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Commissioner Emerita: Dr. Sheila M. Stearns; Montana University System

THAT

Upon the occasion of the retirement of Commissioner of Higher Education Sheila M. Stearns from the Montana University System, the Board of Regents of Higher Education confers upon her the title of *Commissioner Emerita*.

EXPLANATION

The hallmark of Commissioner Stearns' nine-years of service as commissioner has been her vision to expand educational opportunities for Montanans with a keen focus on quality and affordability. Each institution in the Montana University System owes a measure of its strength to initiatives led by Commissioner Stearns in a direction toward institutional and student success. Each college and university in our system is better today because of her expectation and empowerment for each institution to be a strategic provider of educational opportunity, quality, and affordability.

In turbulent times, strong leaders make the persuasive case that risks are worth taking. Often, the best foundation for innovation is built where decision making is strategic and collaborative. Commissioner Stearns nurtured an operating environment in the Montana University System that enabled our colleges and universities to be proactive and bold in many ways.

Examples include:

- Statewide collaboration on the creation of two-year college programs in fast-growing population centers that were previously underserved in the Bitterroot and Gallatin valleys.
- Successful completion of a commitment to the Board of Regents, the Governor, and the Montana Legislature for common-course numbering throughout the vast majority of undergraduate courses statewide, improving transferability and reducing costs for students.
- Collaboration with the Office of the Governor and Montana Legislature to secure state funds in exchange for tuition freezes to keep education affordable for students and families.
- Selection by the Lumina Foundation for Montana's high-profile, privately funded College!Now initiative, which will help the state rebrand and increase awareness of our two-year colleges as affordable options for higher education.

- Promoting state-wide support for innovative educational delivery, including historic growth in online distance learning opportunities, and early advocacy for UM Western's Experience One block schedule program.
- Promoting success of the Montana University System in research, including the recent award of a \$20-million grant from the National Science Foundation to strengthen the state's science and engineering workforce.
- Development and implementation of a system-wide strategic plan, produced from a shared leadership initiative that garnered the voices of a wide set of constituents and formulated a plan that would be the foundation for shared policy goals with the Legislature annually updated and reviewed.
- Establishing Statewide listening sessions on workforce needs from healthcare training to collaborative apprentice programs in the trades.

The vision that set the foundations for these innovations came from a wealth of treasured experience. Commissioner Stearns served as the Montana University System's chief executive officer since 2003 and served previously in president and vice president capacities for two decades in Nebraska and Montana. The lion's share of her career has taken place in the public arena in advocacy for state support of higher education, and in delivering for students. It is her unique blend of leadership and wisdom from both a campus and system perspective that inspires campus communities in Montana to buy into and achieve under such vision and initiative. Her communication skills and rapport with the citizenry and public policy makers have contributed greatly to each institution gaining a more positive image within its community.

Dr. Stearns, Montana's longest-serving Commissioner of Higher Education, tireless advocate for educational opportunity for all, is tremendously suited for the title of *Commissioner Emerita*.