

Statement by the Montana University System to Secretary McMahon's August 3rd National Call to Action

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The Montana University System (MUS) and its 16 public colleges and universities exist to serve the students, families, and communities of Montana. Public trust in higher education is earned through transparency, affordability, academic quality, and a commitment to open inquiry. These are not new priorities. They are longstanding values reflected in Board of Regents policy and in the daily practices of our campuses.

We welcome the national conversation about the value and accountability of higher education. Many of the principles now being discussed nationally reflect goals the Montana University System has long held, advanced, and continuously seeks to improve upon for the Montanans we serve. Below, we describe how these principles are made real on our campuses.

1. Transparent, merit-based admissions

What we do today. The Montana University System is an open access system. It aims to provide every Montana resident a path to pursue further education, whether that is through a trades or transfer degree at one of our two-year colleges or a four-year or graduate program at our regional and research campuses. Our admission criteria are public, objective, and applied consistently to every applicant: A student who meets established standards for academic preparation is admitted.

Following the U.S. Supreme Court's decision in *Students for Fair Admissions, Inc. v. President & Fellows of Harvard Coll.*, 600 U.S. 181, 207 (2023), the MUS reviewed its admission practices and affirmed that no MUS institution uses race-based classifications in its admissions process.

The MUS works collaboratively with tribal governments to increase the recruitment and retention of tribal students. Those relationships reflect the unique government-to-government relationship recognized under federal law, under which tribal membership is a political classification.

Resources and policies

- Through our system's college and career access portal, **Apply Montana** <https://applymontana.mus.edu>, Montana students can explore college options, understand admissions criteria and the costs of a Montana

education, and see the real outcomes of our graduates. **Apply Montana** also provides a single, free application for all Montana students to all MUS campuses.

- Montana Board of Regents Policy 301 (<https://www.mus.edu/borpol/bor300/301.pdf>) sets admissions standards for all MUS institutions.
- MUS Success Agenda (resident student access priority): <https://www.mus.edu/data/strategic-plan/success-agenda.html>

2. Affordability and the value of a degree

What we do today. Affordability is one of our system's most important commitments to Montana families. The Board of Regents has repeatedly held resident tuition flat, helping keep a Montana degree among the most affordable options in the country. After grant aid, Montana resident students at MUS flagship campuses pay less in tuition and fees on average than they did twenty years ago. Additionally, our graduates out-earn their non-college going peers across degree types and sectors. These commitments are incorporated into how our institutions are funded, with state funds tied to performance criteria, including how well they support students to a timely degree.

The Montana University System's One-Two-Free dual-enrollment program lets eligible high-school students earn their first college credits tuition free. We also publish our costs and public dashboards showing MUS graduates' earnings and debt. We work to ensure that an MUS degree reflects deep learning and leads to real opportunity for graduates who are also civically minded and give back to the state.

Resources and policies

- Board of Regents Policy Statement on Tuition, BOR Policy 940.31 (<https://www.mus.edu/borpol/bor900/940-31.pdf>)
- MUS Student Success and Workforce Outcomes: <https://www.mus.edu/data/WorkforceTool/index.html>
- Tuition and fees at MUS campuses: <https://mus.edu/data/dashboards/tuitionandfees.html>
- Student financial aid and loans: <https://mus.edu/data/dashboards/financial-aid-dashboard.html>

- Board of Regents strategic plan (access and affordability): <https://mus.edu/data/strategic-plan/>

3. Free expression and campus discourse

What we do today. Our campuses protect the free exchange of ideas as guaranteed by the First Amendment and Montana’s Constitution. Board of Regents policy and campus policies safeguard open debate while maintaining content-neutral rules regarding the time, place, and manner of expression that keep classrooms, laboratories, lectures, and campus operations open and functioning. The MUS has worked alongside legislative partners to ensure our campuses foster environments for free expression and open exchange of ideas and viewpoints. Our universities seek to be the place in our society most hospitable to civil discourse between competing viewpoints.

Resources and policies

- MUS guidance and resource page on Free Speech: <https://mus.edu/free-speech/>
- 2023 Shared Policy Goals with legislative appropriations subcommittee on education: https://archive.legmt.gov/content/Publications/fiscal/2025-Biennium/Section-E/Interim/2023-Shared-Policy-Goals_2023-04-28.pdf

4. Academic freedom and intellectual openness

What we do today. The quality of a university and the education it provides depends on the freedom to inquire. Our faculty and students are free to teach, learn, research, and speak, with scholarship judged by rigorous, peer-reviewed evidence. Broad curricula and rigorous, discipline-based standards give students access to the full range of ideas in every field. Consistent with academic freedom and the faculty’s professional responsibility for curriculum and scholarship, the Montana University System does not condition faculty hiring, evaluation, or advancement on political or ideological criteria; we protect the conditions in which the strongest ideas can be tested through rigorous inquiry and open intellectual exchange.

Resources and policies

- Board of Regents Policy 302 – Academic Freedom: <https://www.mus.edu/borpol/bor300/302.pdf>

- Board of Regents Policy 703 – Non-Discrimination — <https://www.mus.edu/borpol/bor700/703.pdf>

5. Academic rigor in a time of new technology

What we do today. High standards are the heart of a meaningful degree. Our institutions maintain rigorous expectations and academic integrity policies, and our faculty are continuously adapting teaching methods and assessment practices to address the opportunities and challenges presented by artificial intelligence. Rather than lowering expectations, new technologies are prompting MUS faculty to discuss current practices and design new learning experiences ensuring emphasis on critical thinking, problem solving, creativity, and the application of knowledge. As technology evolves, we remain committed to ensuring that a Montana credential continues to reflect genuine learning, demonstrated competence, and the ability to succeed in a rapidly changing world. This work is guided systemwide by the Commissioner’s Directive on Artificial Intelligence and the MUS Artificial Intelligence Task Force.

Resources and policies

- Commissioner’s Directive on Artificial Intelligence: https://www.mus.edu/che/directives/CommissionerDirective_ArtificialIntelligenceGuidance_4.9.26.pdf
- Report and recommendations of the MUS Artificial Intelligence Task Force: https://www.mus.edu/che/directives/MUS_AI_Task_Force_Recommendations_March26BOR.pdf
- MUS Success Agenda (Artificial Intelligence): <https://www.mus.edu/data/strategic-plan/success-agenda.html>

6. Research integrity and security

What we do today. Montana is a national model for efficiently and securely conducting sensitive, defense-related work in a manner that strengthens our nation and American industry. Montana State University’s MilTech—a U.S. Department of War–authorized partnership intermediary—has delivered more than 300 projects for the Departments of War (DOW) and Homeland Security (DHS), connecting military requirements to qualified manufacturers, including Montana businesses. Its companion program, TechLink, was the Department of War’s first national partnership intermediary. MUS campuses performed more than \$83 million in U.S. Department of War–funded research and development in 2024(as reported in the National Science Foundation’s HERD survey). These projects are carried out under

federal research-security, export-control, and foreign-influence disclosure requirements. MUS campuses have developed and implemented policies, programs, and procedures to ensure compliance with National Security Presidential Memorandum 33 (NSPM-33) and the CHIPS and Science Act of 2022. MUS campuses are keenly aware of the U.S. national security and economic interests tied to federally-funded research and vigilantly work to safeguard these public investments from foreign adversary malign influence and misappropriation of emergent intellectual property.

Resources and policies

- Montana State University research integrity & compliance — <https://www.montana.edu/ric/>
- University of Montana research compliance, security, and export control — <https://www.umt.edu/research-compliance-tech-transfer/>
- Montana Technological University research integrity — <https://www.mtech.edu/research/integrity/index.html>
- MUS Success Agenda (Research): <https://www.mus.edu/data/strategic-plan/success-agenda.html>

7. Service to Montana and the nation

What we do today. Our campuses exist to serve. We align academic programs with Montana’s workforce needs in fields such as healthcare, the trades, agriculture, technology, and education, helping to prepare the professionals and leaders who will sustain our communities and economy. We carry universities’ research, expertise, and innovation into each of our state’s 56 counties, working alongside communities to address challenges Montana’s most pressing challenges related to health, natural resources, economic development, and quality of life. And we partner with employers, local governments, nonprofit organizations, communities, and Montana’s tribal nations to expand opportunity, strengthen civic engagement, and foster open conversations. We sustain Montana's cultural and artistic heritage, through engagement that preserves our state's traditions, enriches civic life, and prepares graduates for the creative economy in Montana and beyond. Through these efforts, our campuses’ students, faculty, and staff contribute not only to the prosperity and well-being of Montana, but also to the nation’s workforce, research enterprise and economic competitiveness. In serving Montana well, we serve the nation.

Resources and policies

- MUS Strategic Plan, Goal #2 Workforce and Economic Development:
<https://mus.edu/data/strategic-plan/>
- MUS Success Agenda (career and technical education and dual enrollment):
<https://www.mus.edu/data/strategic-plan/success-agenda.html>
- Selected MUS Centers, Institutes, and Programs that provide direct services and analysis to Montana communities, governments and businesses.
 - Montana Bureau of Mines and Geology (Montana Tech)
 - Bureau of Business and Economic Research (University of Montana)
 - Office of Rural Health and Area Health Education Center (Montana State University)
 - Goldman Sachs 10,000 Small Businesses (Great Falls College – MSU)
 - Agricultural Extension in each Montana county (Montana State University)
 - Center for Translational Medicine (University of Montana)

We offer this not in response to any single directive but as an account of who we are and as a serious reflection on the trust the public has invested in us. The Montana University System supports efforts to strengthen the quality, transparency, and accountability of higher education, and we are glad to show our work as stewards accountable to the students and citizens of Montana and committed to the spirit of open inquiry that make our universities worthy of their trust.