

Basic training



RANDY SENER | NMBW

From left, interns Rick Wetherill and Laurance Armour work with New Mexico Wilderness Alliance GIS coordinator Lynne Uhring using ArcGIS mapping software. Uhring started at the Wilderness Alliance as an intern.

Giving students an edge in the job hunt

BY KEVIN ROBINSON-AVILA | NMBW SENIOR REPORTER

After 30 years of working in health care, Lynne Uhring decided to change careers.

She enrolled at Central New Mexico Community College in 2008 and expects to earn an associate degree in geographic information technology this fall.

But Uhring is already on the job. The New Mexico Wilderness Alliance hired her this summer to make digital maps of wilderness areas impacted by human activity.

A six-month internship paved the way to formal employment. At CNM, Uhring received classroom training on geographic information systems and global positioning units to collect and organize data. The internship gave her the real-world experience she needed to tackle her new job.

"We learned to use hand-held [GIS and GPS] units at CNM, but it takes a lot of practice," Uhring said. "In class, there are written instructions and a professor and a lab technician there to help when you get stuck. But when you're in the field, you make lots of

mistakes, and you have to learn from them without an instructor watching over your shoulder."

Sionna Grassbaugh, director of employer-based programs at CNM's School of Applied Technologies, said on-the-job training like Uhring received is critical for students in today's highly competitive employment marketplace, because employers are looking for job applicants who can hit the ground running. To give their students an edge, colleges and universities are placing more emphasis on internships that provide students with hands-on experience before they graduate, and adjusting their curricula and skills training.

"No matter how good or skillful students are, they still have to find a way in with employers," Grassbaugh said. "That's not so difficult in a booming economy, but now market competition is much harder. Apprenticeships help students get in the door."

Internships help reinforce training in new vocational and degree programs that community colleges and universities are creating in fields from sustainable energy technology to the film industry. Such emerging trade programs help align curriculum with job opportunities in a changing economy (see related story, right).

In addition, colleges and universities are focusing much more on building basic workplace skills, especially among young adults entering the job

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Colleges align programs with job market trends

A new energy simulation center at the University of New Mexico's School of Engineering is giving students hands-on experience in the growing field of energy retrofits for buildings.

The school inaugurated its Building Energy Retrofit Testbed Oct. 18 at the mechanical engineering building on the southwest corner of campus.

The center allows students and faculty to develop digital simulations of improvements in heating and cooling systems, and compare the models with actual achievements in the building, which has received a \$750,000 energy makeover in the past five years.

Andrea Mammoli, associate professor of engineering and co-director of the Center for Emerging Energy Technologies, said the facility provides a real-life classroom for students.

"The market for energy retrofits is very big now," Mammoli said.

The doctoral student who helped design the facility, Birk Jones, was recently hired by Yearout Mechanical Inc., one of the state's largest contractors for plumbing, heating and cooling systems.

The Albuquerque-based company donated \$200,000 for a new heating and cooling monitoring system at the mechanical engineering building.

Company President Kevin Yearout said the test center will provide valuable data for the industry on how well retrofits achieve promised energy savings, while training students for careers in the field.

"In today's economy, not a lot of construction is going on, but there is a lot of energy retrofitting," Yearout said. "I believe that's the way of the future."

Other UNM schools closely monitor the job market to align curriculum with workplace opportunities. The Anderson School of Management is developing a new minor in arts management, said Dean Doug Brown.

"Arts management is a big part of the economy, but many art professionals don't have business backgrounds, so there are opportunities there," Brown said.

Community colleges focus on teaching vocational skills in emerging fields, such as sustainable energy, said Santa Fe Community College President Sheila Ortego, who is leading a collaborative effort among state colleges to obtain federal funding for more programs.

"It's the right time to invest in community colleges, because we're experts in workforce training," Ortego said.

SFCC opened a 35,000-square-foot Sustainable Technologies Center this spring.

This fall, Central New Mexico Community College opened an 82,000-square-foot Advanced Technology Center in Albuquerque, plus a 7,200-square-foot sustainable technologies laboratory.

CNM frequently develops new programs, such as a recently launched mobile technology and applications course about cellphones, computer tablets and other devices, said Sydney Gunthorpe, dean of CNM's School of Business and Information Technology.

"Traditionally, they say technology changes every three years, but the cycle is getting faster and faster," Gunthorpe said. - K.R.A.



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University of New Mexico graduate student Birk Jones, left, and Associate Professor Andrea Mammoli are pictured with a solar array on the roof of UNM's mechanical engineering building.