

UNM-Gallup showcases successful Bridge Program at local board meeting

Written by Story and photos by Andy Gibbons III Sun Correspondent
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Some know Gallup as “Na’nízhoozhí,” which loosely translates from the Diné language as “bridge” in English. Some view the city as a bridge between Native American and Euro-American cultures.

The Gallup branch of the University of New Mexico acts as a bridge in its own right. That is, UNM-Gallup’s Bridge Program helps local students make the transition to four-year college for their bachelor degrees after they earn their associate’s degrees locally.

On Aug. 30, the Gallup campus, at 705 Gurley Ave., held its local board meeting amidst a campus full of students. The meeting’s topics included working out a bond escrow agreement for over \$1 million and reviewing a budget for over \$17 million.

The financial aspect of the meeting was followed by a presentation that brought tears to the eyes of those who testified — and even to some listeners. The presentation concerned the aforementioned bridge program, which was founded in 2001 by Dr. Kamala Sharma to help local students transition to institutions of higher education after their time in Gallup is finished.

Sharma shared that in the lifetime of the program, a grand total of 66 students have participated in the summer activities. These activities are a part of an internship that collaborates with higher-level universities in research fields that students are interested in.

Of the student participants, 45 percent have transitioned to continue their education beyond their degree from UNM-Gallup.

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Sharma said she's proud of former student Alfreda Nelson for recently earning her Ph.D. in pharmacology. Nelson's currently conducting her post doctorate work at the UNM's hospital.

"I got tears because she is a local Native American student doing her post doc at UNM," Sharma said.

Two former students, Anthony Cornwell and Tyson McCabe, were in attendance at the board meeting to share the rigorous research they conducted during the Bridge Program.

Some board members laughingly admitted that what the students had learned and experienced was "over their [the board members'] heads." Their meaning became clear when Cornwell began to describe how he was able to manipulate strands of DNA in his research using a gene editor known as "clustered regularly interspaced short palindromic repeats."

Both Cornwell and McCabe were quick to express their gratitude to the program and to Sharma.

"I could feel her energy," McCabe said of his first encounter with Sharma.

"I really liked the idea of going to a new school and seeing how it operates," he said. "I can never thank Dr. Sharma enough; she is my idol."

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