

MONTANA UNIVERSITY SYSTEM ACADEMIC PRIORITIES

ACADEMIC PRIORITIES AND PLANNING STATEMENTS

Where do Academic Priorities and Planning Statements fit into the MUS program approval process?

The academic program approval process approved by the BOR in November 2019 requires campuses to submit an annual report to the Board on their academic priorities and planning. This statement is meant to give the Board a broad overview of campus's academic direction, provide useful context for the Board as it considers new academic proposals, and identify some of the specific program proposals that the Board may see from each campus in the coming year. The Priorities and Planning Statement also provides an opportunity for campuses to describe, in broad terms, the process they use to prioritize and review academic programming.

How might the BOR use these reports?

OCHE and the Board can use these reports to:

- Identify areas of overlap in forthcoming academic programming, so that OCHE and campuses can organize early coordination and state-level conversation.
- Evaluate the alignment between a campus's academic priorities, mission parameters, and emerging local, state, and regional needs.
- Understand campus-level procedures for reviewing and prioritizing academic programming.

PLANNING THEMES AND HIGHLIGHTS FROM ACROSS THE SYSTEM

- **Healthcare Workforce Expansion.** Healthcare remains the single most common priority across campuses. MSU Billings, Helena College, Great Falls College, Montana State University, MSU-Northern, Montana Tech, and the University of Montana Western each described new or expanding nursing and allied-health pathways (e.g., CNA, LPN-to-RN Bridge, ASN, Medical Laboratory Technician, Dental Hygiene, Surgical Technology, Pre-Nursing, Integrated Health Sciences, nursing education, paramedic education, occupational health) driven by persistent regional healthcare workforce demand. Flathead Valley Community College is separately fielding repeated community requests to explore Dental Hygiene, Respiratory Therapy, and Ultrasound Technology, several of which overlap directly with programs already established at Great Falls College.
- **Stackable, Flexible, and Accelerated Credentials.** Campuses continue to build stackable and modular credential ladders (e.g., Great Falls College's veterinary pathway, Helena College's CNA-to-nursing pipeline, MSU-Northern's Graphic Design, Geospatial Technology, Healthcare Foundations, and Workforce Foundations certificates, Montana Tech's planned certificates in data science, GIS, mineral processing, and AI-related fields, and UMW's and UM's applied bachelor's degree pathways for adult and transfer learners) that let students enter the workforce quickly and build toward advanced credentials later.
- **AI Integration Across Curriculum and Research.** AI moved from an emerging theme to an active priority system-wide. Montana State University is developing an Interdisciplinary Institute on Artificial Intelligence; the University of Montana-Missoula is launching a Human-Centered AI career certificate and building shared data-science curricula; the University of Montana Western is standing up a Center for Machine Learning and Mathematical Modeling; and Montana Tech's AI Working Group is embedding AI literacy across its new STEM Leadership Program and broader curriculum.
- **Program Review, Portfolio Assessment, and BOR Policy Alignment.** Nearly every campus referenced program-level review tied to OCHE's annual program review process, BOR Policy 303.3 (Program Review), or BOR Policy

301.11 (bachelor's degree definitions/outcomes). MSU-Northern is rolling out a new, more rigorous internal program review process in AY26-27, and Montana Tech is revising its program-review process (informed by its Deans' Productivity Report) ahead of Fall 2026 program submissions. Institutions described using this review cycle to identify programs for continued investment, moratorium, or termination based on enrollment, market, and mission fit.

- **Strategic Plan Renewal.** Several campuses are in the midst of, or just completed, a strategic planning cycle: MSU Billings and Montana State University are both finalizing new strategic plans for fall 2026 rollout, and the University of Montana Western adopted a new 2026-2033 plan at the close of AY 2025-26. Flathead Valley Community College's current plan expires spring 2027, and its incoming president will lead development of the next plan starting that semester.
- **Dual Enrollment and K-12 Partnerships.** MSU Billings, Great Falls College, Helena College, Dawson Community College, MSU-Northern, and the University of Montana-Missoula all described active work to expand dual-enrollment capacity and strengthen K-12 partnerships, several explicitly aligned with the state's 406 JOBS workforce priorities. MSU-Northern noted designing new career certificates specifically around place-bound, dual-enrollment students.
- **Advising, Persistence, and Completion.** MSU Billings, Montana State University, and Montana Tech all highlighted renewed investment in advising models and persistence strategies as a lever for improving retention and graduation outcomes.
- **Program Maintenance vs. Program Expansion.** Not every campus is pursuing new programming this cycle. Dawson Community College is deliberately concentrating on articulation agreements, dual enrollment, and industry partnerships rather than launching new standalone programs; Montana State University similarly emphasized streamlining and assessing existing programs over new proposals; MSU-Northern described AY26-27 as a year to strengthen and consolidate its recent stackable-credential launches; and Montana Tech, while pursuing several new energy programs, indicated it will apply greater discipline to proposals and existing offerings that duplicate other programs or show persistently low demand.

OVERLAP ANALYSIS

To help focus conversation on the 2026 forthcoming academic proposal template, OCHE has developed a short list of program areas that showcase overlap and potential collaboration across the campus statements received to date.

Program Area	Institutions Involved
Nursing / Allied Health Pathways (broad)	MSU Billings, Helena College, Great Falls College, Montana State University, MSU-Northern, Montana Tech, Flathead Valley Community College, University of Montana Western
LPN-to-RN Bridge (specific program overlap)	Helena College, Great Falls College
Dental Hygiene	Great Falls College (established, expanding to Bozeman site), Flathead Valley Community College (exploring)
Veterinary Technician / Veterinary Pathway	Great Falls College (established AAS), Flathead Valley Community College (exploring)
Respiratory Therapy	Great Falls College (established, in accreditation cycle), Flathead Valley Community College (exploring)

Program Area	Institutions Involved
AI-Focused Programs, Centers, and Institutes	Montana State University, University of Montana-Missoula, University of Montana Western, Montana Tech
Applied/Accelerated Bachelor's Degrees (BAS)	University of Montana-Missoula, University of Montana Western
Media Arts	University of Montana-Missoula, University of Montana Western
Geospatial Technology / GIS	MSU-Northern, Montana State University (Geospatial Institute), Montana Tech
Data Science	University of Montana-Missoula, Montana Tech
Broadband / Infrastructure Workforce Training	Montana Tech, Flathead Valley Community College (exploring)
Business, Trades & CTE Workforce Programming	Great Falls College, University of Montana Western, Helena College, MSU-Northern, Montana Tech (Highlands College), Flathead Valley Community College

AY 2026-2027 SYSTEM ACADEMIC PRIORITIES

Drawing on the cross-campus themes above, OCHE anticipates focusing on the following academic planning priorities in the coming year to ensure that the system's academic offerings are responsive to the needs of Montana students and the state economy. [Draft list for OCHE review — confirm final priorities before publication.]

1. Academic Program Review – continued implementation of the ongoing program review pilot across the MUS, including alignment with OCHE thresholds, federal earnings/ROI metrics, and new campus-level processes such as MSU-Northern's rigorous AY26-27 review.
2. AI in the Classroom, Curriculum, and Research – coordinating campus-level AI institutes, certificates, working groups, and centers (MSU, UM, UMW, Montana Tech) to avoid duplication and share infrastructure.
3. Dual Enrollment Pathways / Future Ready Payments – continued expansion of dual credit and articulation agreements aligned with 406 JOBS priority sectors, particularly for rural/two-year and regional campuses like Dawson Community College and MSU-Northern.
4. Healthcare Workforce Coordination – early-stage coordination on overlapping nursing and allied-health pathways (e.g., LPN-to-RN Bridge, Dental Hygiene, Veterinary Technician, Respiratory Therapy, Integrated Health Sciences) across campuses, particularly before Flathead Valley Community College commits resources to programs already established elsewhere.