Listening Session Focuses on Graduation Rate
by Charlie Denison

Commissioner of Higher Education for the state of Montana Sheila Stearns wants to hear from anyone and everyone. While on the Dawson Community College campus recently, Stearns encouraged all members of the community in attendance to share their thoughts on community colleges, community involvement, give her advice, ask her questions and more. Stearns was joined at the listening session by five-year Board of Regent member Janine Pease of Fort Peck Community College, who also listened intently and addressed her thoughts and the Board of Regents’ thoughts on certain issues.

Jim Squires, one of about 20 people to attend the afternoon listening session, took the opportunity to address the need for more unity between community colleges in the state as well as community colleges and their respective communities. The input by Squires gave Stearns an opportunity to expound on a handout she passed out regarding College! Now, an initiative for Montana colleges to team up with business and community leaders, K-12 educators and elected officials to make community college programs more affordable and accessible statewide. College! Now is also meant to expand dual enrollment programs to help high school students get a head start.

Stearns said she would also like to see technology be used in the best way possible. According to her handout, a virtual community college for all 15 two-year colleges to offer online is a possibility that could make information sharing easier and more efficient. Stearns added that this initiative is not just about unifying community colleges, it’s about unifying the state. “We’re excited about collaborating with different kinds of governing structures,” Stearns said. “We really are all one community college.”

Another community member in attendance asked Stearns, Pease and DCC President Jim Cargill about enrollment rates in the state, wondering how many high-school students in Montana were going to college. Pease pointed out that 57 percent of Montana high school seniors go to college while, in North Dakota, 70 percent are going to college. In order to improve the percentage, Pease said the Board of Regents had talked about focusing more on student services and improving the relationship between two-year colleges and K-12 schools. Stearns said she is working to see this number elevated by 25 percent. Most importantly, Stearns said, she would like to see the focus not be on how many students go to college, but how many students finish college. In the College! Now handout, Stearns highlights that today’s state funding for two-year colleges has too much emphasis on just enrolling the students. “Graduating more students with the resources available demands a focus on both,” she said.

The listening session was one of 16 of its kind across the state by the Montana University System. While jumping from community to community, Stearns has been joined by various members of the Board of Regents.

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