



# New Mexico | Academy Impact Story

As Cisco Networking Academy turns 15, we look back to see how far we've come. We see millions of students, each with a unique educational experience and a track record of accomplishments beyond the classroom. Their stories are our story.

## Digital Novice Becomes ICT Professional

**Rebecca Baca parlayed her Networking Academy courses into a fresh start and a successful technology career.**

Since it began as a program for disadvantaged high school students in Silicon Valley, Cisco Networking Academy has made inclusiveness a top priority. Academy students now represent a broad range of ages, cultural backgrounds, economic levels, and career aspirations. Because women have traditionally been underrepresented in STEM areas—science, technology, engineering, and mathematics—the academy has worked to promote female enrollment and encourage women and girls to pursue careers in information and communications technology (ICT). In 2012, 20% of academy students and 17% of instructors worldwide were female.

Rebecca Baca was looking for a new start and a more stable livelihood when she signed up for a Networking Academy course in 2003. Although she had never heard of Cisco and had little idea of what networking was all about, she stuck with it. After completing her coursework



and earning a Cisco certification, she landed a job at an ICT services company and became the first woman in the organization to rise to the position of project consulting engineer.

She now also serves as a Networking Academy adviser and a role model for women who are wondering whether technology is right for them.

### Getting Comfortable with Technology

In 2003, Baca was a 27-year-old single mother living with her parents in Albuquerque. After several years in low-paying service jobs in the hospitality industry, she wanted to become financially independent and make a better life

for herself and daughter. She knew she would need more education to make that happen.

Nearby Technical Vocational Institute (now Central New Mexico Community College, or CNMCC) offered an Associate of Science degree in technology that seemed promising, but first she had to prepare by taking refresher courses and an elementary computing class. “It was kind of embarrassing how little I knew about computers,” she says.

Baca admits she felt intimidated when she walked into her first Networking Academy course. “There were only six women and about 20 men,” she recalls. “I think my desire to succeed kept me going at the beginning. I thought, ‘I don’t care if this is completely over my head, I am not going to quit.’”

**“I found the instructors were very supportive. They really wanted to see the women do well.”**

Two of her academy instructors, Robert Hennigan and David Clauss, remember Baca as both motivated and generous with her new knowledge. “Rebecca displayed the hard work, diligence, and dedication required to succeed in the highly competitive networking field,” says Hennigan. Adds Clauss, “She was always willing to help other students in the networking lab. She realized that helping others deepened her own understanding of the concepts.”

### A Foothold in the Working World

Using a state grant and working part time to help pay her way, Baca completed the Cisco

CCNA® courses for networking associates, attained her associate's degree, and passed the Cisco CCNA certification exam. But she wasn't sure there would be a job waiting for her. She thought, "I'm a straight-A student in the academy, but does that mean I can get hired?" But with the support of instructors, she weathered an extensive interview process and landed an internship at the ICT services firm Network Architects (now Presidio).

"Their work environment was like a fraternity house, with foosball and pool tables. But I loved it. And without my Networking Academy training, there was no way I could have gotten my head around the technology so quickly." After three months as an intern, Baca was offered a full-time job as an associate consulting engineer.

She also studied for and obtained the more advanced Cisco CCNP® certification for networking professionals. It wasn't long before Baca earned the opportunity to work on the project side of the business, taking responsibility for planning and installing networks for a variety of enterprises.

That meant proving herself to male managers. She started to do user training and worked up to installing equipment.

**"My big breakthrough was being named lead engineer on a 19-site telephony project. Now I'm a senior voice consulting engineer."**

Baca discovered that academy courses had prepared her well for the ICT business. "In class, we approached networking as a business challenge, starting from the initial project proposal and continuing through to hardware, cabling, and pricing. Working in teams, we learned how to take different roles and how to lead. Troubleshooting was a big part of it. The instructors 'broke' things and asked the teams to diagnose the problems using different simulated help-desk scenarios. We had to collaborate to get the best results."

Baca has taken on an advisory role for the Networking Academy program at CNMCC, helping to mentor and motivate a new generation of students. She has advocated for more attention to public speaking and project management in the classroom.

"Presentations are always a challenge, whether to the customer or the boss," she says. "In class, we diagramed networks to help explain our designs. If you want to advance, you need to be able to manage a project effectively, whether or not you're the project manager."

Baca represented CNMCC at the Cisco Networking Academy 10th anniversary celebration in Washington, D.C. There she met Cisco CEO John Chambers, as well as one of her state's senators. "That's when I truly realized my accomplishments," she observes. "Before then, I was thrilled that I had a job that I liked, and that I had 'made it.'"

**"I was able to step back and see what I had become—where I came from, and what I am now."**

Rebecca Baca is one of the thousands of women who have used Networking Academy courses and Cisco certifications as a platform for launching a rewarding career. Whether they choose ICT or some other field, their networking education gives them confidence and skills that create new opportunities for success.

## Learn More

For additional information on Cisco Networking Academy, including more impact stories, regional contacts, and how you can get involved, visit our site:

[cisco.com/go/netacad/us](https://cisco.com/go/netacad/us)

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This is why we approach CSR the same way we approach business – by applying our technology, employee expertise and partnerships. We are focused on four primary goals: improving the well-being of people and communities around the world, reducing our environmental impact and helping our customers do the same, conducting our business ethically, and creating a workplace where our employees thrive.

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