



## Jose Herrera (1967-Present)

Associate Vice President for Academic Affairs  
and Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences

**Western New Mexico University**

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*“Get a good advisor, and figure out quickly who you’ll work for. It’ll make or break your career.”  
Jose Herrera, 2005.*

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### Overview

Before being hired at Western New Mexico University, Herrera was the program director for the National Science Foundation in Arlington, Va., where he oversaw various programs within the division of undergraduate education. Herrera was chairman for the biology department at Truman State University, where he had also served as a professor since 2009. He earned his doctorate in microbiology from Kansas State University in 1996 after graduating from Northern Illinois University, where he received his undergraduate and graduate degrees in biology.

*This interview was conducted in 2010.*

### Early Life and Education

Jose Herrera was born in 1967 in Chicago, Illinois. Herrera loved biology and studied it while growing up, but says his inner-city upbringing limited his exposure to the natural world. After graduating from high school, Herrera attended Northern Illinois University, where he received his bachelor’s degree in biology and chemistry in 1988. Herrera continued at Northern Illinois as a masters’ student, where circumstances and inspiration converged to interest him in the environmental sciences. For the first time, he seriously considered pursuing a career in an environmental field.

In 1996, Herrera obtained his master’s degree in biology in 1991, and his doctorate in microbiology from Kansas State University. Soon thereafter, he received a tenure track position as an assistant professor at Truman State University, where he taught introductory biology, microbiology, microbial ecology and mycology. Herrera continues to teach at Truman State University as an associate professor of microbiology. He is currently on a three-part sabbatical that began at the University of Alberta in Edmonton, Alberta, continued at Kansas State University, and will wrap up at the University of New Mexico.

## Career

Herrera, in turn, has helped to guide his own students. Truman State University's focus is on undergraduate research, and Herrera has mentored twenty to thirty undergraduate students in his lab during the past ten years, as well as some graduate students. Herrera takes special pride in one student, who was one of only eight applicants accepted to a medical doctoral program at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Herrera notes that most of Truman's students are accepted to the graduate and professional programs of their choice, a fact he credits to the institution's academic excellence and strong work ethic. Herrera says these characteristics, as well as the university's respect for academic freedom, are what keep him there.

## Highlights

The love Herrera has for his school and his students is mutual. He was a semi-finalist for the Teacher-of-the-Year award at Truman State University in 2000, and again in 2003. Although he did not win, he cites it as an accomplishment because it reaffirms his talents as a teacher. That is critically important to Herrera, who says his career is based around his relationship with his students. In addition to his teaching duties, Herrera serves as an advisor to a Hispanic fraternity at Truman, an experience he has enjoyed immensely. "It's been really neat," he says. "I'm getting old enough to see the progression of their careers. It's good to have been here to see them grow up in the last ten years or so, and keep that relationship with them...to see them when they come in as freshmen, and then to see them later as professionals in their chosen fields." Another career highlight came in 1997, when Herrera and his students published a website (<http://microfungi.truman.edu>) dealing with ecological species of microfungi. Herrera says the subject's relative obscurity makes the endeavor even more rewarding. "It's a very esoteric little niche, but it's been rewarding because it's helped us develop nice relationships with different constituencies," he says. "We've gotten positive feedback about it from people all over the world."

Herrera says his experience in the academic world has been overwhelmingly positive, but that is not to say that it has been obstacle-free. "You're going to have some low moments when your research doesn't work out and you have to start over again," he says. "It's not all glory." However, he accepts such challenges as inherent to his profession. He says in the end, he has remained an academic because he believes that people who enjoy learning are inherently tenacious and determined. "There are going to be peaks and valleys, none of which, however, are too high or too low. It's part of the job," he says. "If you don't enjoy learning and understanding the world, especially from an environmental stand point, you're going to give up. But if you have good friends and mentors there to help you when things are down, you're going to get through it."

Herrera believes that it is hard for young minorities to break into the environmental field, due largely to a limited number of professional-development initiatives. "There are many programs that offer training, but few locations where people of color can break into the profession," Herrera says. He says a current emphasis on molecular-based projects also limits opportunities, and Herrera encourages minority students interested in environmental careers to study molecular biology. "It's big right now," he says.

## **Importance of Mentoring to Career**

Herrera credits his professional success to “hard work, lots of help from others, and serendipity.” Much of that help came in the form of advice he received as a student. Throughout his academic career, Herrera has relied on mentors for guidance and support. He especially credits his Ph.D. advisor, Charles Kramer, who stepped in to advise him despite being on the verge of retirement. “He took me under his wing,” Herrera says. Kramer also introduced Herrera to the fields of microfungus and microbial ecology, areas of study that Herrera continues to pursue.

## **Advice to Young Professionals**

Finally, Herrera emphasizes that a passion for the field and many outside help are critical to success, especially for students of color. “Get a good advisor and figure out quickly who you’ll work for,” he advises. “It’ll make or break your career with respect to the environmental field.”