

Learning water at UNM

By John Fleck / Journal Staff Writer

When Shawn Hardeman was looking for the next step on the career ladder, he turned to the University of New Mexico's Water Resources Program.

A University of Arizona graduate in soil and water sciences, he was living in Austin, working for the state of Texas on public lands management, when his wife landed a good job in Albuquerque. Following along, he said in a recent interview, he "realized I had to reinvent myself."

He was attracted to the interdisciplinary UNM master's degree program because rather than emphasizing an academic research track, it focused on professional preparation for the diverse real-world problems in water management.

Similar to the university's master's degree programs in business administration or urban planning, the program's function is to give students the skills to enter the water management workplace, University of New Mexico engineering professor Bruce Thomson said.

"It prepares students to go and work in the profession," Thomson said in an interview.

But its interdisciplinary nature also sets it apart, Thomson and others said.

"You learn a lot of engineering, resource management, economics, problem solving," said Hardeman, a 2008 graduate who today works as a water quality data analyst for the Albuquerque Bernalillo County Water Utility Authority.

The complex interaction of scientific, legal and political systems influences the way the program's professors approach teaching its students. "We try to get them to see the big picture," Thomson said.

Graduates work in both the private sector and at government water agencies, according to Thomson.

Thomson, who has headed the program since 2006, is stepping down, and the university recently announced that economics professor Bob Berrens has been chosen to take over leadership of the program.

In an interview, Berrens explained the program's purpose by citing its formal mission statement: "To become a regionally prominent center of expertise on water related issues and training for environmental professionals, promoting fair, healthy and sustainable solutions to the challenges of water use in New Mexico and the southwest."

Within the university, the program's structure is unusual, Berrens explained. While academic departments usually have all their courses under a single umbrella, such as the Department of Economics, the interdisciplinary nature of water resources means that courses the students take are scattered across the campus, in many different departments. That reflects the underlying nature of water problems, where a single academic specialty – engineering, say, or climate or hydrology or law – is not sufficient. "You can't solve those water problems from the perspective of a single degree," Berrens said.

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