

COLLEGE!NOW

Montana's Two-Year College Initiative

What COLLEGE! NOW Is...and What It Isn't

What It Is

- COLLEGE!NOW focuses on Montana's two-year colleges as the way to increase the number of Montanans who complete a college certificate or degree. With an admissions philosophy welcoming all students, low tuition, and programs preparing students for successful transfer to a university or for high-demand jobs, Montana's two-year colleges provide a convenient, friendly, affordable doorway to success in college and in life for all Montanans.
- COLLEGE!NOW reflects a shared commitment of Montana's university system, K-12 leaders, business and community leaders, legislators, and the governor's office to make two-year education more accessible, better coordinated, better understood and, as a result, better utilized statewide. In spite of dramatically increasing enrollments in recent years as more and more Montanans have become aware of the quality and affordability of their transfer and occupational programs, Montana's two-year colleges are currently an under-utilized asset.
- COLLEGE!NOW is a concerted effort to combine new approaches and new technology with old-fashioned hard work and cooperation to make Montana's two-year colleges even more accessible, student-responsive, and affordable. This effort includes designating Montana's colleges of technology as "the community college arm" of Montana's university system, changing policies to make it easier for students to start and finish degrees at a college close to home, developing and coordinating courses and programs that students want and employers need, and building data systems and networks that expand access and promote resource-sharing.
- COLLEGE!NOW is the result of a significant investment by the State of Montana (HB 645) and a four-year implementation grant from a major national foundation (Lumina Foundation for Education). The legislature and governor recognize the potential of Montana's two-year colleges to make college opportunities affordable and accessible for all Montanans. In turn, Lumina endorses state-level commitments, like Montana's, to creating a more educated population with available resources. Montana is one of only seven states to receive Lumina funding for this "productivity initiative."

What It Isn't

- COLLEGE!NOW is not an attempt to change the governance of Montana's two-year colleges. Yes, the colleges of technology will take on the identity and mission of community colleges, but they will maintain a governance and structure that assures

efficiency and effectiveness within the Montana University System. Their names, the role of their local advisory boards, and the reporting lines of their leaders may require minor adjustments. But College!Now is about Montana's students, not who reports to whom. It's about a clear and affordable pathway through Montana's education system, kindergarten through college; on- and off-ramps for adults as their careers and aspirations change; and the development of a workforce to support Montana's 21st-century economy,

- COLLEGE!NOW is not an effort to make all two-year colleges look and act exactly the same. Montana benefits by having 15 two-year colleges (5 colleges of technology, 3 community colleges, and 7 tribal colleges), as well as 2 universities with the two-year college mission (MSU-Northern and UM-Western). Each institution has unique strengths and serves diverse communities. However, a certain level of coordination and consistency among colleges is necessary to make access equal, resource-sharing possible, and communication clear. For instance, there are currently areas of the state where affordable two-year college transfer degree, short-term workforce training, and/or dual high school/college credit is not being accessed. We can—and must—provide and promote these opportunities statewide.
- COLLEGE!NOW is not a campaign to solicit more state funding for higher education. It is an all-out effort to find and implement ways of better using our two-year colleges to help contain costs for students and taxpayers. *COLLEGE! NOW* focuses on making the most of Montana's existing investment in higher education.

Why Now?

Montana's economy needs more skilled workers, and two-year colleges can meet much of the demand. According to the most recent projections, Montana's economy will add approximately 98,000 jobs between 2006 and 2016 and approximately 25,000 of these will require at least a postsecondary certificate or associate degree. Half of the 25 fastest-growing jobs will require at least an associate's degree.

Montana will also need educated workers to fill jobs being left by retiring Baby Boomers. One out of every five Montana workers is over 55 years old, which means that education leaders, business and community leaders, and policymakers need to take action today to prepare the workforce they'll need tomorrow.

Montana must increase the education and training levels of its working adults to meet workforce demands. The percentage of traditional college-age Montanans (18-24 years old) is expected to decrease over the next several years, which means we must bring more adults 25 and older to college—or back to college—to ensure a competitive workforce and a sustainable economy.

Montana’s two-year colleges are not being used to their full potential. Just under 25% of Montana college students attend two-year institutions, compared with nearly 50% in Western states. Of particular concern is the under-enrollment of two age groups:

- Adult students typically seek out two-year colleges, where the tuition is significantly lower and the individualized attention significantly higher. Yet only 2.3% of Montana’s adults are engaged in college coursework, the lowest rate in the West and about half the national average.
- High school/college dual credit opportunities allow talented high school students to begin college work at significantly reduced cost. Yet less than 2.5% of Montana high school students engage in dual enrollment opportunities, the lowest rate in the West.

Montana cannot afford to keep doing “business as usual” in higher education.

Making college opportunities affordable—for students and taxpayers—requires more careful stewardship and better coordination system-wide.

- Tuition and fees for students at Montana’s two-year colleges are 61% of the four-year colleges’ tuition and fees, compared with an average of 43% for states in the West.
- With limited resources and growing student demand, Montana’s two-year colleges must work together to operate as efficiently as possible. By coordinating curriculum, sharing technological resources, and aligning business practices, we can improve access and quality of services for students without adding to the burdens of taxpayers.

What Are the COLLEGE! NOW Strategies--and Why?

What

Why

Offer complete community college programs and services statewide for Montana’s students and employers.

Montana’s 15 two-year colleges will become “hubs” for their local regions, providing services that will help students get started or get up to speed and providing businesses with “just in time” assistance and programs for their employees.

Every Montanan should be able to start a college education or receive quality workforce training close to home--no matter who they are or where they live. Every business should have access to the nimble workforce development services of a two-year college.

Montana’s five colleges of technology will

In spite of the gains Montana’s colleges of

become the community college branches of the four-year university with which each is currently affiliated. Their names will have the regional focus typical of community colleges, and they will offer the range of programs and services Montana's community college districts offer.

Today, some colleges offer Adult Basic Education (ABE) while others do not. Working together and with K-12 schools, Montana's two-year colleges will bring these services to every corner of the state with current resources.

Developmental programs helping students build the skills they need to be college-ready will be confined to Montana's two-year colleges, where costs are lower.

Customizing college programming to the needs of working adults through flexible scheduling, online courses, and workplace-based programs will bring more adults to college (or back to college), helping fill jobs on Montana's main streets and open seats on its campuses.

Expand dual high school/college enrollment and improve two-year/four-year transfer.

Students participating in dual enrollment programs throughout the state – online, in the high schools, and at the colleges – will have opportunities to save time and money on their college degree and stay academically engaged throughout their junior and senior years.

technology have made in the past decade – offering transfer courses, engaging with high schools and universities on early college and transfer programs – they have not entirely shaken their “vo-tech” brand. Montana needs a wake-up call on what these colleges have become and are becoming: community colleges sponsored by the Montana University System.

Creating a one-stop shop for adults seeking education, whether it's basic education, workforce training, or a college degree, just makes sense. ABE students are more likely to become college students if there is a clear pathway for them.

Every four-year university in the Montana University System has a two-year college branch. Students can get the help they need to become college-ready without the higher costs both students and universities assume when this preparation is provided at the university level. These savings, in turn, can be invested in making more students successful.

Too many courses and programs do not fit the needs or realities of working adults.

The cost of dual enrollment opportunities at Montana's two-year colleges is less than half of what it is at the universities. Because of the affiliation of the colleges of technology with a four-year university, all of the opportunities available through the university can be made available through

the “community college branch” of the university.

More Montana students and parents will be aware of and have access to the dual enrollment opportunities that can make college so much more affordable.

The rate of high school students engaging in dual enrollment opportunities in Montana is the lowest in the West. Parents and students need to recognize all of Montana’s two-year colleges as an affordable ticket to a four-year degree (not just a place for workforce training or developmental education).

All Montana two-year colleges will offer transfer degrees at the more affordable two-year college tuition rate.

Some two-year colleges do not offer the transfer degree, with the result that students in those communities do not have access to the more affordable tuition rates for the first two years of a baccalaureate degree.

Through coordination at the state level, two-year to four-year statewide articulations will ensure that students in high-demand majors transfer seamlessly to the university of their choice.

Currently, each two-year college works with all universities to identify transfer pathways for students. With so many constantly changing programs and so many colleges and universities to work with, the potential for confusion and the duplication of effort is significant.

Use technology to expand access for students and create savings for two-year colleges.

Montana’s two-year colleges are banding together to create a virtual community college that will combine and re-package key courses and programs and offer them online. The college will initially focus on dual enrollment courses and then move into workforce programs.

Business and community leaders view online education as an important means of providing affordable college programs to remote areas and adult students. The Board of Regents is committed to expanding online education in ways that increase cost-effectiveness and reduce unnecessary duplication. The Legislature and the governor are supporting that commitment through HB 645.

The virtual community college will focus on providing online opportunities that work for adults.

The traditional college model was designed for “college kids” —young adults between the ages of 18-24 with fewer family and work obligations. The success of institutions like University of Phoenix and

Western Governors University suggests a demand among adult learners for programs and services that help adults balance the demands of work/family/college.

The two-year colleges are also moving toward common information technology systems that will make information sharing easier and more efficient and even pave the way for sharing administrative services, such as packaging financial aid

Sharing information more easily and sharing services will translate into savings that can be reinvested in students.

Common systems also mean that regents, campus leaders, and policymakers will be able to get a more accurate picture of how efficiently and effectively the two-year sector is performing.

Fund colleges based on students' progress and success, not just enrollment.

Colleges will have a fiscal incentive to keep their enrolled students moving toward completion of certificates and degrees in a timely fashion.

Today's state funding policy for its colleges and universities is all about getting students *to* college, with little or no emphasis on getting students *through* college. Graduating more students with the resources available demands a focus on both. The Board of Regents is working on a proposal for a new funding policy that will do just that.

College graduates are far more likely to provide a return on the state's investment (and realize a return on their own investment) than college dropouts.