



New Pathways for Indigenous and Rural Students

Northern New Mexico College
Española, NM

April 2025

Aspen Forum for Community Solutions
Belonging, Meaning, Wellbeing and Purpose (BMWP)

How does a rural postsecondary institution operate in an authentic relationship with Tribal governments and members of local Indigenous communities? Can the college build a culture of belonging when so many of its students travel from long distances or take classes exclusively online? How does a college community that experienced deep disconnection and despair wrought by the global pandemic rebuild itself in a more holistic, student-centered way?

Situated 30 miles north of Santa Fe, Northern New Mexico College serves the rural northern part of the state offering a wide array of degrees and certificates to help members of the local community access living wage jobs. Due in part to its rural setting and the high number of students who take courses online, the college has historically struggled to build a culture of belonging for its students. Now under the leadership of a new college president, the campus culture is changing as leaders attempt to improve the campus community and cultivate student belonging, meaning, wellbeing and purpose. In addition to making changes on campus, the college is also partnering intentionally with the local Indigenous community on the Jemez Pueblo to launch dual credit courses. This budding partnership has the potential to change the game for Jemez Pueblo high school students by helping them earn college credit and exposing them to postsecondary pathways that lead to further education and meaningful employment in their local community.

The Aspen Institute's Forum for Community Solutions (AFCS) promotes collaborative, community-based efforts that build the power and influence of those with the least access to opportunity, and supports communities to come together to expand mobility, eliminate systemic barriers, and create their own solutions to their most pressing challenges.

Our next decade of work continues to focus on ending youth disconnection. We endeavor to transform systems and communities in ways that ensure that all youth can thrive. Belonging, Meaning, Wellbeing and Purpose (BMWP) is the emerging framework that is helping us to get there.

Learn more about AFCS and our work to advance BMWP at <https://www.aspencommunitysolutions.org/bmwp>

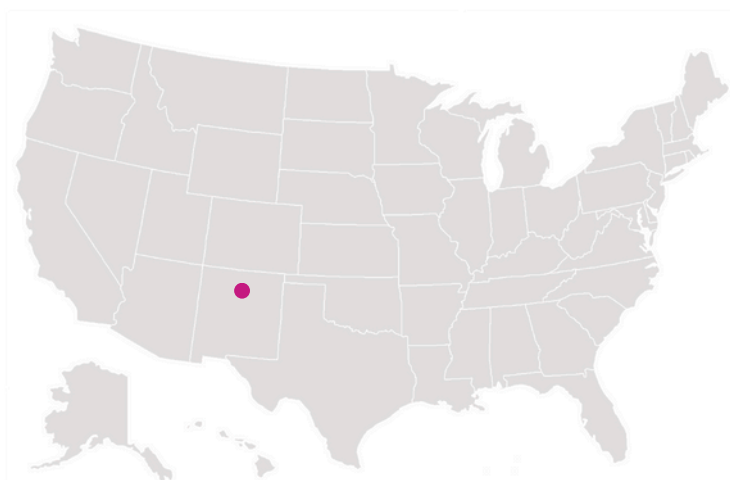
The BMWP in Action Series provides postsecondary practitioners and funders with concrete examples of how a diverse group of leaders are implementing a wide range of approaches to foster belonging, meaning, wellbeing and purpose (BMWP) amongst their students. The goal of the series is to:

- 1 **Celebrate the work of case study institutions**
- 2 **Increase awareness of BMWP**
- 3 **Encourage the spread of these approaches as a strategy to improve racial equity and student success.**



Mural in Española, NM
(photo from NNMC)

Northern New Mexico College



LOCATION:

Española, NM

INSTITUTION TYPE:

Public 4-Year

TOTAL UNDERGRADUATE ENROLLMENT:

1,310*

* Enrollment figure is from fall 2023. Data from US Department of Education, National Center for Educational Statistics. [College Navigator](#).



Policy and Practice Highlight

This document contains several **policy and practice highlight** callout boxes. Each box highlights a specific approach that this college is taking to help students cultivate a deeper sense belonging, meaning, wellbeing and purpose.

Context

Northern New Mexico College (NNMC) first opened in 1909 in El Rito, NM with an initial goal to train educators who could work with the state's Spanish speaking population. In the early years, the college provided both secondary and postsecondary educational opportunities including many vocational and technical programs that provided students with skills needed in the local community. In 1969, the college transferred the high school curriculum to a newly created K-12 school district so it could focus exclusively on postsecondary vocational-technical course offerings. The college developed an Espanola campus, expanded its course offerings and eventually transformed into a comprehensive community college. With the arrival of Bachelor's programs in 2004, NNMC became a four-year college. The college now offers 12 credential programs at the Bachelor's level, 23 at the Associate's level and 16 certificate programs.¹

Today, NNMC continues to serve residents of the local community, but the college also serves a growing number of students in an online format. According to recent college data, a little less than half of NNMC's student population attend courses in a face-to-face setting with the others attending through a hybrid (28% of students) or fully online (23%) model.² Even before the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the college operations, online course taking was commonplace at the college. While online course options were important for enrollment, NNMC's Director of Career and Technical Education Frank Loera acknowledges that the online format coupled with the college's rural setting presented challenges to community building. Loera shared that the arrival of COVID-19 exacerbated this issue, driving deeper disconnection and contributing to feelings of isolation for many at the college.

In late 2022, NNMC started a new chapter when the Board of Regents voted to confirm Hector Balderas as the college's new president. Balderas took a non-traditional path to the presidency and his personal story serves as living proof of the power of educational opportunity. After growing up in public housing in the New Mexico village of Wagon Mound (current population: 264), Balderas attended college and law school. At age 29, he was elected to the New Mexico House of Representatives and went on to serve two terms as the State Auditor and another two terms as the state's Attorney General.

In 2022, Balderas made the shift to higher education when he took the presidency. Describing his motivation for making this decision to a local media outlet, Balderas shared: "I have lived the life story that many of those students are living, so I feel very closely connected to that type of student. And then number two, that it's an under-resourced institution. So in essence, I'm at the height of my career, and I want to use my passion and experience to build more equitable funding for some of those forgotten communities and institutions."

Shared governance and operational excellence

Central to Balderas' leadership priorities is an effort to get students more involved in governance. "At our institution," he explained, "there's a real commitment to put some of the power and some of the governance decisions into the hands of those students — including the vulnerable populations that we serve. That's a mindset shift that I don't see very often in educational institutions, but I fundamentally believe that the delivery of education has to be grounded in a civil rights or social justice frame. And that means that students need to be part of the decision making and the resource allocation process."



NNMC President Hector Balderas
(center left in blue sport coat) and
NNMC staff (Photo from NNMC)

Balderas has also placed a considerable focus on what he calls "operational excellence" at the college. In his view, the college sends messages to its students through even the smallest task or activities that are traditionally not viewed as a part of the student experience. One example of this is the college's financial systems. When Balderas took over at the college, the institution hadn't had a clean or timely financial audit in decades. While some college leaders may not make the connection between that practice and student engagement, Balderas saw a clear through-line: "what does [the lack of a timely audit] say to stakeholder groups like single mothers or low-income young people? We're gonna try to educate you, but we don't know how to stabilize finances or transparently report on how we use taxpayer money? To me, that practice also sends a message that students are not a priority — they're not given the type of support and respect that the SEC gives a multimillion dollar investor on Wall Street."

Operational excellence also extends to facilities and Balderas and his team have made significant investment in making the campus environment more inviting. Balderas inherited a campus that had less than stellar physical spaces, “It was rampant with leaky roofs,” he explains. “I had computers with trash bags on them because the facilities and the management teams here did not understand how to build out spaces [to accommodate the computers].” For Balderas, this was unacceptable. “There has to be supreme alignment in all of the functionalities of an educational institution. A student might be building trust with an instructor, but then they'll go to the restroom and see an out of order sign. What that out of order sign really tells me as someone who grew up in poverty is that they don't care. But we do care. We care about how they learn. We want them to be safe and trusted recipients of our educational institution.” The college has also made improvements to their cafeteria, improved student access to food along with other actions meant to improve operational excellence and boost overall student wellness.

Shifting culture and hiring “natural helpers”

Khiana Valencia is a Student Care Specialist at NNMC. Her journey to that role has been shaped by an early self-awareness that she was destined for a “helping profession.” Valencia grew up in Espanola raised by a single mother and her grandparents. As a middle schooler, her teachers and peers identified her as a highly trusted individual and she was selected to be part of a program called Natural Helpers. Through that experience, which Valencia describes as one of her proudest moments, she was able to participate in training so she could help community members improve their mental health and wellness. In high school, Valencia pursued individual mental health counseling to support her own growth and healing. She enrolled at NNMC and - when it came time to choose a program of study - Valencia followed her passion into Psychology.

During the course of her studies, one of Valencia’s professors noticed her strengths and recruited her to work for the college’s Upward Bound program where she could support students as they made the difficult journey from high school to college. Working for Upward Bound, Valencia saw what a huge impact her efforts could have: “A lot of times students I worked with said that if they wouldn’t have had the space [that Upward Bound provided], they wouldn't have made it this far. Some of the students I worked with are now leaving for college — some even got full ride scholarships. I stayed up nights with them as they were doing those essays. And so as I continued doing this work, I saw the impact that it was making. That fueled the fire in me a little bit more.” As she graduated from NNMC, Valencia accepted a position as a Student Care Specialist and Title IX Coordinator at the college so that she could continue to help students through one-on-one counseling and other services.

Valencia works with students one at a time, but views her work as multi-generational: “I believe in breaking generational trauma and making that difference. And I know that we have a lot of trauma in our community — especially around mental health. We’re told to not say anything and told to be strong. And we’re told that if you’re ‘strong’ then there’s no such thing as a mental health illness. And that is a stigma that I'm hoping to break and I make progress every day.”



Valencia's attentiveness to student mental health is a way to foster student wellbeing.

Valencia's role and commitment to the students she serves is an outgrowth of the broader efforts under way to make the college more student-centered and community-responsive. Under Balderas' leadership, the college has taken several important steps forward including:

- Consolidating advising services into a “one-stop” Counseling and Student Support Center, scaled up operations of a **student-run food pantry that features produce donated from a local farm that uses traditional, regenerative agricultural practices**;
- Working to expand the college's Native American Center to serve as a cultural and resource hub for the college's Indigenous students, faculty and staff;
- Organizing **student visits to the state capitol to help them understand how state policy impacts their lives** as students and New Mexico residents; and
- Prioritizing hiring of NNMC students and graduates so they can “grow their own” future leaders — an effort that helped the college hire Valencia.



The food pantry supports student wellbeing and, by organizing it as a student-run enterprise, it also promotes belonging.



Facilitating visits to the state capitol allows students to explore their purpose, engage in meaning making and promote their wellbeing.

Although some of these efforts have been relatively small scale, their strength is in their multiplicity and longevity. In the aggregate and over time, each piece is adding up and creating deeper cultural change within the college.

“They are students of the community and they represent us”

Before President Balderas arrived, administrators at NNMC had been hard at work trying to better serve a critical constituency: local high school students. NNMC's Director of Career and Technical Education Frank Loera shared that, at this time, “we were getting a lot of feedback from our community that they did not have a feeling of belonging here.” The college decided to prioritize building out its dual enrollment partnerships with local high schools.

In 2019, the college established a branch community college campus with an exclusive focus on increasing access to training in electrical technology, plumbing and pipefitting. As a part of this effort, the college made an intentional push to offer dual enrollment opportunities to students at local high schools by providing transportation options to help reduce barriers to attendance.

While successful for a while, shifts at the college eventually led to a shut down of transportation options leading to a significant enrollment decline. Rather than shutter the program, Loera forged new partnerships that flipped the partnership structure: rather than asking students to get to campus, the college started sending instructors to local high schools to deliver instruction. This helped to stabilize enrollment and ensure continued operation of the CTE-focused dual enrollment partnerships.

Around this same time, a group of Indigenous leaders located on the Jemez Pueblo — approximately 70 miles away from the college — were actively searching for a partner to help increase postsecondary opportunities for their high school seniors. As the Pueblo's Education Service Manager, Lenora Loretto shared, "our director wanted to find a way to get our local high schools to have dual credit options." Pueblo leaders wanted to make sure that students had exposure to postsecondary pathways that could lead to real jobs in the local community and, as Loretto put it, to show their students that "they're able to get the opportunity to be at the same level with other students that are in the city."

Transportation was among the Pueblo's top considerations. The Pueblo is located in a remote part of the state which has historically presented very real challenges to accessing postsecondary education. "We knew it would be hard," Loretto says, "because we don't have enough transportation for our students, and that's a big issue because some of our students are single parents." Loretto also described the need for access to other resources — like lab equipment and supplies — needed to offer dual enrollment courses focused in career and technical education fields: "Being remote, we don't have a lot of equipment and necessary tools to be the same as Albuquerque schools or Rio Rancho schools or Santa Fe schools."

Leaders on the Pueblo continued to focus on their objective and got creative, "We got into the whole mindset of, how can we bring it here?," Loretta shared. "How can we bring these opportunities to the students? And **how can we support them to know that they can do more and they don't even have to leave the Pueblo?** They don't have to leave their high school and those services are being provided to them."



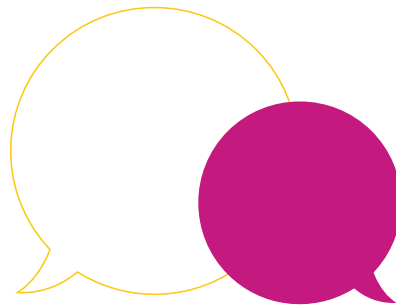
Outreach and barrier removal are common strategies to promote student belonging.

Leaders on the Pueblo continued to focus on their objective and got creative, "We got into the whole mindset of, how can we bring it here?," Loretta shared. "How can we bring these opportunities to the students? And **how can we support them to know that they can do more and they don't even have to leave the Pueblo?** They don't have to leave their high school and those services are being provided to them."

In 2022, NNMC officially launched dual enrollment course offerings to students at two high schools located on the Pueblo — Jemez Valley High School (total 2023-24 student enrollment: 104) and Walatowa Charter High School (38 students). Early enrollment numbers are small, but suggest significant interest — in 2023-24, twelve students from Jemez Valley and five from Walatowa participated in the program. Leaders think they can build on this in future years.

“How can we bring these opportunities to the students? And how can we support them to know that they can do more and they don't even have to leave the Pueblo? They don't have to leave their high school and those services are being provided to them.”

Lenora Loretto
Jemez Pueblo Education Service Manager



Making the program work remains a fluid and collaborative effort between the Pueblo's Department of Education, NNMC and the local high schools. Loretto describes the program as very community-oriented. Classes take place at one of the high schools or at the Pueblo's Education Service Center, which is conveniently located across the street from Jemez Valley High School. Due to the relatively small numbers, students from the two high schools sometimes attend courses together: “We've been working with both schools trying to implement all the programs. This program should benefit both schools and the community because they are students of the community and they represent us.”



Jemez Pueblo secondary dual credit students in electrical trade and instructor

Reflecting on what makes the program work, Loretto shared, “I think part of it is that the Pueblo acts as the middle person for both schools and also as the communicator with Northern Mexico College. Providing that support and communication is what I feel really helps this work. Loretto paused for a minute and then continued. “Part of it is just being there. And being that reminder that this is for the students. This is what we want them to be. What we want them to have. It's not about your school or my school, it's just figuring out what's best for our students.”

Time will tell if the goals of the Pueblo’s partnership with NNMC accomplish their long term goals. For now, Loretto is happy that the program is in place because of what it represents for the community. She describes changes in students’ individual narratives and sense of possibility: “before [the partnership with NNMC] some students were kind of like, ‘I'm not college material’ or ‘nobody in my family went to college, so why would I go to college?’ It's great to bring [dual enrollment options] and change up the mindsets of students.”

Bringing the pieces together

The Northern New Mexico College story is still being written and there is reason to believe that its brightest days are still ahead. College leaders remain focused on their primary goal of serving their community and they work every day to bring all of the pieces together. President Balderas is providing critical new leadership and helping the college move toward a post-pandemic culture that prioritizes connection and student belonging. The college’s “grow your own” hiring strategy is helping to make sure that students are met — in every division and at every level — by “natural helpers” like Khiana Valencia who are deeply invested in helping their community thrive. The college’s work around dual enrollment — with local high schools and with the Jemez Pueblo — demonstrates willingness to find creative ways to bring college education to the community and open new pathways to opportunity. Like other colleges who are embracing belonging, meaning, wellbeing and purpose as institutional priorities NNMC is not focused on a single initiative. Leaders are finding ways to weave BMWP into multiple strategies acknowledging that all actions — even when actions may feel small — can add up to big changes.

Gratitude

The authors would like to thank Hector Balderas, Khiana Valencia, Frank Loera, Larry Guerrero of NNMC and Lorena Loretto, Stephanie Mack and Eldrick Toya of the Jemez Pueblo for the generosity of time spent sharing the resources, stories and perspectives used to create this document.

The authors strived to represent the vibrancy of this effort with accuracy. We take full accountability for any errors.

End notes

¹ NNMC (2024). [Academics](#). Accessed on October 17, 2024.

² NNMC (2024). [Spring 2024/First of Term Enrollment Report](#). Accessed on Aug 29, 2024