



The University of Montana Western Campus Report

DATE: January 2026

TO: Board of Regents

FROM: Michael Reid, Chancellor

RE: Campus Report for the January Board of Regents' Meeting

- Montana Western Chancellor Michael Reid Announces Retirement**

University of Montana Western Chancellor Michael Reid has announced he will retire at the end of the academic year after more than 30 years in higher education.

“I want to take a moment to express my sincere gratitude to our incredible students, faculty, and staff. The work we do here is meaningful, rooted in community, and centered on changing lives. What makes Montana Western special isn’t just our mission or our block schedule—it’s the people and their dedication to our students, to one another, and to the spirit of this place that has made every day here a privilege,” said Chancellor Reid.

During his tenure, UMW launched new academic options including the Farm and Ranch Management B.S. degree, and the online Elementary Education B.S. Numerous facility projects were completed, such as Bulldog Stadium, the Student Wellness Center, and major campus landscape upgrades. Renovations to Block Hall and updates across several campus buildings are also underway.

- **Montana Western Foundation Announces Gift of Historic Andrus Hotel**

The University of Montana Western Foundation is pleased to announce that Dr. John Micha and his wife, Vicki, have transferred ownership of the historic Andrus Hotel to the Foundation.

The Foundation will continue its partnership with the Drew Family, owners of Sparky's Garage, who have assumed hotel operations. This collaboration creates new opportunities for internships, hands-on learning, and academic programming while preserving the Andrus as a cornerstone of downtown Dillon.

Dr. Micha's longstanding relationship with Montana Western reflects his commitment to education, innovation, and community success. As a gift, no state or institutional funds will be used for the hotel's operations or maintenance; the Foundation and its partner will cover all associated expenses.

- **Alumna Katie Verderber to Represent Team USA in 2026 Winter Paralympics**

Montana attorney and University of Montana Western alumna Katie Verderber has been selected to represent Team USA in Wheelchair Mixed Curling at the 2026 Winter Paralympic Games in Cortina d'Ampezzo, Italy. Announced by USA Curling on Nov. 24, this will be her first Paralympic appearance.

Verderber, an attorney with Silverman Law Office, previously served as a Judge Advocate General officer and deployed to Afghanistan before injuries led to her medical retirement. She later discovered adaptive sports and wheelchair curling.

"If anything comes from this, I want to share the message that you can still achieve whatever dreams you may have despite illness or disability," she said.

- **Students Place 3rd at Montana Section of the American Water Resources Association**

University of Montana Western students Dakota Willis, John Fitzpatrick, Taylor Williams, and Landon "Bird" Hayes recently placed third in the student competition at the Montana Section of the American Water Resources Association annual meeting in Great Falls. Their project, completed in UMW's

Applied Environmental Geophysics class, focused on mapping buried river channels in the Medicine Lake area of northeast Montana.

Led by Associate Professor of Geophysics Dr. Neil Foley in partnership with the Montana Bureau of Mines and Geology, the team used Electrical Resistivity Tomography and well log data to identify ancient sand and gravel deposits that may indicate perched aquifers. These shallow groundwater pockets can be valuable for agriculture and water management.

Dr. Foley said the students showed professionalism through demanding fieldwork and extra effort preparing their conference posters. The project offered real-world experience and will continue next year with plans for a third field campaign.

- **Education Faculty Receive \$319,004 to Strengthen Montana's Teacher Workforce**

Faculty in the University of Montana Western Education Department received \$319,004 in legislative funding to support two initiatives addressing Montana's teacher shortage: a Grow Your Own partnership with Great Falls Public Schools and expanded Residency Pathways.

The Grow Your Own program, based at The CORE School in Great Falls, allows UMW students to work full time as paraprofessionals while completing coursework on-site, taught by K-6 master teachers serving as adjunct instructors.

A second grant supports efforts to strengthen Montana Teacher Residency options across all education majors. Faculty are working with the National Center for Teacher Residencies to study recruitment, program design, and sustainable funding to improve teacher preparation, especially in rural communities.

- **Tori Murnion Receives Montana Athletes in Service Award**

The Montana Campus Network for Civic Engagement (MCNCE) has honored fourteen student-athletes with the 2025 Montana Athletes in Service Award, including Montana Western's Tori Murnion. The award recognizes students who demonstrate exceptional dedication to community service while pursuing their degrees and competing in collegiate athletics. Recipients were celebrated during halftime of the 2025 Brawl of the Wild on November 22.

Tori, a senior Business major from Jordan, Montana, is an organizer for the Dillon Labor Day Rodeo and serves as a peer mentor. Her leadership, volunteer work, and commitment to helping others make her a strong representative of Montana Western and the MCNCE's mission to promote civic engagement statewide.

- **Talk of the Town: Fick Faculty Speaker Series**

The University of Montana Western launched the "Fick Faculty Speaker Series," a new initiative celebrating faculty innovation in teaching, service, and scholarship.

The inaugural event, held on November 17, 2025, featured Dr. Katrina Kennett, who presented her work on community-based literacy projects, including the Story Stroll and the emerging Garden Bank initiative.

Each semester, one faculty member will be selected for an honorific award and invited to share their work with the Dillon community. The series highlights how UMW faculty enriched student learning and strengthened campus–community connections.

- **Students Present on Pilchuck Glass School Experience**

The University of Montana Western's Glass Program hosted a public presentation featuring students Braden Kopp and Tori Tinker, who shared their experiences studying at the internationally renowned Pilchuck Glass School.

Held on November 20 in the Emerick Art Studio, the event highlighted their summer 2025 coursework made possible through the Mary Baker Emerick scholarships.

Pilchuck, located in Stanwood, Washington, is recognized as a global center for glass art education, offering intensive programs led by top instructors. Associate Professor Ruth King thanked the UMW Foundation and Emerick Trustees for supporting a continuing pathway between Pilchuck and Montana Western.

- **O. Alan Weltzien Writers Series Hosts Author Jon Keller**

The University of Montana Western English Department hosted author Jon Keller

for a reading and conversation on Thursday, December 4, as part of the O. Alan Weltzien Writers Series.

The series features writers connected to Montana and the West and celebrates the legacy of longtime professor O. Alan Weltzien. Keller, a commercial fisherman, sailboat captain, carpenter, and former Montana backcountry guide, shared insights from his writing career and life in an off-grid cabin in coastal Maine. He holds degrees from the University of Montana and Boise State University and is the author *Of Sea and Cloud*.

- **Shakespeare in the Schools Hosts Richard III**

The University of Montana Western's Theatre Program welcomed Shakespeare in the Schools (SIS) for a one-day performance of *Richard III* on December 10, 2025, in Beier Auditorium. The event featured two shows and a free workshop between performances.

Celebrating its 33rd season, SIS brought *Richard III* to middle and high school students as an engaging live production, accompanied by a post-show discussion and interactive workshops. This marked the first time SIS presented one of Shakespeare's Histories to students. Associate Artistic Director Riley O'Toole made his directorial debut with MSIP, aiming to offer a fresh perspective on the classic play while enriching communities across Montana and Wyoming with professional programming.