

August 31, 2026

From: Deputy Commissioner Joe Thiel

To: Board of Regents

Please see below for an executive overview of the Request to Plan items that are being proposed for your review and action at the September 2026 meeting of the Board of Regents. These items have been submitted by the campuses and reviewed by the Chief Academic Officers of the Montana University System and community colleges. OCHE staff has reviewed the items and provided a short analysis below, relying on information submitted by the campuses. For more information and specific details on each item, please see the supporting documentation included on the Academic, Research, and Student Affairs Committee agenda.

University of Montana Missoula

Request to plan Studio Art and Media Arts Concentrations in the Baccalaureate and Graduate Art Degrees

The School of Art and Game Design proposes to consolidate its current BFA in Art and BFA in Media Arts into a single BFA in Art, and its current MFA in Art and MFA in Media Arts into a single MFA in Art, each offered with Studio Art and Media Arts concentrations. The change responds to NASAD accreditation standards requiring a shared foundation of practice and disciplinary knowledge across the two fields, while preserving a student's chosen area of focus, which will remain visible on the transcript. A final program proposal is expected in December 2026.

Consolidating four degrees into two is intended to simplify advising and clarify UM's identity in visual and media arts to prospective students. Combined fall headcount across Art, Media Arts, and Game Design and Interactive Media has ranged from 360 to 396 over the past three years, with Game Design and Interactive Media nearly tripling, from 19 students in Fall 2023 to 54 in Fall 2025. The school cites Montana's arts and cultural sector, valued at roughly \$2.24 billion and 16,540 jobs in 2022, and BLS projections of approximately 5,000 annual openings nationally for special effects artists and animators through 2034, as workforce context supporting both concentrations.

The nearest comparable programs in the MUS are at Montana State University Bozeman (Art, and Film and Photography/Integrated Lens Based Media) and Montana State University Billings. UM reports this as a consolidation of existing degrees rather than a new or expanded program, and plans to launch it using current faculty within their existing skill sets, without new hires or additional financial resources.

Request to plan the Center for Transformative Health, Resilience, Innovation, Vitality and Engagement (THRIVE)

The University of Montana proposes THRIVE, an interdisciplinary research center focused on trauma and developmental adversity across the lifespan, to be housed in the College of Health / School of Public and Community Health Sciences and directed by James Caringi, Ph.D. The center is intended to coordinate research, evaluation, and technical assistance; strengthen competitiveness for external funding; and expand student research and community-engaged learning.

UM points to significant behavioral-health need in Montana, including an age-adjusted suicide rate of 26.8 per 100,000 in 2024 and 50 of 56 counties designated as Mental Health Professional Shortage Areas, along with disproportionate impacts on rural and Tribal communities. UM identifies existing internal strengths — the Center for Population Health Research, the Montana Clinical and Translational Research Center, and the DART Lab — that currently lack a coordinating structure to compete for larger, multi-investigator awards, which THRIVE is intended to provide.

UM identifies Montana State University's Center for American Indian and Rural Health Equity (CAIRHE) as a closely aligned counterpart center for potential joint grants and shared infrastructure, along with collaboration opportunities within UM's College of Education and with national trauma researchers. The center is expected to launch primarily on existing DART Lab donor funding and coordination with current UM research units, with ongoing support intended to come from external grants, contracts, and indirect cost recovery rather than new state appropriations.