

DEPARTMENT LAUNCHES NEW CENTER FOCUSED ON COMMUNITY GEOGRAPHY
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The Department of Geography & Environmental Studies (GES) is excited to announce the launch of a new center at UNM. The R.H. Mallory Center for Community Geography will begin operating this fall with the mission of bringing UNM and its communities together to address critical human-environment issues.

According to Geography professor Maria Lane, who will serve as the center's first director, the center will put its effort into three main areas: service learning, community-engaged research, and public events on human-environment topics. "We're starting small, but we want to focus on areas where UNM has a lot of opportunity to improve," she said. "UNM is filled with student learners who are building their knowledge and developing new research skills. We will support them in achieving those goals while addressing issues right here in our home community."

The center will provide support and funding to students and faculty who want to bring a community-engaged perspective into the classroom, a dissertation project, or a research lab. Students will be able to apply for direct research funds, and faculty will be able to apply for funds to hire student researchers or to add community engagement activities to their courses. The center itself will also host events that bring public and university audiences into conversation about human-environment dynamics and issues.

GES Department Chair Chris Duvall said the Mallory Center is a great match for a growing department that focuses on critical and complex issues. "Our state is a living laboratory for geographers who study human landscapes, natural environments, and the complex relations between them," he said. "Many of our students and faculty already pursue place-based research right here in New Mexico, from mapping changing grassland dynamics to conducting geospatial analysis of healthcare inequities, and we also participate in interdisciplinary teams focused on related issues like evaluating water management policies. The Mallory Center will help focus these projects on local priorities and expand these opportunities for students."

Lane said she expects to spend the first year in a listening and building phase. "Our goal for 2020-2021 is to talk with groups and communities in central New Mexico to find out where and how our student geographers, faculty researchers, and geospatial technologies can be of help. Once we know how we can be useful, we'll set up protocols to fund research and teaching approaches that make a difference to our community partners," she added.

Although the COVID-19 pandemic presents numerous constraints for university operations this fall, Lane is optimistic that a slower pace will actually provide more of an opportunity for UNM personnel to listen to what the community needs. "We're not going to have a big kickoff event anytime soon, so all of our attention will be focused on thinking about new ways of getting students, faculty, and researchers focused on community priorities," she said.

The center's first year will be supported through seed funding from a donor and from the College of Arts & Sciences. In addition, Lane plans to apply for external grants to support specific projects over the next few years. "We are excited to help support this initiative," said Tom Turner, Associate Dean for Research in the College of Arts & Sciences. "The Mallory Center provides opportunities and incentives for students and faculty to devote more attention to local issues and partnerships, and this mission aligns well with goals of our College and UNM."

According to Lane, community groups aren't the only ones who will benefit, since students gain valuable experience by studying real-world environmental and geographical issues. "I think the new center will actually help us improve our teaching and research at UNM," she said. "We know as educators that the deepest forms of learning take place when students connect what they are learning to their own lives, and when they help build knowledge through their own actions and interactions," she said. By bringing real-world problems into the classroom, and by sending students out into the community in partnership with community groups, Lane hopes that the Mallory Center will thus bring mutual benefit to UNM and its surrounding community.

One project is already on tap for spring 2021. Students in a new "Critical Cartography" course will work on a community-based mapping project to support ongoing work with the National Trails program and other partners. Lane hopes to use this course as a pilot for community-engagement approaches that could be brought into other courses in the future.

"There are great examples of community-engaged research and learning at many universities," Lane said. "We will experiment with different ideas and approaches to see what works best for our community, and I hope we can use the Mallory Center to build something special for New Mexico." Lane encourages interested community partners to get in touch via email: mdlane@unm.edu.