

# **College!NOW**

## **Brand Research Report**

Focus Groups  
Community Surveys  
Student Surveys

January - February 2012

Provided by:



**Abstract**

1

As part of the College!NOW initiative supported by the Lumina Foundation, the Montana University System, Office of the Commissioner of Higher Education is renaming Montana's five Colleges of Technology (COTs). Renaming and rebranding the five COTs is part of a larger initiative to extend the comprehensive mission of two-year higher education to the state's COTs. Previous work undertaken by College!NOW determined that new names should embody the extended *Mission*, the local *Place* of the COT, and the university *Affiliation*.

This report considers the findings from three research pieces in order to formulate a full recommendation to the Board of Regents for renaming Montana's five Colleges of Technology. These three research pieces include: 1) focus groups held in six communities around Montana that tested how different naming frameworks communicated *Place* and *Mission and Affiliation*, which tested how different place-names represent communities where a COT is located; 2) a survey that sought to elucidate current perspectives, priorities, and challenges that concern current students of two-year higher education in Montana; and 3) a community survey that allowed community members from the five cities containing a COT to give feedback on naming conventions and place-name identifiers.

Based on the findings from these three research pieces, the *Place and Mission and Affiliation* naming convention most closely meets the primary goals of communicating a distinct two-year college mission that also highlights a community's local identity while still telling the common story of two-year higher education in Montana. This report recommends that MUS adopt the *Place and Mission and Affiliation* naming convention as the guiding framework for renaming Montana's five Colleges of Technology.

## Introduction

College!NOW, supported by the Lumina Foundation, is a multi-year initiative that aims to make two-year higher education more accessible, better coordinated, better understood, and better utilized in Montana. The primary goal of this initiative is to increase high-quality degree and certificate attainment for all Montanans. . As part of this initiative, Montana's Board of Regents (BOR) approved a comprehensive mission and vision statement for two-year higher education in the state<sup>1</sup>. The comprehensive mission and vision statement will be extended to the state's five COTs through a twenty-five month plan that includes renaming and rebranding them.

Recognizing that renaming and rebranding the five COTs in the state will have a lasting impact on the face of two-year higher education in Montana, the Office of the Commissioner of Higher Education has taken great care to consider input from a broad range of stakeholders who will be impacted by the change. To give these stakeholders an opportunity to weigh in on the rebranding and renaming, the College!NOW communications team organized community and campus listening sessions, a retreat focused on mission expansion, and a renaming and rebranding summit. From these events, the Montana University System (MUS) determined that new COT names should: 1) clearly communicate the mission of a two-year college as distinct from the mission of a four-year university; 2) communicate a common story of two-year education in Montana while retaining a sense of local identity; and 3) follow a simple and

---

<sup>1</sup> Please see Appendix A for the full mission statement.

straightforward naming convention that shows the COT's university affiliate. These three components are understood as *Place*, *Mission*, and *Affiliation*.

The Office of Commissioner of Higher Education engaged Strategies 360 to lead the post-brand summit market research, including a prospective student focus group study, a current student survey, and a community input survey.

The College!NOW initiative is seeking to answer the question: How can the five Colleges of Technology be renamed so that their names embody the comprehensive two-year college mission for Montana and reflect *Place* and *Mission and Affiliation*? In order to answer this question, Strategies 360 in collaboration with the Office of the Commissioner of Higher Education, Public Agenda, and Collaborative Research Associates designed a qualitative study using focus groups. The purpose of this study was to test different naming frameworks for the ability to embody *Place* and *Mission and Affiliation* and to consider the appeal of different place names that evoke a sense of local identity.<sup>2</sup>

To accompany this prospective student focus group study, two surveys were also conducted. The first survey consisted of current students and was designed to elicit perspectives about priorities and challenges for two-year higher education. The second survey was a community input survey made available to communities with a COT. This survey allowed community members an opportunity to share their ideas for place identifiers and new college names that reflect the two-year mission. Additionally, it served as a way to gain insight into how the public evaluated the different naming frameworks under consideration by the BOR. The data from these surveys was meant to augment the findings of the focus group research.

The prospective student focus groups, student surveys, and community input surveys make up the post-brand summit market research that will inform the full recommendations to the Board of Regents on the renaming of the five COTs.

## **Brief introduction to the three data collection methods**

### **1) Focus groups**

#### **a. Overview of the design of the instruments**

The scope and design of this research was reached through collaboration between Strategies 360, College!NOW communications, and research consultants including Public Agenda and Collaborative Research Associates, and the College!NOW team from the Office of the Commissioner of Higher Education (OCHE). The group facilitation guide was also drafted in collaboration and included input from Strategies 360, Dr. John Cech, Dr. Alison Kadlec and research staff of Public Agenda, Dr. Anne Clark of Collaborative Research Associates, and Dr. Erin Cech (Postdoctoral Fellow, Michelle R. Clayman Institute for Gender Research, Stanford University). The questions were designed to engage conversation and elicit stories from

---

<sup>2</sup> This focus group study also looked at prospective student perceptions of two-year higher education in Montana. The results of these findings will be addressed in a separate report specifically focused on rebranding the five COTs with recommendations on a branding and messaging campaign.

participants regarding their perceptions of higher education, naming frameworks, and local place names.

### **b. Brief overview of the research design**

Qualitative research using focus groups assumes that valuable and relevant information can be drawn from a guided group discussion. It also assumes that the nature of this information provides a different kind of insight, when considered against other forms of data collection, into how people assign meaning and relevance to things in their lives. To answer the primary question considered in this report, qualitative research methods were seen as providing a more richly contextualized understanding of how people evaluate naming frameworks.

In order to test naming frameworks under consideration by the BOR, the focus groups reviewed three fictional college names with identifiers in a different order for each name. Participants also reviewed at least four local college names that were developed in the December brand summit as well as names suggested by participants.

### **Population**

The study included six focus groups taking place in the communities of Helena, Butte, Missoula, Great Falls, Billings and Bozeman because these communities have a local COT or a two-year college program. Focus group participants had to be between the ages of 17-60 and currently considering enrolling in a two-year college. Participants could *not* be current students at any of Montana's two-year colleges. Participants had to be residents of a region where the focus group was conducted.

### **Sample**

The criteria for selecting focus group participants was determined by Strategies 360 in collaboration with Dr. John Cech and Public Agenda. Focus group participants were screened for age, educational background and goals, career interest, military experience, family status, ethnicity, gender, and length of time living in the community, with the goal of building a focus group participant list in each town that represented balanced diversity within categories. Focus groups were composed of 8-10 prospective students representing a range of ages and backgrounds including, high school students, young adults who had not started college or who had dropped out and were unemployed or underemployed, working and unemployed middle age adults looking to retrain for a new career, adults interested in lifelong learning, military veterans, and Native Americans.

### **Data Collection**

The focus groups were facilitated by a single moderator. Data was collected using separate audio and video recordings. Following the focus groups, audio recordings were transcribed verbatim, but certain nonverbal forms of communication such as prosody, pitch, and hand gesture were not captured in the transcript. To aid in the readability of the transcripts, filled pauses and speech repairs were often excluded as well.

To analyze the data, researchers reviewed focus group transcripts, audio recordings, and key segments of the video recording. Researchers then manually coded and grouped comments based on their relevance to key research questions.

#### **d. Ethical Protection of the Participants**

Participants were given an informed consent form that explained that their identities would remain anonymous and that the content of the focus group would be used in a research study. Participants were each given a \$75 incentive for participation.

### **2) Community Surveys**

#### **a. Overview of the design of the instruments**

The research design was led by Strategies 360 with input from the Office of the Commissioner of Higher Education, Dr. John Cech, Collaborative Research Associates, and Dr. Erin Cech.

#### **b. Brief Overview of the Research Design**

The survey was designed using a combination of multiple-choice questions to collect demographic information from participants, and open-ended questions to collect data on perceptions of fictional four-year universities and two-year colleges based on varying name frameworks under consideration by the BOR. Demographic questions regarding nearest city of residence and whether or not participants were employees of the Montana University System were included.

#### **Population**

The population sampled included residents living in or near Montana's five Colleges of Technology, including the towns of Billings, Butte, Great Falls, Helena, and Missoula.

#### **Sample**

A total of 951 people participated in this survey, including:

- 142 participants from Billings
- 120 participants from Butte
- 296 participants from Great Falls
- 259 participants from Helena
- 120 participants from Missoula
- 19 participants from various parts of the state and two participants from out of state.

39% of participants identified themselves as employees of the Montana University System.

#### **c. Brief overview of data collection**

Data was collected using the *Survey Monkey* online survey data collection tool. The survey was hosted by *Survey Monkey* on the Internet and was open and accessible to the public via web-link. The survey was open to the public from February 3rd to February 13<sup>th</sup>, 2012 in each community.

The survey was promoted via two online media ad buys on local online newspaper websites within the markets of the five Colleges of Technology. The survey was also promoted via press releases, which were sent statewide. The survey was highlighted in earned media through TV and radio interviews on local broadcast stations and was picked up by the Associated Press. The AP story was carried by every newspaper and most electronic newspaper media in the five College of Technology markets in the state. This included coverage on Montana Public Radio and Yellowstone Public Radio. Local newspapers also posted links to the survey on their

Facebook pages. Finally, the link was also posted to the College!NOW blog and Facebook page and the MUS website.

#### **d. Ethical Protection of the Participants**

Participants were notified on the introduction page of the survey that that all responses in the survey would be collected anonymously and confidentially and used for research purposes only. They were notified that participation in the survey was optional and voluntary, and no one at any college would be aware of whether or not they completed the questionnaire. Survey responses were collected anonymously.

### **3) Student Surveys**

#### **a. Overview of the Design of the Instruments**

The research was designed by Strategies 360 in collaboration with the Office of the Commissioner of Higher Education, Dr. John Cech, Collaborative Research Associates, Dr. Erin Cech, and a special committee representing COT Presidents including Dr. Marsha Riley, Dean of MSU Billings COT, and Dr. Daniel Bingham, Dean and CEO of UM Helena COT.

#### **b. Research Design**

The research was designed to gain insights into the priorities, goals, challenges, career interests, and perceptions of college from current students. The survey was designed using a series of open-ended, multiple choice and Likert Scale questions. The research was designed to complement the prospective student focus group study, with the goal of analyzing trends that would be used in evaluating decisions made in the brand and marketing strategy development process.

#### **Population**

The population sampled was composed of current students at from Montana's five Colleges of Technology.

#### **Sample**

354 students from Montana's five Colleges of Technology took part in the survey. The following breakdown shows student response by College:

Montana Tech COT: 81 student responses  
MSU Billings COT: 76 student responses  
MSU Great Falls COT: 39 student responses  
UM Helena COT: 81 student responses  
UM Missoula COT: 77 student responses

#### **c. Data Collection**

Data was collected using the *Survey Monkey* online survey data collection tool. The survey was accessible publicly on a web-link hosted by *Survey Monkey*. The survey link was distributed by college administrators and professors via email to current students at Montana's five Colleges of Technology. The survey was open and collected data from January 31<sup>st</sup> through February 8<sup>th</sup>, 2012 from the students.

#### **d. Ethical Protection of the Participants**

Participants were notified on the introduction page of the survey that all responses in this survey would be collected anonymously and confidentially and used for research purposes only. They were notified that participation in the survey was optional and voluntary, and no one at any college would be aware of whether or not they completed the questionnaire. Survey responses were collected anonymously.

### **Overview of findings from each of the three research areas**

#### **1) Focus Group Findings**

Focus group data revealed that when evaluating the name of a fictional college, the identifier emphasized first told the defining story of that college and shaped people's perceptions of its affordability, accessibility, size, and degree offerings. Focus group participants made stronger associations between the qualities articulated in MUS's extended two-year mission and a fictional college using the *Place, Mission, Affiliation* naming convention. When the naming convention began with the *Affiliation* identifier, participants were more likely to identify the fictional college as a large university or a satellite of a large university offering four-year degrees. When the *Mission* identifier appeared first, participants frequently saw the college either as a highly specialized school (e.g., a business school or a design school), or as an exclusive liberal-arts-college.

To help evaluate appropriate *Place* identifiers for each community where a COT is located, participants were also presented with suggestions that came out of the rebranding and renaming summit; they also were given the opportunity to suggest their own *Place* identifiers. When local *Place* identifiers were used in the names of fictional colleges, participants viewed the colleges as being more community-oriented and welcoming. They also associated these fictional colleges with the values and attributes of the extended two-year mission. Focus group participants preferred place identifiers that signified beautiful, calm and inviting places, such as valleys, rivers, and mountains; included the surrounding communities of a town or region; and represented their sense of local identity and pride.

Generally, focus group participants *placed a high value on a university system with affiliation* at the end of the local test names as representing transferability, accreditation, prestige, and belonging to a university system.

#### **2) Community Input Survey Findings**

##### Perceptions of fictional college frameworks

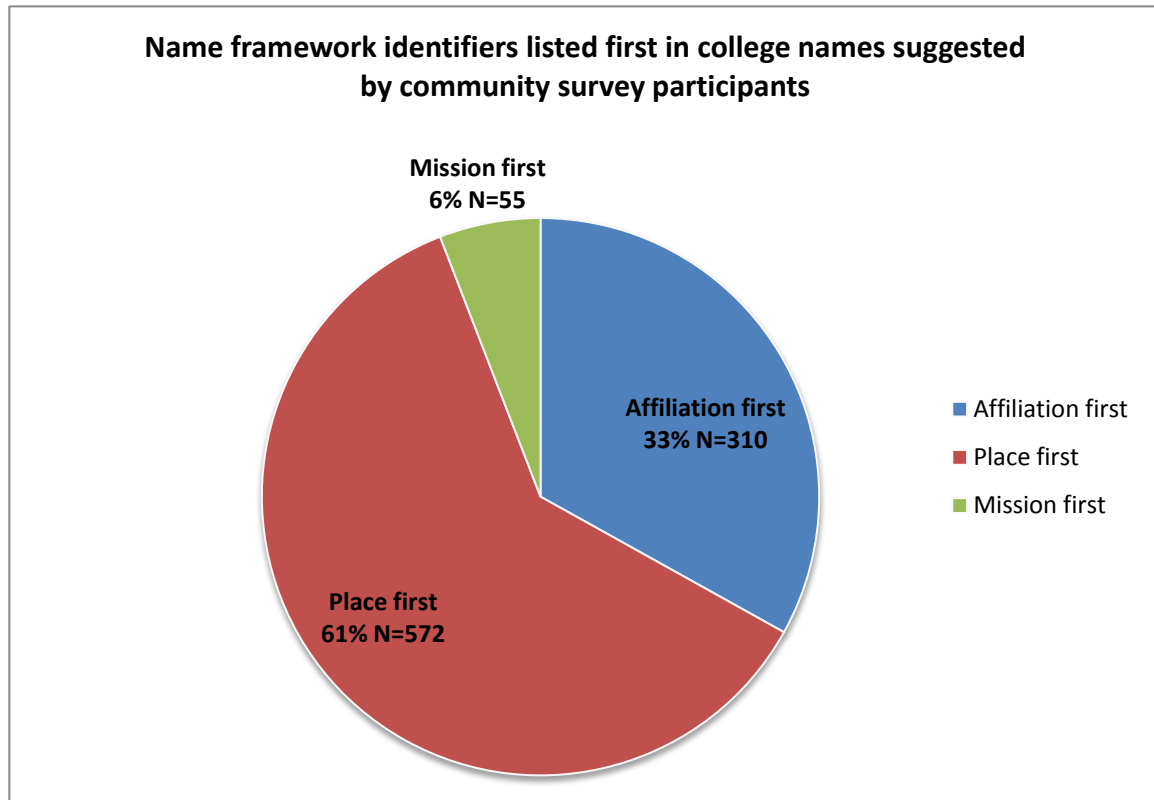
In the community surveys, research found that the largest percentage of participants associated college name frameworks in the order of *Place Mission - Affiliation* with a two-year college and associated the order of *Affiliation Place Mission* with a university.

The largest percentage of participants believed that *Centerville College of UNC* sounds more like a two-year college serving the needs of its community, than any of the other college name options presented.

The largest percentage of participants believed that *UNC Lincoln College* sounds more like a four-year university, than any of the other college name options presented.

#### Name Suggestions from Community Members

Participants were asked to suggest a new name for a comprehensive two-year college in their community. In every city surveyed, a clear majority of respondents listed the *Place* identifier first in order of the naming framework of their suggested two-year college name.



Of 937 total suggested names suggested by community members in the survey:

**572 or 62%** of names displayed ***Place first***

**310 or 33%** of names displayed ***Affiliation first***

**55 or 6%** of names displayed ***Mission first***

Other trends in name recommendations from participants included the use of “community college” as the *Mission* identifier.

A name listing the mission as “Community College” ranked within the top three names suggested for every city.

A name with *Affiliation* first was the number one most suggested name in Great Falls and Helena, however in Butte and Billings a name with *Affiliation* first did not rank in the top three.



Top two *Place* identifiers suggested by community survey participants:

*The College in Billings:*

Billings  
Yellowstone County/River/Valley

*The College in Butte:*

Butte  
Silver Bow

*The College in Great Falls:*

Great Falls  
Missouri River

*The College in Helena:*

Helena  
Sleeping Giant

*The College in Missoula:*

Missoula  
Clark Fork River/Valley

The findings show a preference toward *Place* identifiers that reflect the name of the town or county served by the college. This finding supports focus group analysis that people identify with the place names of their local communities.

When evaluating and analyzing this data, it is important to note that the name idea generation process from these surveys should be taken into consideration. The thought process or considerations that went into how people made suggestions for naming the colleges in this survey were not identified in the research. These ideas are subjective and a formal recommendation on place names will include additional considerations and data.

### **3) Student Survey Findings**

#### Influential factors for attending college

Factors that were most influential in a student's decision to enroll in a College of Technology included major and program offerings, the location was close to home, and affordability.

In assessing determining factors for why students stop attending college, the survey findings revealed that the leading reason for taking a break in an academic program or discontinuing studies was financial concerns (32%), followed by family stress, and emotional concerns.

A larger majority of students surveyed, 80%, did not relocate to attend this college. This finding can be viewed in conjunction with the third most influential determining factor for enrollment in the college: that *the college was close to home*.

These findings suggest that a majority of students at the College of Technology can be considered members of the community served by the college, and that they have commitments and strong ties to these places. It also suggests that students may identify with the place or region in which they live.

### College Experience

College of Technology students surveyed showed preference for a college that has the attributes of the comprehensive mission for two-year higher education in Montana. They valued the affordability and intimacy offered by a two-year college, and a majority of respondents would prefer *not* attending a university. The findings below show they were able to distinguish attributes of a two-year college in comparison to a university.

- A majority strongly agree and agree that a college would be more personal than a university
- A majority agreed and strongly agreed this college provides the most affordable access to higher education
- A majority disagreed and strongly disagreed that they would prefer to attend a university.

This study emphasizes affordability and place as key factors determining engagement in higher education for these current students at a COT. These findings support evidence from the focus groups that show affordability and place as leading priorities driving considerations around enrollment in two-year education. The study also emphasizes that current students value the offerings of a two-year college, including affordability and smaller class size.

## **Conclusion**

### Recommendation for a new college name framework

In analyzing the findings of the focus groups and two surveys together, the data supports the idea that adopting a naming framework of *Place Mission - Affiliation* will most clearly communicate the mission of two-year education in Montana. When participants in each of these studies was asked to identify a two-year college serving the needs of the community, this naming framework was chosen most often. Emphasizing *Place* first in this framework also speaks to the attributes people in these studies, particularly the focus group and student survey, desire in two-year education.

This data also helps clarify the idea that *Place* as an identifier emphasized first in the naming framework is important for other reasons as well.

The survey responses supported focus group evidence, and emphasized these communities' strong attachment to place and a consistent identification with the place names that define the areas where a community lives. *Place* identifiers attach to a deep sense of personal identity, including local pride, and a shared sense of belonging and being *at home* in the world. By emphasizing *Place* identifiers in a name, we are connecting to an established sense of identity held by a target audience and are building a brand upon a solid foundation of positive associations and meaning. With *Place* as the first identifier in the naming framework, the brands will carry the significance and meaning desired by prospective students. This meaning

comes from the strong sense of identity and the value they attach to being members of their Montana communities.

The demonstrated preference for *Place* first in the college name reveals a desire for the college to have a stake in the unique educational, economic, and workforce needs that define a place. *Place* emphasized first followed by *Mission* in the name framework indicates that responsiveness to community is a primary facet of the College's mission. It also tells a story indicating that the well being of the community is at the center of that mission. It acknowledges the unique dynamics of history, economies and people that define a place. This acknowledgement speaks to local wisdom and an intimate understanding of how a public two-year college can positively impact the people and businesses of a place.

Affiliation listed third in the framework works to continue the story of two-year education in Montana. It tells the story of transferability, credibility, and the resources available through the parent university. Under this recommended framework, the name would not be allowed to appear without its affiliation thus ensuring continued public awareness and understanding that each of the five colleges are structurally part of one university, one system. This new framework speaks to the unique identity of each college while also showing that they are part of a larger whole. This larger whole is the common story of the Montana University System.

#### Considerations for *Place* identifiers

Where there will be a consistent name framework and defining brand for the Montana's two-year college system, there will also be keen opportunities for individual colleges to tell a common story of two-year education in Montana while also creating and emphasizing particular brand characteristics that speak to the unique needs of individual communities. The unique place identifiers for each college should engage positive associations and meaning to begin to define the Montana University System's two-year college story to the public and to build the individual brands.

Both the focus groups and the community surveys tested and gathered ideas on meaningful place identifiers for the communities served by the Colleges of Technology. Focus group research indicated a preference for names that signify beautiful places, such as valleys, rivers, and mountains. Both the focus group analysis and the community survey data suggested that identifiers inclusive of the regions where people live beyond the city limits are also preferable.

What follows are considerations and options for the three *Place* identifiers for each of the five Colleges. Discussion and analysis from the brand summit, the focus groups, and the community surveys are all taken into consideration in presenting these options:

#### *The College in Billings*

In the Billings focus groups participants found the place name "Billings" to be redundant, when paired with the *Affiliation*, MSU Billings. They did, however like "Billings City College", because they felt "City College" told the story of the mission: night classes, affordable, etc, and helped to frame the position of the college's relationship to MSU Billings. Focus group participants also liked "Yellowstone River" because it showed an inclusion of the eastern part of the state,

extending to the communities outside of Billings. “Yellowstone Valley” was a popular identifier in the community survey and it also indicates recognition of an extended community.

Place Identifier Options:

Billings City  
Yellowstone Valley  
Yellowstone River

#### *The College in Butte*

Butte is a contained city with a rich history and strong local pride. Butte is truly a *place*, with a nickname, Butte, America, emphasizing this local pride and the historical and cultural significance of the place. For this reason, we recommend the actual town or county names for the college *Place* identifiers. Both “Butte” and “Silver Bow” showed strong response in focus groups and community surveys. In the brand summit, it was noted that there is a community college in California named Butte, which is a copyright and web-property consideration. The “Highlands” are the mountains facing uptown Butte, and as natural geographical features surrounding the town, they are also relevant to the local place identity.

Place Identifier Options:

Butte College  
Highlands College  
Silver Bow

#### *The College in Great Falls*

Although a strong majority of community survey participants recommended the city name of Great Falls as the *Place* identifier, “Great Falls” is not recommended for a *Place* name identifier in this report. As was recognized in the Brand Summit, there is an existing four-year college, University of Great Falls, located across the street from the COT; this can and will cause confusion about the offerings and price structure of the college. To build a strong brand, we recommend using a place name that is not already in use by a neighboring college. We also do not recommend “Missouri River,” as it can be too easily confused with being associated with the state of Missouri, particularly since it is common to put a state’s name at the beginning of a college name. In the focus groups, both “Central Montana” and “The Falls” received strong, positive response, with “Central Montana” recognizing the region and extended communities served by the college and “The Falls” indicating a unique and prominent geological feature that defines the area.

Place Identifier Options:

Central Montana  
The Falls  
Great Falls  
North Central Montana

#### *The College in Helena*

In the focus groups and surveys, the place name Helena was popular. In the community surveys, “Helena,” as indicating the town was the most commonly suggested *Place* identifier. In the focus group, participants also showed positive associations with the names “Mount Helena” and “Helena Valley” indicating that these place names made the college seem more “inviting” and localized.

Place Identifier Options:

Capital City  
Helena  
Helena Valley  
Mount Helena

*The College in Missoula*

In Missoula, focus group participants took great care to discuss how the name would be inclusive to the people living in communities outside of Missoula. At the same time, for those living in Missoula city and county, there is tremendous local pride and affinity for place. “Missoula Valley” was a name widely preferred in the brand summit and the focus group, and it was also included in community survey responses. “Clark Fork” was a strong alternative, inducing associations with nature and beauty, while demonstrating inclusiveness to the communities beyond Missoula served by the college.

Place Identifier Options:

Missoula Valley  
Clark Fork  
Missoula  
Five Valleys

## APPENDIX A.

### **MONTANA UNIVERSITY SYSTEM COMPREHENSIVE TWO-YEAR EDUCATION MISSION/VISION**

#### **Mission Statement**

The Mission of two-year education in Montana is to provide a comprehensive, accessible, responsive, student-centered learning environment that facilitates and supports the achievement of individuals' professional and personal goals, and enhances the development of Montana's citizens, communities and economy.

#### **Vision Statement**

Montana's two-year education: Transform lives and create opportunities through educating the citizens of the state of Montana.

#### **Key Purposes and Attributes**

Montana's two-year education is centered around the attributes of the comprehensive community college mission and is committed to providing:

- Transfer Education Through the Associate's Degree
- Workforce Development, Including Certificates and Applied Associate's Degrees
- Developmental and Adult Basic Education
- Lifelong Learning
- Community Development

The attributes of two-year education in Montana include:

- Open Access Admissions
- Affordable
- Student-Centered
- Adult Focused and Accessible Learning
- Responsiveness to Local Needs
- Cultivation of Partnerships

#### **The Core Values include:**

- Require Excellence
- Provide Rigor and Relevance
- Embrace Diversity
- Expect Civic Engagement
- Encourage Innovation
- Insist on Integrity
- Be Accountable
- Retain Transparency
- Embody Inclusivity
- Offer Consistent Unified Support
- Promote Lifelong Learning
- Celebrate Student Success