

## 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:

0-5 yrs	6-10 yrs	11-15 yrs	16-20 yrs	21+ yrs
10	7	10	1	4

**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?**

Most Recommended Programs

Reasons

Healthcare (7)	Wage, demand
Nursing (6)	Wage, demand
Radiology Tech (3)	Wage, demand, student interest
Construction Trades (5)	Demand, student interest, wage
Welding (7)	Demand, student interest, wage
Heavy equipment (4)	Student interest, demand
Core courses for transfer (4)	Small class size
Diesel (4) and Auto Mechanics (4)	Wage, demand
Fire Science (3)	Student interest
Business (3)	
Education (2)	Demand
Petroleum plant management (2)	Wage, demand, student interest
Computer courses (2)	Practicality
Engineering Transfer (2)	Wage, demand
Remedial programs (2)	Effectiveness, small class size

**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; 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.)**

- |    |  |
|----|--|
| 18 | Expand dual enrollment opportunities for high school students  |
| 17 | Ease transfers between MT's various postsecondary institutions |
| 16 | Expand online course offerings                                 |
| 12 | Improve affordability  |

- 11 Increase capacity for specific workforce training programs
- 8 Improve access for working adults (alternative schedules, etc.)

**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 .