Project: Reach Higher Montana: Elevating the Potential of Adult Learners

Brief Description: Montana State University Billings requests an appropriation of $300,000 to strategically target proficiencies, mentorships and assessments needed to meet the needs of adults who have either dropped out of the education system or are returning to college to improve their skills. This initiative fits the mission of MSU Billings as an urban university and will fill gaps in a leaky education pipeline that has negative impacts on workforce sustainability.

Executive Summary: Many reports over the past couple of years have provided ample evidence that Montana needs to move ahead with policies and initiatives to more fully engage adult learners. Reports estimate that more than 100,000 Montanans do not have a high school diploma or a GED and almost 1 in 10 young people drop out of school every year. Montana State University Billings proposes to address these issues with program and service development for adult learners. This proposal will not only provide adults currently in the workforce opportunities to improve their educational attainment, but will give former high school drop-outs an opportunity to access higher education.

According to a report from the National Commission on Adult Literacy (June 2008):

> *"More and more, the American economy requires that most workers have at least some postsecondary education or occupational training to be ready for current and future jobs in the global marketplace, yet we are moving further from that goal. By one set of measures, more than 88 million adults have at least one major educational barrier—no high school diploma, no college, or ESL language needs. With a current U.S. labor force of about 150 million(16 and older), a troubling number of prime working age adults likely will fall behind in their struggle to get higher wage jobs, or to qualify for the college courses or job training that will help them join or advance in jobs that pay a family-sustaining wage."*

Project Description: Today, Montana ranks near the bottom in percentage of adults who participate in higher education and is not catching up. In addition, there is a growing need for the university to better serve adult learners of all ages who still want to remain in the workforce but need some "reverse specialization" or new training because of economic transitions or downsizing. The services will be delivered both on-site an online to more adequately meet needs of individual students. It is clear that states with declining populations of "traditional-aged" students and workers need to do more to get all segments of society involved in post-secondary education.

A conference sponsored by MSU Billings in November 2008 (attended by a wide array of public and private partners) addressed some of the issues relating to Montana, and funding is needed to take the next logical step to put ideas into action. This proposal will provide resources for the university, adult education partners throughout the region and various employers to strategically target proficiencies — including workforce development expertise and training at the College of Technology and College of Professional Studies and Lifelong Learning — to engage adult learners in new ways. Through flexible scheduling opportunities, tuition assistance for employers and engagement of business, industry and labor, the university will provide "just-in-time" higher education opportunities when adults need them.

Congressional Action Needed: An appropriation of $300,000 is requested.

Importance to Montana: Success will be measured by increased adult participation in all academic areas of the university, from increased customized training and increased numbers in two-year degree-completion and college degrees. Resources will be used for development of flexible scheduling (including funds for scholarships, registrar, advising and business services) mentorships, market research and faculty resources.

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