

## Higher education endowments are an investment worth maturing *By Patricia Trujillo, Deputy Secretary, Higher Education Department*

“New Mexico is making positive strides. But...”

It’s a familiar refrain. There always seems to be a “but.” Naysayers often have the loudest voice, highlighting surface-level challenges while minimizing the hard work of building new programs and giving them time to bloom.

Our state faces persistent shortages in critical fields, leaving too many without the services they need. Thankfully, New Mexico is exploring innovative solutions, including a \$150 million investment in faculty endowments for teacher education, social work, and nursing programs—laying the groundwork to fill these higher education workforce gaps.

The Legislative Finance Committee recently noted that the endowments program has yet to meet projected workforce growth and faced early delays. Like any new initiative, it took time for universities and colleges to adjust their systems. With financial structures in place, the program is now well positioned to expand its impact.

Well-intentioned policies and funding often stretch institutions beyond their current capacity, a challenge we hear about frequently in hearings and campaign speeches. Yet our colleges and universities continue turning opportunity into progress. Each starts from a different place—some with more resources or experience building financial structures than others—which shapes how quickly and effectively they can create endowments that meet their communities’ needs.

It’s encouraging that New Mexico now has more teachers, nurses, and social workers than before the pandemic. Endowments, as part of a broader set of policy initiatives, are contributing to increased enrollment at schools that have received these awards year after year, while supporting faculty recruitment and retention in high-demand fields.

Some measurable outcomes already stand out:

- Undergraduate enrollment in nursing programs has increased by 22.3% since 2021-22
- Undergraduate enrollment in social work programs has increased by 33.4% since 2021-22
- Teacher education enrollment at the University of New Mexico has grown consistently year over year. Academic year 2024-25 grew from 2,542 undergraduate students to 2,621

Several factors drive this progress, including the department’s leadership in implementing the endowment system, which expands faculty positions and, by extension, student enrollment in high-need fields. This initiative not only strengthens the stream of skilled workers for the state but also equips the academic departments that train them—a true double win for New Mexico.

One clear lesson is that innovative ideas, like young seedlings, must be nurtured from infancy to maturity. Every new program grows through a cycle of learning, adapting, and strengthening before reaching its full potential. A New Mexico farmer would not rip out all the green chile starts at the beginning of the season because of weeds.

Of course, there is room for improvement. While enrollment has risen across these fields, graduation rates for nurses and social workers have remained stable, and some institutions have still to fully scale up their programs. Yet filling key faculty ranks and expanding student access is already making a meaningful impact and has risen in priority across HEIs with increased resources.

The Legislature, in authorizing these endowments, has given higher education institutions the tools to fill workforce gaps. Students are responding. Enrollment continues to rise and academic programs are building momentum. Though targets set by the LFC may not yet be fully met, the progress so far demonstrates that these investments are worth the effort.

At the department, we've doubled down on making sure endowment funds are used as intended—fueling dynamic, innovative, high-quality programs. Now is the time to stay the course, resisting the lure of constant criticism, and to focus on the remarkable potential we share.

The New Mexico I believe in moves beyond “buts” and either/or thinking, embracing the power of “ands” to tackle complex challenges. Tuition-free college has welcomed over 42,000 new students to New Mexico campuses, *and* initiatives like faculty endowments create learning environments that will produce the next generation of high-quality teachers, nurses, and social workers. Supporting interconnected, evolving solutions is how we ensure our higher education system continues to grow.