publish a link to a page that lists the minors, to include LAS and associated courses. We believe this will also showcase LAS as a minor for students not only in our liberal arts degree programs, but in the career and technical degrees like business and culinary arts as well.

*As always in a musical collaboration: One has to like each other. As simple as that.*  
—Klaus Schulze

Another challenge to replicating the success of the CNM/UNM partnership may lie with the people involved. Each institution had a leader over their respective programs who was highly engaged and committed to the partnership. We were respectful of the differences that existed between our institutions and mindful of the strengths of the faculty and staff who were involved in the program. We met regularly (at our favorite local coffee shop) to brainstorm ideas and to check in on strategies, timelines, and outcomes. We were both very involved at the ground level to insure the successful implementation of our project activities and were very responsive and proactive in our communication with each other and our various stakeholders. Finally, we were also both open to feedback on what was working with the partnership project, and what wasn't, and we enjoyed the synergy of working together to create an authentic collaborative relationship.

## **Future Directions**

*"Success is not a destination; it is a journey we must constantly pursue."* --Gabriela Reyna

The strong collaborative relationship we developed through this grant project has built the foundation of an enduring partnership. What we have learned from the project will not only serve to sustain activities beyond the life of the grant, but also inspire new ideas for grant-funded projects.

The strength of LAS is its interdisciplinary appeal, as evidenced in the breadth of topics available to faculty and students through our speaker series and guest lecturers, the structure of the curricular framework for the associate degree in LAS and the study abroad, and the diversity of majors among the students participating in these initiatives. These elements serve as the basis for future directions and planning for the next grant proposal. Building upon our desire to expand the opportunities for students at CNM, to further develop their cultural competencies, and to leverage access of faculty and students to the field of LAS through multiple areas of study, we are interested in expanding the integration of LAS topics from courses more traditionally associated with liberal arts (i.e. anthropology, history, literature, music, sociology) to courses at CNM typically characterized as “career and technical.” Our proposal includes bringing together faculty from CNM who represent a particular career field, such as culinary arts, with CNM faculty from the humanities or social behavioral sciences disciplines, such as history or sociology, and UNM faculty who specialize in a LAS-related topic, to form a working group around a particular theme, such as foodways. These funded working groups will encourage knowledge exchange and provide a forum to explore new opportunities to revise existing career and technical course curricula at CNM to reflect this theme. Not only will this provide new professional development opportunities to faculty across disciplines, but the resulting curricular revisions will increase cultural competencies of students pursuing career and technical degrees

and introduce them to the LAS field of study, which they may choose to pursue as a minor--one that is new to them and one that can expand their future career options.

While faculty at each institution enjoy the benefits of receiving additional funding for curriculum development and participating in a speaker series and serving as guest lecturers, many of those involved, once involved, express a desire to continue the activities regardless of funding. The additional rewards of professional growth, community-building, learning from each other, and engagement with CNM students, as well as the benefit to both institutions' programs, makes the effort worthwhile.

I believe, for all involved in this partnership project, it has been a uniquely rewarding experience. It has not only created new pathways to success for our students, but also serves as a model for mutually-beneficial relationship-cultivation between community colleges and universities. It seems fitting that this model was developed within a program of study that celebrates rich interdisciplinary connections, fosters cross-cultural understandings, and reflects the value of cultural heritage for a community.

## **Biography**

Dr. Erica Volkers is Dean of Communication, Humanities and Social Studies at Central New Mexico Community College (CNM) in Albuquerque, NM. Dr. Volkers earned her PhD in Education and Human Resource Studies from Colorado State University in 2012. Prior to her appointment as Dean, she served as Associate Dean and Director of Education at CNM, and prior to pursuing her PhD, she was on faculty at Santa Fe Community College.