



The University of Montana Western Campus Report

DATE: May 2026

TO: Board of Regents

FROM: Michael Reid, Chancellor

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

- **[Dr. Estee Aiken Selected as Chancellor of the University of Montana Western](#)**

Commissioner of Higher Education Clayton Christian announced Dr. Estee Aiken has been selected as the next Chancellor of the University of Montana Western, pending Board of Regents approval, beginning May 21.

Aiken has served UMW for 15 years, joining the faculty in 2011 as a tenured professor of Education before becoming Dean of Strategic Initiatives and later Interim Provost and Vice Chancellor of Academic Affairs. Her background includes K-12 teaching and leadership, service on boards, and scholarship in gifted education and teacher preparation, grant-funded work and recognition as a Montana University System Teacher Scholar.

Christian said her experience will support UMW's continued innovation and student success. Aiken said she is honored and looks forward to serving the university and community.

- **UMW Names Jason Ferris as Director of Athletics**

The University of Montana Western has announced the hiring of Jason Ferris as its next Director of Athletics & Development Officer. A Montana Western alumnus and former Bulldog football student-athlete, Ferris brings extensive experience in leadership, finance, and community engagement, along with a strong connection to the university and Dillon community.

He earned multiple degrees from UMW and was an eight-time Dean's List honoree, NAIA All-American, and two-time Frontier Conference Defensive Player of the Year. After college, he pursued professional football opportunities with the Carolina Panthers and Birmingham Stallions before working in banking and serving in local leadership roles, including at Beaverhead County High School and community organizations. Ferris will oversee Bulldog Athletics, strengthen partnerships, and support student-athlete success, beginning his transition immediately.

- **Montana Western Names JC Isakson as Men's Basketball Head Coach**

The University of Montana Western has named alumnus J.C. Isakson as the next head coach of its men's basketball program. Isakson returns to Dillon after eight years at the University of Providence, where he served as an assistant coach before leading the men's program for the past three seasons. He previously began his coaching career at Montana Western as an assistant from 2014 to 2016.

A 2013 graduate and former Bulldog student-athlete, Isakson helped lead the team to three NAIA National Tournament appearances and a Frontier Conference co-championship. Athletic Director Michael Feuling cited his experience and vision as key strengths. Isakson expressed gratitude for the opportunity, emphasizing his strong connection to the university and commitment to the program's future.

- **2026 Colt Sale Raises \$290,000 for Natural Horsemanship Program**

The University of Montana Western's annual Colt Challenge and Sale, held March 27–28, 2026 at the Montana Center for Horsemanship, generated

\$291,900 for the Natural Horsemanship Program. The program, a partnership between UMW and the Montana Center for Horsemanship, allows students to train donated colts as part of their coursework before selling them at public auction each spring. Proceeds support scholarships, facilities, and program needs.

The event opened with the Colt Challenge, where students demonstrated horsemanship skills; Vivian Mayers earned first place riding SLD SKIPPA BET and received a scholarship and additional prizes. The following day's live auction drew buyers nationwide, with an average price of \$10,722 per horse. The Alumni Horse Sale also highlighted former students' success. Top-selling horses reached up to \$21,000, underscoring the program's continued popularity and impact.

- **Montana Western to Produce 78th Season of Virginia City Players**

The University of Montana Western's Theatre Program has partnered with the Montana Heritage Commission to operate the Virginia City Opera House this summer, producing the Virginia City Players' 78th season—recognized as the longest continually running summer stock theatre west of the Mississippi. The season will be artistically directed by Assistant Professor Stephen Alan Seder, a former Virginia City Player, and managed by Adryan Miller Gorder, a scenic designer and Montana Western faculty member.

The company will present two melodramas adapted by Seder—The Bat! and Xantippe!—along with a mid-summer revue, Vaudeville's Greatest Hits. Featuring a mix of new and returning performers, the season aims to continue the tradition of family-friendly theatre while enhancing the historic Virginia City visitor experience.

- **Dr. Janelle Handlos to Receive Alumni Distinguished Service Award**

The University of Montana Western will honor Dr. Janelle Handlos with the Alumni Distinguished Service Award at its 129th Annual Commencement Ceremony on May 9. A 2000 graduate, Handlos has served UMW for more than two decades in both athletics and academics. She began as the university's first assistant athletic trainer and later became Head Athletic Trainer, Interim Athletic

Director, and a faculty member and department chair in Health & Human Performance.

Handlos has also been deeply involved in the Dillon community through coaching, volunteer work, and professional service. Her contributions have earned numerous state and regional honors. Recognized for her leadership and commitment to students, Handlos has made a lasting impact on the university and community.

- **Cadence Brown Represents Montana at National YF&R Competition**

Cadence Brown, a University of Montana Western student graduating this fall, represented Montana nationally after winning the Farm Bureau Young Farmers & Ranchers Discussion Meet. A business major with a minor in equine studies, Brown has developed strong public speaking and agricultural advocacy skills during her time at UMW. She won the state competition twice and advanced to nationals, where she placed in the top 16.

Her discussions focused on issues like urban sprawl and farmland preservation, drawing from her experiences in the Gallatin Valley. Brown credits Montana Western and its YF&R chapter for shaping her path and providing leadership opportunities. She is the first UMW student to compete at the adult level and plans to continue building on these experiences after graduation.

- **UMW Business Student Passes LEAN Bronze Certification Exam**

University of Montana Western senior Cael Murgel has earned the LEAN Bronze Certification, an industry-recognized credential from the Society of Manufacturing Engineers demonstrating proficiency in lean manufacturing and process improvement principles. The certification focuses on improving efficiency, reducing waste, and applying tools such as 5S, value stream mapping, and standardized work.

A Business Administration major, Murgel prepared through a professional development course offered by the Montana Manufacturing Extension Center at Montana State University. He credited Montana Western coursework, particularly Operations Management, and the university's block schedule for helping him succeed in the intensive study process. Typically pursued by experienced professionals, the certification represents a significant achievement for an

undergraduate student and marks an important step as Murgel prepares to enter the workforce in operations management.

- **UMW Students Selected as George M. Dennison Civic Engagement Scholarship Recipients**

The Montana Campus Network for Civic Engagement has named Montana Western students Lanie Crabb and Vivian Mayers as recipients of the 2025–26 George M. Dennison Civic Engagement Scholarship, recognizing their leadership and commitment to community service. The award honors students across Montana who address critical issues such as food insecurity, homelessness, and substance abuse through volunteerism and civic engagement.

Crabb serves as the Suicide Prevention and Awareness Coordinator for the PATH Program at Montana Western and supports youth through the Rural Fridays Program, while also contributing to long-standing community traditions. Mayers has logged more than 290 volunteer hours working with youth through religious education, 4-H, and high school athletics. Both exemplify strong dedication to service and community impact.

- **UMW Alumna Brigid Reedy Announces Release of “Seeds,” Her Debut Book of Original Poetry and Art**

University of Montana Western alumna Brigid Reedy has released “Seeds,” her first book of original poetry and artwork, marking the start of her Montana book tour and her first formally published written work. Reedy graduated in spring 2025 with degrees in English Literature and Natural Horsemanship, and her interdisciplinary practice blends poetry, music, visual art, and horsemanship.

The collection features 56 poems exploring themes of cycles, regeneration, and cultural continuity, alongside pen-and-ink illustrations she designed herself. Reedy credits Montana Western faculty and programs for supporting her creative development and allowing her academic and artistic work to intersect. A longtime performer in cowboy poetry and storytelling traditions, she has appeared at major venues including Carnegie Hall and the Grand Ole Opry. Reedy says her time at Montana Western helped shape her connected, place-based artistic approach.

- **[UMW Professor Helps Shed Light on Rapid Climate Change in Greenland 8,200 Years Ago](#)**

The University of Montana Western professor Dr. Spruce Schoenemann led a research team that uncovered new insights into the 8.2 ka Event, one of the most abrupt climate shifts of the last 12,000 years. Published in *Paleoceanography and Paleoclimatology*, the study examined lake sediments near the Greenland Ice Sheet to better understand how regional environments responded to sudden cooling about 8,200 years ago.

Using chemical and isotopic evidence from ancient lake materials, the team reconstructed past temperatures and environmental changes near the ice margin. Their findings suggest the cooling may have been more intense and variable than previously thought. Schoenemann noted that combining multiple proxy methods provided a more complete picture of climate dynamics. The research helps improve understanding of how ice sheet collapse and ocean circulation changes can drive rapid climate shifts, offering important context for modern climate change studies.

- **[UMW and IBILTA Announce Virtual International Conference on Innovative Learning and Teaching](#)**

The University of Montana Western, in partnership with the International Block and Intensive Learning and Teaching Association (IBILTA), will host the IBILTA 2026 International Conference as a fully virtual event on September 29–30, 2026. The conference will bring together educators, researchers, and practitioners from around the world to share innovative approaches to teaching and learning, with a focus on block and intensive learning models.

Centered on the theme “Sharing Practice, Sharing Stories, and Looking Forward,” the event will highlight collaboration, reflection, and innovation in higher education. Participants will engage in case studies, research presentations, and practitioner-led discussions exploring how experiential learning is shaping the future of student engagement and academic practice.