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## Students Get Small-Business Experience

*By Carole Rutten, Deputy Director, Los Alamos National Laboratory Community Programs Office*

Preparing college students for a career involves more than just filling their heads with knowledge. It includes giving them a realistic idea of what employers will expect from them once they graduate.

Several students at New Mexico Highlands University (NMHU) are getting this well-rounded perspective as part of a workforce development initiative of the university's Achieving in Research, Math & Science (ARMAS) Center, the Las Vegas/San Miguel Entrepreneurial Network and Los Alamos National Laboratory's Community Programs Office.

The collaboration supports small businesses in San Miguel County by providing meaningful work experiences for undergraduate students who are pursuing bachelor's degrees at NMHU.

"The literature show that students who participate in internships or service projects related to their discipline are more successful (in school) than those who don't," said Edward Martinez, Ph.D., a forestry professor in NMHU's Department of Natural Resources Management and coordinator of the ARMAS Center, which aims to recruit and retain students majoring in science, technology, engineering or math — the STEM disciplines — and see them through to graduation.

Martinez embodies that overarching desire to keep New Mexico's students from moving elsewhere by providing gainful employment for them at home. The Mora native graduated from NMHU, pursued graduate studies out of state and returned to his alma mater to teach.

The Los Alamos National Laboratory (LANL) collaboration was Martinez's second foray into job placement for students. His first grant-funded project placed STEM students in Las Vegas-area government and nonprofit settings doing natural-resource-management tasks. The success of that model led the university into a placement program with broader economic development ambitions and a partnership with LANL and the Las Vegas/San Miguel Entrepreneurial Network, which acted as the liaison between the university and local businesses.



New Mexico Highlands University natural resources management professor Edward Martínez, right, talks with Eliza Montoya about her research poster at Research Day 2015; photo by Margaret McKinney/courtesy NMHU

Participating businesses are required to submit job descriptions and describe specific projects they'd like the student interns to tackle. This helps the internship coordinator match students with compatible businesses.

While the program pays the student's salary during the internship, the business owners or managers must provide mentorship that's tailored to the student's ambitions and helps the student develop critical work-related skills. "They're not just taking on an employee," Martinez said. "We want businesses to treat them like interns and mentor them — help them develop skills."

Semilla Natural Foods in Las Vegas was among the first businesses to participate in the program when it launched this spring. "We were so excited with our first intern — and she's going to stay for a while — that we got two more, because we couldn't pick between them," store manager Debbie Morse said.

Interns begin by learning how the store operates — how to receive shipments and read invoices, how to price products and verify which are organic. Besides their routine work duties, Morse said, the interns have time to work on special projects geared toward their area of study.

The pharmacology major developed a storyboard about herbs with natural healing properties, which the store uses to educate consumers. The student majoring in biology and hoping to become an ophthalmologist is working on a project about herbs that support eye health. The other intern, a conservation management major, created a display about companies that don't use genetically modified products for the October commemoration of Non-GMO Month.

Other area businesses participating in the project include Energy Concepts and Balanced Health Acupuncture.

As part of the three-way partnership, Martinez will provide leadership to a committee of higher education, secondary education, business and community members who want to establish an ARMAS-like initiative in Los Alamos and other nearby counties. The funding for this initiative was provided by Los Alamos National Security LLC, the company that manages the laboratory.

For more information about this and other workforce development initiatives of the Los Alamos National Laboratory Community Programs Office, visit <http://www.lanl.gov/community-environment/community-commitment/index.php>.

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