

Special Emphasis Accreditation: An Outline

The Higher Learning Commission, our North Central accrediting body, now offers the possibility of a more specialized accreditation effort, in which the institution being accredited is given the option of defining a special area of emphasis for its accreditation effort. This does not mean that the normal accreditation criteria are set aside, but they are in the first place considered in terms of the organizing central theme. This option is not available to all institutions, only institutions with a history of accreditation for the full 10-year term without interim reports. In our conversations with the Higher Learning Commission, we have been encouraged to propose a special emphasis for our accreditation effort.

We feel that the best special emphasis for UNM at this time is to focus on minority student achievement. We feel simultaneously that UNM has a great deal to be proud of in this area, that we have successfully addressed many issues which other institutions have not, and that this is something we need to need to celebrate and make part of our account of what makes UNM the special place it is. Yet at the same time achieving fully equitable outcomes for all population groups in the state is not a goal we have yet realized. So the record of which we are proud and which distinguishes us is also a record which we need to build on, improve upon, and remain dissatisfied with.

Our working title for the special emphasis is “Educating Tomorrow’s Demographic Today: The First Majority-Minority Research/Flagship University.” UNM has the highest percentage of underrepresented minorities of any flagship university in the country, with almost twice the number of the University of Alaska in second place. It also has the highest percentage of underrepresented minorities of any university considered “Very High Research” in the new Carnegie classification (this is the old R1 designation drawn somewhat more narrowly, so that we are the only such university in the state). The reference to the future is intended to draw attention to the fact that increasing minority enrollment—especially Hispanic enrollment—is a national trend which we are on the front end of. In other words, our successes here are of national interest and importance, and we can serve as a national model.

The model for a special emphasis accreditation is the continuous improvement model that many accrediting bodies are moving towards: it is not a matter of meeting minimum standards and then taking it easy; rather we define important goals—aspirational or stretch goals—and then move towards them in measurable steps. The point is precisely to set out an ambitious agenda and then to figure out how to make continuous progress towards the goal you have set.

The overall goal we are proposing is in one word: equity. We aim to create an educational environment at UNM which will allow all population groups in the state to have equal access to higher education at UNM and to have equitable results from that access, i.e., to enter, stay in, and graduate from in equal measure, both at the undergraduate and graduate level. Given the metaphor of the pipeline and given the sharp demographic changes expected in the composition of New Mexicans graduating from high school over the next 15 years, this overall goal is perfect for a continuous improvement model. Not only are most of the measures quantifiable and easily compared year-to-year, we are in fact going to need to improve continuously in how we educate minority students in order to keep up with the changing demographics of the state.