Project: Academic & Workforce Development Program at the Montana Women's Prison

Brief description: Montana State University Billings requests $500,000 to expand a pilot project for an academic development program targeted to inmates at the Montana Women's Prison in Billings. The program offers inmates general education coursework toward certificate or Associate of Applied Science degrees while at the same time providing them with college and/or life skills.

Executive summary: The MSU Billings pilot project for Academic and Workforce Development at the Women's Prison, funded in FY10, is designed to enhance the academic and job-skills success of an at-risk group which has historically not graduated from high school, post-secondary vocational technical schools, community colleges or four-year colleges. This project provides "boot camp academic preparation" for offenders in the prison and in the pre-release Passages facility. We would now like to expand the current offerings, create a mentor program and export the methodology and the courses to other Montana prison facilities as well to men in the Yellowstone County jail.

Project Description: This project serves a diverse female population, many of whom are high-risk students, under-prepared for college or typically do not consider further education as an alternative. The June 30, 2006, the female prison population was 297 offenders and is expected to grow by 17% per year. The demographics of the Women's Prison show that inmates are 66% White/Caucasian; 26% Native American; and the remaining being Hispanic, Asian and black. Educational levels for inmates traditionally varies from first grade/ninth month (with some having basic illiteracy) to some having 11th and 12th grade levels of education. Roughly 40% place in that upper range of educational preparation. The age of the inmates ranges from 16 to over 60, with 37% over the age of 40. That puts the majority between the ages of 18 and 39, or an age where workforce skills can be best put to work to keep them out of jail upon release. The Pathways to Success program that was initially funded has resulted in a number of inmates completing classes in work skills training, personal finance, reading, writing, construction techniques, Microsoft Excel training and philosophy. MSU Billings faculty provide basic skill instruction through formalized courses, seminars and workshops. MSU Billings staff work in conjunction with existing School District #2 personnel to transition inmates from the GED preparation to college-level work and workforce development skills. Partnerships in this endeavor include the Montana Department of Corrections, staff of the Montana Women's Prison, local business leaders and the staff of the Billings Job Service Workforce Center to assist with placement opportunities.

Congressional action needed: An appropriation of $500,000 is requested.

Importance to Montana: The hand's-on teaching at the prison includes:

- Vocational and occupational counseling programs for the women to explore future careers (approximately 75 individuals have gone through this program at the Women's Prison and at Passages)
- General education courses enabling students to transfer to a two-year or four-year institution to complete their degrees once they are released
- Developmental courses for students with weak academic skills
- Alternative teaching methods to accommodate a variety of learning styles
- Reduced recidivism rates through better preparation for re-entry to society. Recidivism has hovered at above 30 percent for the last decade. Successfully putting inmates back to work will save money for the correctional system and taxpayers of Montana.

In addition, the program develops academic and workforce potential of Montana's women prison population and support high-risk and under-prepared learners for academic success.

Contacts at MSU-Billings

Ronald Sexton, Chancellor (406) 657-2300
Dan Carter, Director of Government Relations, (406) 657-2269