

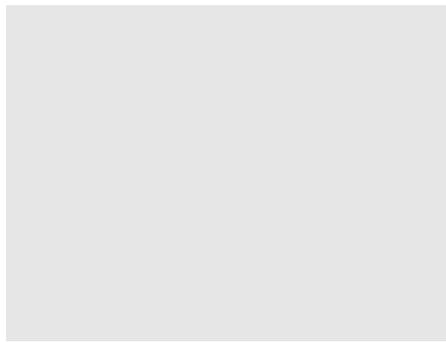
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MY VIEW MAHYAR A. AMOUZEGAR

New Mexico Tech maintains health — and excellence — amid challenges

By Mahyar A. Amouzegar

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Mahyar Amouzegar, Ph.D., president
of New Mexico Tech

In one of the most dramatic transformations in decades, higher education in the U.S. is grappling with declining enrollment and financial instability. Dozens of colleges have been forced to close or merge, and many others are scrambling to stay afloat.

Since 2021, more than 70 colleges and universities have either shut down or merged, and even midsize and large institutions, once thought to be insulated, must make drastic cuts.

For example, the University of New Orleans, a midsize, urban-serving campus, is facing a \$12 million shortfall this academic year (full disclosure: I served as the provost there from 2017 until 2022). Similarly, Sonoma State University — part of the California State University system — has a \$24 million deficit, causing program eliminations in social sciences and humanities as well as staff,



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These institutions, like many others nationwide, have been contending with an anticipated but severe enrollment decline. New Mexico has not been immune to these trends. The state's research and comprehensive universities have experienced over a 10% decline in enrollment since 2015.

While there was a modest 2.4% increase from 2023 to 2024, demographic projections suggest that New Mexico's aging population and stagnant growth will continue to limit the pool of prospective college students. Nationally, the picture isn't much brighter — Forbes projects that dozens of additional colleges may face closures or significant restructuring soon.

Yet, New Mexico Tech remains on solid footing — not because we are exempt from these challenges, but because we take a strategic, long-term approach to overcoming them. Enrollment is a critical metric, but at New Mexico Tech, it is one of several that define our success.

We remain committed to strategic growth, reversing the past decade of decline through expanded recruitment, industry partnerships and student retention initiatives. But we also measure our health by additional key indicators:

- Expanding our reach by strengthening national and international recruitment.
- Building strong industry connections through partnering with industry leaders to provide students with real-world experience and career pipelines.
- Investing in future-ready programs by developing new academic offerings aligned with emerging STEM fields.
- Supporting student success, which includes enhancing retention initiatives and student support services.
- Discussions about enrollment often miss a crucial point: not all universities function in the same way.

At many institutions, increasing enrollment is as simple as admitting more students. At a STEM-focused institution like New Mexico Tech, the reality is far more complex.

Our curriculum is built around highly specialized, hands-on programs. A student at a larger university who begins in engineering but later shifts to history can transition within the same campus.

At Tech, where options outside STEM are intentionally limited, students who pivot away from engineering or science must transfer. This counts as an enrollment loss for us, affecting our funding allocation. Yet, we see it as a success — helping students find the right path, even beyond our campus.

Additionally, scaling STEM education presents unique challenges. In lecture-based disciplines, increasing enrollment often requires only more seats. At New Mexico Tech, however, small, intensive lab and experiential environments are essential.

Expanding a specialized lab course from 10 to 11 students isn't a minor adjustment — it requires a new section, an additional instructor, and more specialized instrumentation, lab space and technical support. Sustainable growth, therefore, requires careful planning, not just increasing headcount.

Yet, despite these pressures, New Mexico Tech has consistently navigated challenges without the severe disruptions seen elsewhere. While others face drastic enrollment declines, financial shortfalls and faculty and staff layoffs, New Mexico Tech remains remarkably stable.

Unlike many STEM institutions that struggled to balance hands-on learning with pandemic restrictions, we adapted quickly. Faculty designed hybrid lab solutions that maintained both high safety and academic standards.

Financially, our diversified revenue streams ensure long-term stability. While many larger universities face hiring freezes and widespread furloughs, we have preserved faculty and staff positions and, in some cases, have even grown our faculty — a testament to our strength. Additionally, our research centers continue to secure competitive grants and external funding, enhancing our financial position while giving students real-world research experience.

New Mexico Tech is more than just a university — it's where innovation turns imagination into reality and where the future is built.

We remain focused on what we do best — and we're doubling down on it. At New Mexico Tech, we don't just endure change — we lead and innovate through it. And as we do, we prepare the next generation of scientists, engineers and innovators who will shape the world.

Moving forward, our focus is on:

- Expanding access to STEM education by reaching students beyond traditional regional pools.
- Investing in faculty and research growth to drive innovation and industry partnerships.
- Strengthening student success initiatives to improve retention and graduation rates.
- Developing programs in emerging fields to stay ahead of workforce and technological demands.

The long-term health of our university is not determined solely by how many students we enroll — though that remains essential — but also by the impact we have on those students, the research we produce, the lives we improve, and the real-world challenges we help solve.

Mahyar A. Amouzegar is the president of New Mexico Tech and a writer. His latest novel is *The Hubris of an Empty Hand*.