2009-2010 PROVOST’S PROJECT

ADVANCING LEADERS PROGRAM

A Program of the ADVANCE Program at the Teaching Academy

NUESTRO CORAZÓN: GROWING WITH NMSU

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Dear Provost Wilkins,

We first want to be among those who welcome you to the NMSU campus, and our wider community. We are pleased to share this report with you and hope that the insights we have articulated provide useful information for you, as you take on the challenge of being our Provost. Should you see sufficient value in the report, we hope that you will opt to share it with others on the Executive Team.

We look forward to our meeting on November 18 and an opportunity to discuss the report with you in person.

Best wishes,

Members of the 2009-10 ADVANCING Leaders Project

Mark Andersen  
Stephen Arnold  
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PREAMBLE

About the ADVANCING Leaders program

The ADVANCING Leaders Program (ALP) trains 12 tenured participants from the Las Cruces and Doña Ana campuses annually. This year-long leadership program was established in 2004 and has trained more than 60 faculty members to date, with up to two participants from each of the six academic colleges and Doña Ana Community College (DACC) participating per year.

The program provides monthly workshops and a two-day off-campus retreat to develop leadership and managerial skills, and to improve personal skills for leadership in teaching, research, service, extension, or administration.

Participants build ongoing networking opportunities, connect with a mentor from upper administration, and demonstrate an understanding about the core values and best practices at New Mexico State University (NMSU).

About the Annual Provost’s Project

Participants in the ADVANCING Leaders Program look at the University and propose a project that could be developed and implemented over the next year. This project should be doable, manageable by a group, and address a campus-wide issue. Participants work on the project during their monthly meetings, and also meet “off-line.”
NUESTRO CORAZÓN: GROWING WITH NMSU

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This document is the product of 11 faculty members who participated in the 2009/10 Provost’s Project through the ADVANCING Leadership Program (ALP). The ALP is designed to train interested faculty and staff to become leaders at New Mexico State University. These people were selected from a pool of applicants for their potential and dedication to bettering NMSU. They received training in the many aspects of leadership and administration. Part of the charge to the ALP group was to develop a project that would help both the Provost and New Mexico State University (NMSU) as a whole. After many long discussions, we charged ourselves with producing a document that captures the spirit of the University through interviews with recent, mid-career and long-time faculty at NMSU. What follows is a summary of the transcripts of group interviews conducted during the spring of 2010. The intention of this document is to appraise incoming administrators of the cultures of research, teaching, service, and outreach/extension that have developed at NMSU and that are, in many cases, unique to our University. Specifically, this document deals with faculty retention by focusing on what has brought people to NMSU, and what keeps them here.

In the same way that NMSU is made up by a diversity of people, interests and expertise, the interviews revealed a similar diversity in factors that caused people to come here and remain here as productive faculty members. As is true for most faculty members, the interpretation of the mission of a university is a vital factor in attracting members to its campus; the same is true for those at NMSU. Our land-grant mission is appealing to a broad spectrum of individuals because of its multifaceted nature: to provide a liberal and practical education for students and to sustain programs of research, extension education, and public service. For example, the emphases on teaching, research, service and outreach/extension related to the land-grant mission have each been for many people of utmost significance. NMSU’s persistent determination to permit each faculty member to develop his or her own strengths within this quartet of thrusts—particularly in view of the University’s goal to serve the people and initiatives in State of New Mexico – is seen by many faculty members as vital to their connecting with and staying at our Institution.

As reflected in the focus groups, many faculty are dedicated not only to serving our student population from a traditional classroom education point of view, but also to serving students who might not otherwise be equipped to enroll and successfully matriculate at a university. This dedication to students is broadly reflected throughout the faculty; it additionally demonstrates a devotion to diversity based on a variety of definitions. As part of this passion for our students, NMSU’s size permits a favorable teacher-to-student ratio which helps students achieve and faculty realize the positive impact they have on student lives. In conjunction with this, faculty expressed a ‘sense of family’ at NMSU that might not be possible at a larger institution. This familial sensitivity also has led to spousal employment accommodation that again might not occur at other institutions. Such elements have also been an important aspect at NMSU where small perks and a collegial environment help offset perspectives on lower salaries.

All of the above factors have led to a collegiality at NMSU that permeates the very fiber of this campus. For the most part, faculty feel at ease within their departments and, as one stated, they enjoy not only “symbiotic relationships with other faculty” but also the lack of “collegial toxicity.” The willingness of
faculty to communicate and work with each other leads to an atmosphere on campus where ideas can be shared, cross-discipline research is fostered, and the whole becomes greater than the sum of its individual parts.

In addition to aspects of campus life and interactions, the region plays an important role. The southern New Mexico location leads to the integration of southwestern attitudes and lifestyles. It also leads to architectural reflections of this culture and provides faculty with a beautiful area in which to work and live. The affordability of life in this region additionally remains important in the retention of faculty at NMSU.

While the majority of the discussions that we summarize in this report focus on what faculty appreciated most about NMSU, areas where there is room for improvement were also identified. These aspects, if addressed, could strengthen the Institutional culture and faculty morale. Most of these potential opportunities for making NMSU an even better environment related to a desire for leadership continuity, expression of a clear and collective vision, and vertical communication. Changes in these areas and some changes in the work environment could help strengthen the research, teaching, service, and outreach/extension missions of the University.
INTRODUCTION

New Mexico State University’s current strategic planning and guidance document, “Living the Vision,” includes five broad goals, each with specific measurable objectives. Although none of the goals explicitly mention the importance of faculty retention in enhancing organizational stability and cohesiveness of the University, some of the objectives under Goal 2 (a high-quality, diverse faculty, staff and student body) imply the importance of a diverse, stable, and well-compensated faculty helping to move the Institution toward its goals. In addition, a high rate of retention of excellent faculty is essential for the attainment of Goals 1, 3, and 4: national and international recognition of academic programs, national and international recognition of research and creative activity, and economic, social, educational and community development in New Mexico, respectively. New Mexico State University (NMSU) can work toward achieving its goals by promoting an institutional environment and culture that fosters retention of high-quality faculty.

The report that follows is based on a study designed to identify what attracts faculty to NMSU and what encourages people to stay at NMSU. This study was conducted by the 2009-2010 participants in the NMSU ADVANCING Leaders Program (ALP). This program typically trains 12 tenured participants from the Las Cruces and Doña Ana campuses annually. The year-long leadership program was established in 2004 and has trained more than 60 faculty members to date, with up to two participants from each of the six academic colleges, the Library, and DACC participating per year.

The program provides monthly workshops and a two-day, off-campus retreat to develop leadership and managerial skills, and to improve personal skills for leadership in teaching, research, service, extension, or administration. Participants build ongoing networking opportunities, connect with a mentor from upper administration, and demonstrate an understanding about the core values and best practices at NMSU. The program consists of five components:

Fall Retreat
Strength Finders Assessment
Monthly Lunches
Mentoring
Provost’s Project

Since 2005, each cohort of the NMSU ADVANCING Leaders Program has undertaken a “Provost’s Project” intended to address an issue of campus-wide importance. Previous projects have dealt with the following issues:

2005-2006 Research clusters
2006-2007 Reallocation of faculty lines
2007-2008 Effective system-wide communication
2008-2009 Shared governance

Of these previous projects, the two most recent reports specifically address issues relevant to institutional culture, cohesiveness, and shared vision. In that sense, then, this year’s report on faculty retention has an element of continuity with previous project reports.
Retention of university faculty is an important issue for many institutions across the country. Budgetary, geographic, and lifestyle factors, among others, prompt faculty at all levels to consider moving to a different institution. In many urban areas, the range of employment options available to qualified faculty, especially to non-tenure track faculty, makes career moves easy and appealing. Budgetary constraints often make it impossible for an institution to counteroffer faculty recruited by other institutions, leading to additional turnover in the faculty ranks. Burnout, family considerations, the promise of higher salaries in the private sector, and other factors lead many faculty to leave the academic career path altogether.

Turnover among faculty can erode institutional stability, thereby eroding institutional effectiveness. This effect is even stronger in the current climate of budget cuts, minimal or nonexistent faculty salary increases, and severe restrictions on making counteroffers. Organizational stability promotes organizational cohesiveness, which has been shown in business and academic contexts to further organizational effectiveness along with individual civility and satisfaction.\(^1\) Organizational cohesiveness is also essential to establishing and pursuing a shared institutional vision. Although some faculty turnover is unavoidable, and perhaps even desirable, each institution must establish its own acceptable baseline faculty turnover rate.

A previous study of faculty retention at NMSU, “A Diamond in the Rough: Faculty Retention at New Mexico State University,” sought to examine the reasons why faculty members were leaving NMSU. The resulting 2008 report by Christine Eber (Department of Anthropology) consisted of interviews with 34 NMSU faculty members who were leaving or who had just left NMSU. Overall, Dr. Eber found that lack of institutional appreciation for faculty contributions, lack of transparency, unrealistic teaching loads, lack of assistance and mentoring, and limited institutional understanding of diversity all contributed to faculty members’ decisions to leave NMSU. Based on the results, the report recommends extensive support and mentoring for early-career faculty, greater administrative involvement in faculty issues, reduced teaching loads and higher salaries, as well as improved professional development for leadership and administration as means to enhance faculty retention at NMSU. As the report suggests, many factors contributed to the departures of the faculty interviewed. We know there are an equal number of sound reasons why faculty members choose to remain at NMSU. The study we completed, therefore, was designed to be complementary to Dr. Eber’s study by looking at the opposite question and identifying reasons why faculty members choose to remain at NMSU.

An additional aim of this report is to provide a snapshot of faculty perspectives that can be useful and relevant to the administration at NMSU. The 2009-2010 ADVANCING Leaders hope this research will provide a more complete picture of NMSU’s institutional culture than previously available. We also hope this focus on NMSU’s strengths will provide administrators with information that can be used to build on those strengths, to improve faculty retention and in turn institutional effectiveness, and to recognize the faculty’s commitment to the Institution.

Rationale for the ADVANCING Leaders Program Provost’s Project

We as a cohort began our collaboration at a point of great transitions for NMSU -- the new President had yet to join the campus community, and searches were underway for a Provost as well as three Deans. The prevailing uncertainty surrounding our work presented both challenges and possibilities to the campus community, and we decided to view this as an opportunity to undertake a project that could introduce a new executive team to factors that faculty—and they themselves—might consider assets of NMSU. We viewed the project as a chance to identify the positive attributes that characterize the campus climate and culture, and to help NMSU’s leaders understand what attributes positively affect faculty retention. The members of the ALP are all faculty, as were the participants in focus groups that were part of our study, so the project additionally represents an opportunity for a cross section of the faculty to share their perspectives with NMSU’s senior leaders.
OUR FINDINGS – THE HEART AND SOUL OF NMSU

Description of the research process

As the ALP team, we met regularly to frame our research questions and develop a protocol for the Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects (IRB). The IRB protocol included descriptions of the process for recruiting participants, safeguards that would be used to ensure the anonymous participation of volunteers, and methods used to ensure informed consent. The project was then approved by IRB.

The principal component of the project involved conducting focus groups with open-ended questions to allow research participants to voice their opinions as freely as possible without the risk of coercion or leading questions (see Appendix A). Half of the ALP team served as interviewers and half served as research participant recruiters, contacting colleagues across campus that might be willing to share their perspectives. Prospective participants were instructed to “opt-in” to the research by contacting the interview team. In this way, the interview team had no knowledge of which faculty had been invited to participate and thus could not influence anyone to participate. At the same time, the recruitment team never knew who opted to volunteer and who chose not to.

We used a standard set of questions for the focus group interviews. In each focus group, one member of the interview team served as recorder and prepared focus group notes without including identifying information. Interviewers did not seek to capture an exact transcription, but rather sought to record the flavor and nature of sentiments expressed. The de-identified notes of the focus groups were then shared with the entire ALP team, who reviewed the comments and identified recurring themes, which serve as the structure for this final report. The focus group participants highlighted numerous positive attributes of our campus, our colleagues, and our priorities. In addition, several recurring comments suggest areas that, if addressed, could contribute to an even greater satisfaction among our University community.

Characteristics of participants (N = 19)

Men and women were almost equally represented among the focus group participants, with women representing 47%. Most of the participants are white, non-Hispanic (84%) and the remaining participants identified as Latino/Mexican-American. Almost all (90%) participants have a spouse or domestic partner. About half of those with partners report that their partner works at NMSU.

The participants represent all of the Colleges at NMSU, with the most from Arts and Sciences (26%) and the least from Business (5%) and Health and Social Services (5%). One-third of the participants are relatively new to NMSU, having joined the faculty since the year 2000. The single largest percentage of participants (44%) joined NMSU in the 1990s and the same percentage of participants reported more than ten years until retirement. Most (75%) reported six or more years until retirement, with twelve as the mean number of years until retirement among the group.

The focus group participants represent all academic faculty ranks. Most (82%) joined NMSU as Assistant Professors and almost everyone (95%) in the participant group is now tenured and promoted. Most (67%) have been in their current rank and position for five years or less. The mean length of time in the current position is 7 years.
Respondents were asked to indicate all of the aspects of work at NMSU with which they were most familiar through their employment and attributes of these that contributed to choosing to build their careers and stay at NMSU.

The University

This report is organized around key factors that focus group members reported as assets contributing to their desire to stay at NMSU. They include (1) The University’s mission; (2) the student population; (3) the size of the institution; (4) accommodations for dual career couples; (5) collegiality and collaboration; (6) the freedom to engage in teaching, service, and scholarship; (7) facilities; and (8) the region.

University mission

A majority of the faculty members interviewed reported that the University’s mission was an important reason for choosing a position and staying at NMSU. Many faculty members felt the University’s land-grant mission was both compelling and appealing, acknowledging that service to the state and its unique populations were an important way to give or give back to New Mexico and to the community. One faculty member “fell in love” with the University’s land-grant mission; another believed the mission to be a core principle for all NMSU faculty, noting that it was a good way to market the University to prospective faculty. Another found personal fulfillment in the mission and said that faculty “can live the mission here in a way you can’t in other places; we’re the only place that really keeps the land-grant mission central to [University] activity. If you want to buy into that mission, you’ll get that support here. Everyone understands and supports that mission.”

The service component of the University’s mission, as noted above, is at the heart of many faculty members’ choice to remain at the University. One faculty member liked that the University provided New Mexicans with the materials and tools to help them develop and grow. Many commented that the University’s focus on public service was unique to NMSU and an important component of the work environment. As an example, one faculty member was impressed to see full professors, who had “nothing to prove,” working in service to the community. As one faculty member stated, “I have responsibility to make this a better place than I found it and not put myself first.” As an example, some mentioned they gained satisfaction from the opportunity to make a difference in people’s lives within the state, noting that “much of our research is related to big issues in sustainability and resource use, and we can involve our students in this relevant research.”

Student population

The University’s unique student population was a primary factor that has kept many faculty members at NMSU. Many faculty in the focus groups mentioned that they appreciated NMSU’s ethnic, linguistic and economic student diversity and believed it to be a major institutional strength, noting a felt absence in diversity and difference at other more homogeneous campuses where they had been. In fact, a number of faculty members reported feeling at home at NMSU because of its heterogeneity.
Many mentioned that a substantial number of NMSU students are first generation college attendees and often have not had the same educational or economic opportunities as university students in other parts of the country. Faculty at other institutions might not appreciate this type of student, but most participating faculty mentioned welcoming a sense of personal responsibility for preparing students for a successful college experience and for providing students with a means to be successful in their chosen careers.

One faculty member commented that faculty efforts “seem to make a difference in people’s lives,” that they are “not just teach[ing] geniuses. Anyone can teach prodigies. Faculty [members] are giving students tools [so] that they can go out and contribute.” Musing about the plusses and minuses of teaching economically disadvantaged students, one faculty member commented that students present us with both challenge and opportunity. Their levels of preparation are often subpar, and it challenges the faculty to be more engaged in shaping their learning processes, such as steering them toward supplemental instruction, reviewing written work, monitoring completion of homework, none of which some faculty had expected to do to this extent at a university. However, when we are successful it creates a sense of accomplishment and is gratifying to know we made a difference in the life of a given student, something many faculty members mention as rewarding.

Along the same lines, one faculty member mentioned appreciating more unique opportunities to contribute to students’ success than he had had experienced at another school with a more affluent student body. As one participant put it, while there are challenges, with the “diversity of students in terms of preparedness – from the super intelligent and capable to those with very basic skills who should be at a community college,” many voiced that diversity of students was important and valued. One participant stated that the “diversity of students we graduate” is important. Diversity also offers challenges that at least one participant voiced as nonetheless rewarding: “Half our students are first generation students, and they have no conception of the work load that college requires, or that they have control of their own destiny.” This participant suggested that our challenge “is to take students who have been just passed along through the system and require excellence of them, and to help them see they are worthy human beings. This gives us internal reward when we successfully accomplish this.”

Overwhelmingly, faculty found invaluable rewards teaching NMSU students. One faculty said that he got “psychic” rewards from his students. He got to know them as people, met their families and attended their weddings. Another faculty member commented that one of the greatest rewards was “seeing students succeed, see[ing] them come back after graduation and see[ing] their poise and success, the experiences they have had.” This, the faculty member said, is the best thing that we do.

**Institution size**

In population size, NMSU is one of the smallest land-grant institutions, yet faculty frequently cited its small size as a positive feature, believing a smaller institution can offer a “healthier” environment. Some faculty explained that NMSU does not have the pressures that larger institutions have and the school allows for a more comfortable balance between work and personal life. One participant commented that NMSU was “small enough to do things, make a difference, a splash” and “big enough for opportunity.” Another faculty member felt that the size of the University was an optimum fit because employees are “not just a cog in a big machine” and yet the University is “big enough to have the resources to meet our needs.”
A number of participants mentioned appreciating that NMSU’s low faculty-to-student ratio allows for greater and closer interaction and collaboration between faculty and undergraduates. Additionally, they reported that undergraduates have research opportunities at NMSU that are often not found at larger universities. In part because of our smaller-sized institution, a couple of faculty members felt their departments or colleges had a family atmosphere. Several faculty members commented that because of its small size they have experienced less territoriality at NMSU.

**Accommodations for dual career couples**

A few faculty members mentioned the University’s willingness to accommodate dual career couples and appreciated its efforts in that area, despite lack of a formal policy. Not only does this practice provide institutional stability by attracting and retaining valued faculty members but it also engenders loyalty and appreciation from its employees. In Eber’s report on why people leave NMSU, a lack of support for this factor in the history of the Institution was listed as a reason for leaving the Institution. Although there has been inconsistency in addressing this issue, it clearly fosters good morale when the University recognizes and acts upon the need to accommodate dual career couples.

**Collegiality and collaboration**

Most of the study participants reported feeling a strong connection to members of their department; a number of participants even indicated that their department colleagues were akin to family members. Some mentioned appreciating the personal bonds developed among departmental members who have provided a network of support that aided them in weathering illnesses and deaths, for instance. The concern displayed within departments, some participants reported, further fosters a sense of solidarity and helps provide an intimate, caring and enjoyable work setting. Several participants expressed that the sense of community was a unique quality of NMSU. Several participants noted friendliness as an asset, with one citing “the friendly, open environment of the people who work here” as key to their satisfaction with NMSU.

Overall, NMSU was described as a “decent,” “friendly,” “open” environment in which to work because of the people who are here and because of those who are not: notably, as one person put it, the “toxic people.” Many of the faculty members reported that people in their departments seem to feel free to disagree professionally but remain friendly and still respect the other person and their views. Moreover, the collegiality reported in the focus groups was appreciated as conducive to a positive working environment and a selling point for recruiting and hiring new faculty to join NMSU’s ranks. As one faculty member stated, “Collegiality is key. People disagree, but people still get along. Anyone can teach the courses, but it’s important to get along.”

Not only was collegiality seen as a factor underlying faculty retention, but it was also viewed as a means of fostering enduring loyalty to the department and to the University. One informant mentioned actively thinking about what to do before retiring in order to assist the department. The consideration of a legacy indicates this faculty member’s strong sense of commitment to a department and the University.
In all, participants felt that there was a strong collegial atmosphere at the departmental level at NMSU and that this atmosphere fostered greater personal and professional relationships amongst their colleagues, allowing for a comfortable working environment and promoting feelings of personal investment in one’s work. Moreover, the focus group members indicated that continued attention to maintaining this sense of collegiality was crucial to maintaining positive faculty and staff morale in the face of budgetary crises, low salaries, and administrative changes.

Most of the faculty members who were interviewed mentioned feeling at ease with those in their departments and in their colleges. As a result, they report a strong willingness to collaborate across disciplines and colleges. One faculty member noted that the college dean had been instrumental in encouraging departments to collaborate and share knowledge and information. The result has been crucial in fostering teamwork across departments. Another informant noted that faculty members from across the University have spontaneously responded generously with information and expertise. This participant stated that a request for help from colleagues across campus had never been turned down.

**Freedom to engage in teaching, service, and scholarship**

One of NMSU’s most strongly recognized assets was the broad autonomy faculty are extended as they engage in the type of scholarship, teaching, service, and outreach they wish. A number of faculty mentioned appreciating the ability to employ their efforts from all these areas. This quality reportedly sets NMSU apart from other institutions. As one participant noted, “People let you do your work and try not to get in your business.” Another mentioned that there is “lots of freedom to teach what I want, how I want, and to integrate research and service into teaching.” This sentiment, according to many faculty members, contributes to the sense that NMSU is people-driven, with the departments defining the character of the University rather than an overall institutional mind-set being imposed upon the faculty members.

Many faculty members also mentioned that the freedom to engage in what they viewed to be valuable endeavors was personally rewarding. Regarding teaching, one informant indicated that being able to direct one’s teaching efforts in such an unfettered manner provided a “greater ability to make a difference in students' lives.” With respect to scholarship, freedom was cited as a means to grow professionally. For instance, one participant stated, “If you have an idea to start something new, like a project with national presence and engagement, it is possible to do that here. There are opportunities for growth and professional development.” This quality was noted as an attractive feature for recruiting new and particularly young faculty members: “For someone who’s interested in finding their own path, there is opportunity here.”

Moreover, some faculty mentioned that this lack of restrictions fostered a greater personal investment in NMSU as an institution. As an example, because of the encouragement one faculty member received to develop professionally through service opportunities, this participant had “take[n] advantage of opportunities to serve on task forces, searches, etc., to serve the University.”
Finally, one participant noted that NMSU had recently made a concerted effort to document the value of autonomy by incorporating the Boyer model\textsuperscript{2} in policies that speak to faculty evaluations. This person stated the significance of having these policies written instead of just presumed is important: “It’s one thing to be able to say to people they’re going to have the freedom to do the things they want to do; it’s another to be able to hand them a document that demonstrates that that freedom is implemented through policy.”

In sum, faculty members overwhelmingly reported appreciating freedom in designing their own paths for teaching, scholarship and service. They acknowledged that such freedom was not present to the same degree when they worked at other institutions. Moreover, faculty members mentioned that such freedom fostered both their professional and personal growth, and provided a sense that they, their students, and the University reaped greater influence from their efforts. Finally, it was acknowledged that NMSU had demonstrated its commitment to faculty autonomy in the areas of teaching, scholarship and service by implementing policies recognizing and valuing such freedoms.

**Facilities review**

Until recently staff and faculty enjoyed small benefits, such as unlimited or inexpensive access to athletic facilities on campus to provide a healthy and family friendly setting. We continue to enjoy relatively reasonable parking charges that make work here pleasant. Small “perks” such as these help to offset our lower salaries and constitute an important feature of the NMSU experience.

**The region**

NMSU is located in a beautiful area of southern New Mexico and continues to be an attraction for many of our students, staff and faculty. This beauty is not limited to a stunning landscape, but is also reflected in its diversity of people, work attitudes and the physical campus itself. Much of the architecture has been constructed to reflect a southwestern environment unique to the Chihuahua desert locale. The architects have blended the old and new together to result in a unique campus work environment.

All survey respondents, when asked their general feelings about the Las Cruces area, were positive in their responses. Comments ranged from the most descriptive and enthusiastic “welcoming,” “friendly,” “active,” “artsy,” “outdoorsy” to “great place to live” as well as “fine” or “okay.” At least one person described the area as “geographically remote, but beautiful.”

Another emerging theme was how the geographic area contributed to NMSU’s uniqueness. As one participant put it, “This is a dynamic place, diverse in many ways, and our place in the history of the region and the environment of the Chihuahua Desert makes things possible. We blend the old, the new, and the possible worlds.” Climate and the high desert environment were listed as assets for those who are a part of the NMSU community. Loving the local geography was a recurring theme. “Location, location, location” was the initial attraction for one participant choosing NMSU. “I don’t like shoveling snow” was why one participant was drawn to the area. Another individual “likes to see stars at night”

while another “fell in love with the mountains.” At the same time, one person mentioned it was important to have prospective hires “think about whether or not they want to live in this landscape; for some it’s a shock, but they have to be able to appreciate a new palette.”

The border region is also valued by faculty because it provides unique research opportunities. One participant expressed that our close proximity to the border, being a Hispanic Serving Institution, and having a Native American population “all give openings for grants” and unique contributions through research. For instance, one participant stated, “location on the border is linked with my research. My previous job was across the country and I wanted to be here.” A third participant liked that the United States-Mexican border “offers a chance for research on issues (especially related to health) in the region.”

The local community was another factor that emerged as a positive attribute related to working in the region. As one person explained, “People are very friendly here, in the town as well as the campus,” promoting a sense of acceptance and belonging. Another participant stated that “They [the Las Cruces community members] accept us for who we are” while adding that some issues disrupted the campus-community relationship during a previous administration’s era, but people in the community seem to have moved on and are once again “friendly and helpful.” One focus group member stated that being a University town contributes positively to the community building in that there is a “breadth of activities so we have good and interesting people attracted to the area.” In addition, another participant attributes the mix of University and local community as an attraction: “There is more going on here than we know about, including here in town. We’re not New York City but we have a lot going on in the arts, in the community.”

A number of participants reported that they additionally see this as a good place to raise a family. As one participant explained, “I feel a safety and security here, and there are a lot of things to do for families.” Another “wanted family and community to matter, particularly community among faculty and staff” and was able to find that attribute here.

In addition, several participants from this area are pleased to be able to work in their home community. One person had left this community to pursue a PhD but found that “people elsewhere weren’t any more interesting than people in Las Cruces.” Another voiced a sense of pride if not ownership in NMSU: “This Institution is mine, my family has been here eight or nine generations, and we had land which is now part of the University. I am invested in the University and feel committed to making it better.”

A positive quality of life is another theme that surfaced. Living in a community that offers an affordable lifestyle was important to several focus group members. One participant expressed comfort in our ability to tell a prospective faculty member that “quality of life, not only the academics at NMSU” would be a reason to choose NMSU over another institution. Another voiced that living here provided a “wonderful lifestyle.” Having strong ties to the community and quality of life was how one person expressed the reason for staying here: “I stay here for everything except the money.” At the same time, one participant listed affordability as the best thing about NMSU as a work place: “Land prices are affordable here and one can afford a place to live, compared with California or other such places. You can afford a house here even though salaries are low.”

Included in the discussion of geographic location was the sense of pride in the local chiles. Our location makes our chiles unique, delicious, and therefore famous. The NMSU Chile Pepper Research Institute, a
number of participants stated, adds to our uniqueness. As one participant put it, “Red and green chile is amazing” and everyone in the room agreed.
OPPORTUNITIES IDENTIFIED

Clearly, there are numerous reasons faculty choose to come to and to stay at New Mexico State University. In exploring what keeps us here, we have identified aspects that faculty find attractive personally and professionally. We have also identified opportunities that according to participants, if taken advantage of, could help provide an environment for the University that is conducive to continued growing and thriving. Since the focus group sessions were held this past spring (Spring 2009), we are pleased to report that some of these opportunities have already been identified and explored. Other opportunities can result from current issues facing this and other institutions across the state if not the nation. Still other opportunities are unique to our Institution. Below, we share opportunities that were identified by participants in more than one focus group session. Most relate to one of two themes: work environment and leadership.

Work environment

Support Units. In most sessions, faculty mentioned that support services present multiple opportunities for improving the quality of faculty life at NMSU. Currently, however, faculty too often find support services as impediments rather than support. For instance, some groups addressed issues with services such as Business, Finance and Human Resources being seen as driving forces rather than support units at NMSU. A number mentioned that if the mission of the University is to strengthen teaching, research, and service, then those activities should be supported by these services, rather than the other way around, as some mentioned perceiving the situation. For instance, there is a belief that Human Resources (HR) should be more supportive in working with departments to help meet these missions rather than denying benefits or hires outright. Understandably, some said, the HR office has many rules, legalities, and other constraints to balance. And although department heads might be more informed about what HR might have done behind the scenes to work with an issue, faculty are too often only told “no”; they are simply told they can’t do something, and they often wait for what is perceived as a substantial amount of time only to be subsequently refused. Similarly, participants mentioned that important decisions about hiring and salary are often caught up in Human Resources, where inflexibility or delays seem to prevent NMSU from getting or keeping the most desired candidates. Improving communication about and offering rationale for such decisions in this and other support services is seen as an opportunity for improving the work environment at NMSU.

Faculty in most sessions also reported a desire to increase their grant-seeking to support their research; some suggested that more facilitation, especially transparent facilitation, in the grant process would encourage even more grant-writing efforts. In each session, people indicated it can be difficult to manage grants at NMSU: hiring and paying people, tracking budgets, disbursing funds—all are perceived as bewildering and difficult. These processes are reportedly more challenging if international students or post-docs need to be hired. Some participants mentioned difficulties with Human Resources and other areas affiliated with grant administration can impede those who procure grants and discourage people from writing more grants. It also appears some of NMSU’s institutional HR rules are in opposition to funding agency rules, which can put grant recipients at risk with funding agencies. Overall, we heard a desire for support services to offer and to serve as resources and aids in achieving the University mission—something we see as a substantial opportunity.

Along the same lines, participants cited opportunities for increased communication about policy changes across the University. One suggestion is to include more stakeholders when policy changes are
being discussed, particularly stakeholders most impacted by a policy change. In other words, there could be opportunities for support services to work with others so the ramifications of decisions can positively impact the University mission. Working together to make decisions and determine policies from the start seems a substantial opportunity for NMSU today.

**University Mission and Student Credit Hour production**

Some participants voiced concerns that the student credit-hour (SCH) production emphasis creates an environment emulating a factory productivity model. Participants worry that the strong emphasis on SCH production suggests the Legislature sees community colleges and universities as having the same needs, aims, and objectives. The NMSU mission and strategic plan emphasize research and service as well; among many participants, these critical aspects seem extremely undervalued if not undermined by the funding formulas. Participants mentioned the difficulty increasing SCH in the face of budget cuts. Many also believed the 3% growth model was impossible to maintain and damaging to the educational environment.

Some connect this model—or the way this model plays out at NMSU—to the role of the VP of Finance. A number of groups expressed concerns about the decision-making power of the VP of Finance, whose strengths are in financial administration, not academic administration. Yet academic policy is perceived as being determined there, without consultation with key stakeholders or those affected by decisions. In some cases, decisions were perceived as impeding the ability to fulfill the University’s teaching, research, service, and outreach/extension missions. Some participants in our study were perplexed that academic priorities were being set by the Finance Office, though they attributed this to successive leadership changes.

Each of the focus groups mentioned that singular focus on SCH is perceived as limiting the focus on research. Decisions based solely on SCH have reportedly put some departments in a position of functioning in many ways as a community college department, even while they continue to offer upper-division and/or graduate courses and attempt to support graduate students in the multiple ways required of graduate programs. Because decisions to focus on the SCH have a long-term effect on the research capacity of the University, finding other ways to measure and encourage value and productivity is seen as another substantial opportunity, as is changing the model for capturing SCH (e.g., by separating out credit hours by graduate or undergraduate numbers, following the tiered allocations that the legislature establishes).

Other respondents worried SCH production has led to some faculty to become disheartened and complacent, leading some to feel undervalued and others to “act out.” A number of groups mentioned how research and teaching have been negatively impacted by the SCH production focus and made more difficult by other factors.

**Research**

Some groups expressed concerns that research could increasingly be devalued with the SCH as the sole driving force contributing to decision-making. Some mentioned that the “freedom” to do research varies by college; that publication could be valued more explicitly by departments and colleges; that mission-
driven leadership can provide constructive direction related to the possible discrepancies in departments’ valuing of research in light of the University’s mission, the strategic plan, and the Boyer model that is advocated in the University’s Promotion and Tenure policies. Others mentioned that indirect cost calculations work against them when they do receive grants. Some see the lack of a graduate student stipend as an impediment to procuring strong graduate students that will contribute to the research mission of the University. Declining library resources were also seen as a reflection of research being devalued, as was the previous placement of the Graduate School into the purview of the Vice-President for Research. Support services for the Graduate School was mentioned as a barrier to research efforts and other aspects affiliated with graduate students as researchers.

**Teaching**

Although a strength overall, diversity at our land-grant Institution also means students enter the Institution with substantially different levels of preparedness for college-level work. Supporting a range of preparedness offers opportunities and challenges for faculty. Addressing this presents a dilemma for dividing time between teaching and research. Simultaneously, diversity is one of the main aspects considered “special” about NMSU, and most groups reported welcoming diverse populations particularly given the land-grant mission of our Institution. Some groups stated they would appreciate a better sense that teaching—and the quality of teaching—were valued along with research and SCH. As an example, some mentioned encouraging quality in teaching more than quantity in student numbers in the rush to offer distance education.

The issues mentioned here are reflective of a group of faculty who want to excel in the research, teaching, service, and outreach mission of the University. The areas identified as opportunities come from people who clearly care about their work (teaching, research, outreach, and service), who appreciate support that sustains and improves their work, want to provide the best experience for students as learners, and contribute in positive ways to the quality of our University – a place where they have chosen to stay.

**Leadership and the Provost’s important role**

Academic Leadership. Stability and collective vision in leadership were mentioned as desirable in the University’s academic leaders, including the Provost. As we prepared for new administrative leaders, a number of groups mentioned the importance of a Provost who can provide strong academic leadership. A number of people are putting their trust in moves toward continuity of leadership, vision, and communication—all of which can help us build and grow productively and in a positive environment.

What types of academic leadership did the participants mention? A large number of people mentioned a desire for more access to information – and more communication about decisions – from our academic leaders. The thought is that the majority of faculty, most being well-intentioned and productive, can be appeased by a dispelling of the “us” versus “them” approaches that led to some disappointment and disillusionment in the recent past.

One aspect seen as warranting leadership is related to people’s views of the land-grant mission of our Institution. Because of the land-grant mission, some participants suggested an interest in more
infrastructure supporting civic engagement, service learning, and opportunities to work with the communities of Southern New Mexico to find ways to improve people’s lives. Others saw opportunities for the University to model “walking the talk” through sustainability initiatives.

Many mentioned that a longer-term commitment from NMSU’s administrative leaders will allow others to make a true and valuable difference at NMSU. Strong, positive, stable leadership is greatly valued by the participants.

**Stability in senior leadership**

Many participants mentioned a desire for new leadership to bring stability to our Institution. They mentioned valuing characteristics such as accessibility, presence, openness, listening. Some mentioned welcoming visionary leadership.

Continuity was a consistently recurring theme, with many people emphasizing ways the University has suffered due to leadership turn-over; for example campus-wide involvement and momentum was hampered by changing administrative agendas. Many participants hope for a “glue to the system,” stable leadership providing a positive orientation and designing ways to connect people to the Institution (such as the ADVANCING Leaders Program). Such efforts, combined with good communication and transparency, may invite people to make positive and productive contributions.

Some participants believed stability in leadership could counter concerns about the Board of Regents making decisions that could seem adversarial to faculty, students, or the functions of a university. Some wondered if increasing the number of regents might reduce the power of a few. When decisions are made that seem inexplicably counter-productive to the mission and functions of the University, some are troubled by the decision-making power of these few, particularly because the Regents frequently lack experience in educational institutions. Many mentioned preferences for the power of participation and the value of including more and diverse voices to enhance the decision-making processes and democracy.

In short, according to a number of groups, our University needs an identity in ways that mission statements can’t provide. Stability in leadership can help. Good administrators are incredibly valuable. We need to know and trust the administrators.

**Budget decision making and transparency**

Most participants mentioned a desire for more faculty voices to be heard on issues that most affect them. For example, the top down decision to use SCH counting for budget allocations did not permit group participation or faculty-administration cooperation. The way the SCH was counted did not take into account “on the ground” realities of our Institution. Conversely, the transparency of the most recent budget process is a good example of an administrative opportunity to establish a culture of cooperation, to create efficiencies rather than unhealthy competition. This can allow for real change.
Building and maintaining diversity and innovation

Some said that our unique, “last frontier” place in the nation offers opportunities for being mavericks in innovations. With academic leadership advocating for more innovative approaches related to our unique position, for instance, at the border, with a diverse population, a number of people felt we could extend our national if not international standing. A number of people mentioned desiring more leadership support for outreach with the community as well, with high school and community students, their teachers, and members of their community being invited to programs designed to support connections. A large number of people suggested more fostering of teamwork within--and external to--the University.

In the end, most groups concluded that we are “spread thin” but “that’s what we do and that’s why many of us are at a land-grant Institution at the border. We are here to address and inspire a wide array of students.” The groups who participated in our study reported appreciating the opportunities to do so. These and the many other factors mentioned throughout make NMSU a place where people want to stay.
IMPLICATIONS OF OUR FINDINGS

The broad consensus of our faculty is that they have “bought in” to the mission of NMSU as a land-grant University – not so much the legacy of the role in agricultural improvement per se – but the sense of fulfillment they gain in positively influencing the lives of students and the broader community. Perhaps more accurately put, faculty members have individual motivation and a sense of mission to the people and the place. Nearly all respondents commented on the pleasure derived from living in this environment with unique cultural and physical geography, and the pluralistic communities that make up our region. The sense of satisfaction and contentment that motivates faculty stems from the positive and collegial relationships they develop with their peers and department members.

Given the insights we have gained into the motivations of NMSU faculty to stay and invest in the institution and the community, a few implications emerge:

- Everyone acknowledges that salaries and financial support for scholarship are poor, so efforts made by administration to address these, even in very small ways, can foster significant improvements in morale.
- As faculty speak consistently of their sense of purpose derived from having a positive impact on students, more recognition of this positive impact can also foster improved faculty morale. Excellence in teaching, mentoring, and advising is as important to recognize formally, including in annual performance reviews. For most departments success in securing external funding and publication have been the traditional domain for rewards and accolades, and a broader view of faculty performance excellence is desirable in the view of most faculty.
- Faculty feel valued by colleagues and peers, and are generally happy with their immediate work environment (departments), but most do not feel valued by senior administration (at least in the recent past). The sense that they have no influence above their department can be addressed by a commitment to greater vertical dialog, transparency, and shared governance, especially in this climate where faculty perceive themselves as here for the long haul, while administrators have for some time been transient.
APPENDIX A - QUESTIONS FOR FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS

1. What initially attracted you to NMSU?

2. What is special or unique about NMSU as an institution?

3. As a faculty member, how do you contribute to this uniqueness?

4. What do you consider the best things about working at NMSU (as a workplace)?

5. People choose to remain at NMSU for various reasons. What keeps you here?

6. What would you say to a faculty member asking, “Why should I come to NMSU rather than another institution?”

7. If you could add or change anything to make NMSU a better place, what would it be, and why?
APPENDIX B - RESPONSES FROM FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS

When asked about their experiences, responsibilities, and roles at NMSU, respondents clearly spoke from positions of great familiarity with the academic and scholarly missions of NMSU. Specific responses to the question concerning domains of University activities with which they had familiarity showed the following responses:

- Instruction (95%)
- Research/scholarship (95%)
- Promotion and tenure processes (90%)
- Service/outreach (68%)
- Staff/faculty supervision (63%)
- Curriculum development (53%)
- Grant management (42%)
- Technology (37%)
- Budgets (32%)
- Lab management (32%)
- Program management (32%)
- Property management (21%)
- Procurement (16%)

Perspectives on New Mexico State University

Respondents were asked to indicate how they think their departmental colleagues would rate the quality of work life at NMSU. Just over half (58%) indicated “good” or “excellent,” with “good” representing 53% of the responses. Just under half (42%) said that their colleagues would rate the quality of work life at NMSU as “fair.” No one selected “poor” as a descriptor.

Respondents were asked to list the best three things about working at NMSU. The broad categories of responses are:

- Friendliness and collegiality of people: students, colleagues, staff,
- Opportunities for research and other collaboration with interdisciplinary colleagues
- Opportunities for professional development/life-long learning through Teaching Academy and in other ways
- Border, desert location in southwest (weather, chile, etc.)
- Balance of teaching and research with freedom to emphasize either
- Contract structure and benefits (domestic partner, leave, nine-month contract)
- Land-grant mission and opportunity to serve the state/make a difference
- Leadership (strong and accessible leadership, opportunities to lead and share in governance)

Respondents were asked to list the best three things about NMSU as an Institution of Higher Education. The broad categories of responses that differed from the above list are:

- Research diversity and opportunities
- Connection to the larger community, service orientation
- Hispanic Serving Institution status
- Quality and diversity of instruction and opportunities to engage with students at undergraduate and graduate levels
- Respect of peers outside of NMSU
• Cultural diversity and border location

Lastly, respondents were asked to share words that best describe their department as a place to work. The positive responses were:
• Knowledgeable of students and one another
• Collegial
• Supportive and nurturing, understanding, a haven
• Diverse, interdisciplinary
• Engaged and committed, serving students
• Determined and focused
• Family

The negative responses were:
• Corrupt
• Dysfunctional
• Mismanaged
• Stressed
• Isolated
• Chaotic
• Conflict/hard time getting along