Counselor Focus Group Results 2009

Context: In the opening 15 minutes of a conference session for high school counselors on two-year education in Montana, participants were asked to complete this feedback form. In order to maintain their anonymity, the forms were collected by a conference aide assigned to the room. All the participants are current or retired high school counselors, although some have a “blended” assignment at the high school and middle school, or at all schools throughout the district.

Respondents: 32 total
18 high school counselors, 12 “blended” counselors and 2 retired counselors
8 counselors in Class AA MT schools, 8 in Class A, 8 in Class B, and 8 in Class C
19 respondents were Montana natives
26 respondents had a Montana college degree
Years of experience as school counselors:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>0-5 yrs</th>
<th>6-10 yrs</th>
<th>11-15 yrs</th>
<th>16-20 yrs</th>
<th>21+ yrs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Respondents</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Responses:

1. What words come to mind when you think about your region’s two-year college?
   Exceptional schools with minimal costs
   Vo-tech (3)
   Love our community college – wonderful
   Awesome asset – great opportunities (7)
   Bright, motivated people can get into higher paying and more fulfilling jobs more quickly and economically
   Serves primarily Crow students
   Progressive, innovative, technical, specific
   Hard-working, getting better all the time; great place to go to be electrician/plumber
   Accessible – student-friendly – qualified – expanding- lower cost
   Great communication with counselors and students
   Not close enough and no housing so not a real choice (3)
   Credible, worthy
   Low advertisement (2)
   Does not meet our needs!! What they offer is good – need lots more! (GF in Bozeman – 3)
   Quality programs – always evolving – accessible
   Close to home, more affordable, classes fit area needs, small class size, GED, Summer Bridge
   Expanding at location but not providing distance education
   Accessible – affordable – user-friendly
   Would like them to get out of their offices and visit our schools more often
   A well-kept secret – they provide an excellent education
   Small and limited and under-resourced (2) – though it is an appropriate and positive stepping stone for some community members
   Not utilized enough by students straight out of high school
   Convenient, cost-effective, good investment of not much time to make pretty good wage
2. **How responsive do you feel your two-year college is to the needs of business and industry?**

   - Wonderful/awesome/excellent (8)
   - Highly responsive to all needs/trends in community, not just business (5)
   - Not very responsive
   - Somewhat responsive (5) –(3 saying as tribal colleges they focuses on meeting the needs of tribal people, not business/industry
   - Seem to track placement rates and report it – they point out where they are leading edge.

     - They strive (4)
     - They not only respond to business/industry needs but provide innovative avenues for education.
     - We have 3 in our region, I don’t know how responsive they are
     - It’s trying but we need your help! (2 - Bozeman)
     - Need to provide more tangible services in Eureka
     - Doing the best they can with the resources they have (tribal)
     - I would like more programs, but they do offer a good choice and meet needs of western MT
     - Much more adaptable than four-year schools
     - Works well with businesses

3. **Name three programs offered by your two-year college that you would especially recommend to students and/or their parents. Why?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Most Recommended Programs</th>
<th>Reasons</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Healthcare (7)</td>
<td>Wage, demand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nursing (6)</td>
<td>Wage, demand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Radiology Tech (3)</td>
<td>Wage, demand, student interest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Construction Trades (5)</td>
<td>Demand, student interest, wage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Welding (7)</td>
<td>Demand, student interest, wage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heavy equipment (4)</td>
<td>Student interest, demand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Core courses for transfer (4)</td>
<td>Small class size</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diesel (4) and Auto Mechanics (4)</td>
<td>Wage, demand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fire Science (3)</td>
<td>Student interest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business (3)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education (2)</td>
<td>Demand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Petroleum plant management (2)</td>
<td>Wage, demand, student interest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Computer courses (2)</td>
<td>Practicality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engineering Transfer (2)</td>
<td>Wage, demand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Remedial programs (2)</td>
<td>Effectiveness, small class size</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

   **Note:** Many counselors recommended programs because of their known quality – these reasons were not listed here because they are campus-specific.

4. **Agree or disagree with the following statements and explain why**

   a. **Students who want a college degree really need to go to a four-year institution.**

      1 Agree
Two-year colleges can be the most appropriate choice for some students, but having to apply to a four-year college after their two-year program is a hassle that can be avoided by attending a four-year college in the first place.

31 Disagree
- We have good jobs for students that don’t require a 4-year degree and can do apprenticeship, etc., and make just as much money (6)
- There are now many options (2)
- Great place to start your college studies (5)
- Affordability is an issue at four-year colleges (4)
- Four-year colleges can be overwhelming at first, less personal be; 2-year is often a good transition from high school to college. (3)
- The most important thing is a good fit – it varies by student (4)
- Most students can benefit more from a two-year college
- Some students are not likely to succeed in a four-year environment – especially if from rural area (2)

b. MT’s two-year colleges are much more affordable than the four-year colleges.

25 Agree
- I know it’s more affordable, but I would like to have exact figures.
- Spend less time in college and begin working sooner – both $ benefits
- Because the requirements are specific to the job, there aren’t a lot of “fluff” courses, making the degree more affordable (UMH)
- Affordability is a big reason for running start. What a shame we’re going backwards by making college teachers get a high school license!
- They’re definitely more affordable, but we need to explore ways to make them even more affordable.
- Great tuition and financial aid/scholarship assistance (3)
- Especially affordable if students don’t have to move (3)

6 Undecided
- Our four-year schools are really expensive; not sure if MSUN is less expensive in its two-year programs
- Can’t be generalized; they’re all different in price
- True of the community colleges, not of the technology schools (e.g., MSUB)
- Depends on the student’s financial situation and financial aid
- They are more affordable but not much more (2)
- Need to be cheaper

c. Students graduating from two-year institutions are well-prepared for the workforce.

27 Agree
- They’re well-prepared, but we need to look at higher-paying jobs for these degrees.
- Students receive in-depth practical skills, training and development tailored to the job
- Graduation/employment data illustrates the success
- In some cases, graduates are better-prepared than four-year graduates
- Internships help with training and placement

3 Undecided
- This depends on the school and the program of study (3)

1 Disagree
- Professionally and socially, “2-year students” are probably ready for the workforce, but the degree is less economically advantageous than a four-year degree.

**d. Students graduating from two-year institutions are well-prepared to transfer to four-year colleges.**

17 Agree
- But get the numbers to match the courses all across Montana
- They gain the skills, knowledge, and comfort level to move on
- We need to make sure all courses that are applicable transfer (MSUBCOT)
- Students understand the basics of how college works and can adapt to the four-year environment better with less expense.
- Yes, but there is an image problem – can you promote the two-years as stepping stones to the four-year schools?

13 Undecided/Can’t Answer
- This depends on the school
- I’m not sure how well they do on preparing students for transfer (MSUN)
- Due to the nature of two-year ed, students get in-depth training rather than traditional core academics, so not sure why an issue needs to be made of this.
- Doesn’t seem to apply (UMH, MSUN)
- Not sure they can transfer – concern about credits
- Unknown, but would predict it’s true
- Depends on program
- Ideally, students who would not be ready for a four-year program will be better prepared for transfer at a two-year school.
- Depends on the amount of advising and help they get from the receiving institution

1 Disagree

5. **Rank the following list of possible improvements for two-year education in Montana, according to their importance.** (Tally represents total number of times the item was ranked in the top three.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tally</th>
<th>Item</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Expand dual enrollment opportunities for high school students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Ease transfers between MT’s various postsecondary institutions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Expand online course offerings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Improve affordability</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
6. What factors do you see as preventing students from enrolling in/finishing a two-year degree program?

**Image-related**
- Parental discouragement from going to a two-year college (3)
- Perception that a 2-year college is for lower-level students (3)
- Students see it as “settling for” instead of “choosing to”
- Prestige factor of four-year college and/or four-year degree (3)
- The stigma (4) of a two-year college as being “less than” a four-year (7)
- People are not convinced of the “ease of moment” between two-year and four-year

**Experience-related**
- Lack of belonging to a college campus environment (3)
- Age of students is older
- High school students look at college as a time to have fun, which they associate with a 4-year college

**Access-related**
- Lack of access to variety of programs at MSU-Bozeman
- Distance (5)
- Housing, especially on-campus housing, for out-of-town students is a big issue. (5)
- Limited variety of degree offerings in our area (2)

**Information/Marketing-related**
- Communications and information about two-year is just not out there clearly and constantly enough for students to really know about this option (7)
- Do like Wyo Tech – more students know about them than about our own colleges
- So much emphasis is put on four-year colleges that students aren’t sure of the availability of this option
- Visibility needs to be more prominent in community – market as a launching ground to four-year schools
- The four-year university system has a monopoly on the high school prep message as if four-year college is the only real goal of our high schools! What about the rest of our students?

**Student-related**
- Students don’t take two-year programs as seriously as they should – especially if a two-year school is in the community they grew up in.
- Students feel they need to work right away to earn money for the family.
- Not fully understanding the role of student, having the willingness to commit to process
- Students’ own lack of motivation is the only barrier
- Preparedness
- It’s important to stay connected with them after they enroll.
Affordability-related

- Money is always a factor. (3)
- Scholarships are harder to get for two-year colleges.