

Sept. 16, 2006

UNM Program Puts Students to Work With Community Groups (Albuquerque Journal)

By Olivier Uyttebrouck, Journal Staff Writer

Kimberly Gallegos did her best to quiet 60 rambunctious elementary school kids long enough to introduce a group of University of New Mexico theater students.

"These students are going to UNM, where we're all going after we get out of high school," said Gallegos, who works with elementary and middle school kids at the community center.

"We're going to do another play, and they're going to help us," she told the students one day last week. Gallegos' introduction sums up the course description for UNM's upper-division theater course, Drama in Barelás.

The class is one of 20 offered at UNM this fall— called research-service-learning courses— intended to put students to work with community groups around the city. About 400 students enrolled in the courses this fall.

UNM theater student Alexander Caulfield, 30, said the course fits nicely into his long-term plan to open a school for the arts. He's also glad for an opportunity to work with people off-campus.

"We come here to go to school, but we rarely get an understanding of what the community is," Caulfield said as he and about 30 other students toured the Barelás Community Center.

Caulfield's class plans to write and stage a play about Barelás using local kids as performers.

Meanwhile, UNM anthropology students plan to write reports about the center this fall based on conversations with area residents.

Sean Bruna, a UNM graduate student teaching the anthropology class, said it is intended to give students a real-world environment for learning anthropology.

"I'm amazed how excited they are about applying some of their research skills," Bruna said of his 17 students. "A lot of them have been anxious to take their research out of the library."

Service learning might be described as UNM's answer to the Peace Corps— a way of giving college students new skills working on useful community projects.

"We have 20,000 undergraduates with good brains and lots of muscle," said Peter White, UNM's associate provost for undergraduate education, who created the service-learning program.

The program has about \$300,000 in funding this year donated by private groups and foundations. Some 40 groups have expressed interest in working with the program this year, White said.

They include well-known organizations like Habitat for Humanity and Head Start and smaller nonprofits including the Albuquerque Rescue Mission and Project Share Inc.

Other groups include health care providers, church-sponsored groups, schools, community centers and neighborhood associations.

White hopes within five years to enroll 3,000 students per semester in such courses.

"I want undergraduates to get out of the classroom and apply their research skills, their learning, to help the community," he said.