

Open Comments from the Montana Economic Developers Association (MEDA) and the Montana Ambassadors

Subsequent to the publication of survey results on the perspectives of MEDA and the Ambassadors on Two-Year Colleges in Montana, an opportunity for open comment was provided. Some of the comment was provided by telephone; some, by email. A total of only 8 individuals provided comment, as opposed to 146 who responded in full to the online survey.

Comments have been condensed and paraphrased under the themes that emerged across individuals.

Duplication of Programs

- We are very satisfied with our community college, but the Board of Regents needs to understand that not all duplication of programs is bad. Our local industry needs local workers, and local people can't afford to move, set up a second household, etc., to attend a program that already exists.
- [Our industry] has invested significantly to bring expensive equipment to a program at MSU-Northern. When another campus duplicates that program, it puts us in the position of having to invest in two programs, which eventually leads to both programs being underfunded. With expensive programs, it's important to choose a site for that program and support it.

Engagement in Economic/Community Development

- Our COT has been subsumed into the four-year mission. Neither the university nor our COT is out in the business community in any meaningful way. They don't go to the economic development meetings. They don't participate in economic development planning. They don't have sustained business-to-business relationships. In terms of our economic development efforts, the COT is absolutely a non-entity; they don't have a public face. Probably the educational agent with the most business-to-business recognition is the [adult education program] here. They give the COT a real run for their money. [The adult education leader] in particular is engaged in the community. The COT is engaged with the university.
- Our COT has been a major player in economic development in our community. They are at the table and they come prepared. They're positive, proactive, and flexible.
- Be careful of averages in your survey. They mask the highs and lows. Pay attention to this: almost half of your respondents said they seldom or never rely on their local two-year college for economic development activities. Less than a third rely on them constantly or frequently. That's bad. And that's how it is.

Data-based Approaches to Programming

- As economic developers, we don't know what we want. Having spent a lot of time with individual employers analyzing needs and building training programs, even one company at a time, it's a very hard question. Looking at it in aggregate, as we do far too often, is especially meaningless and dumbs the discussion down to basic literacy/numeracy/work habits as though the needs really pretty much do end there.

- The program advisory groups for many of our COT programs are stagnant – same people, friends of the faculty, have been on them for years. They've been talking about the same things for years – customer service, earrings and tattoos, employees who “can't make change.” When will *they* make change?
- The demand indicator for the campuses, the future job growth data from the Dept. of Labor & Industry's statisticians who draw on the U.S. Dept. of Labor data, is and has been wildly wrong for many decades now. So we're pointed to job growth that doesn't happen, replacement hires are ignored entirely, and it really isn't adjusted for Montana's actual businesses. When I went through the methodology with DoLI's guys who rely on USDOL's, after seeing their prediction that 457 more market researchers would be needed in Montana when I could only think of 4-6 full-time ones surviving in Montana, knowing all of them, and then looking at the IT jobs forecasts...it's wildly wrong but it's what we've used to plan programs forever. Labor & Industry does great weekly research and could readily provide far more useful stuff if they can just ignore the federal estimates of estimates of casual guesses based on abysmally bad forecasting.

Resources

- The campuses have a severe limitation on practical training simply for the cost of equipment and production/lab space, ignoring how unattractive the compensation is for teachers with real skills (unless only those with crippling injuries and chronic diseases are hired which might in fact be the best pool.) Doing all or most of the lab work/hands-on work at a variety of local workplaces as well as online simulations is the only solution, albeit a very inconvenient and potentially embarrassing one for faculty who are often far behind in their own knowledge and have few actual local business contacts. We just can't build and equip enough space at the 2 year campuses with the funding available from all sources, unless we closed UM/Missoula to pay for it.
- The university system doesn't care about students; they care about money. If a student, especially an adult student, already has the knowledge and skills, why make them take classes they don't need? Because it pays. For decades the campuses have assured us that the transfer problem is “solved.” That's a hoax. As long as the receiving campuses can require students to take more courses that make them more money, they will.

Curriculum and Programming

- The [two-year] campuses are too focused, like the 4-years, on producing people who are barely entry-level workers at great expense and far too long of time. Ask employers if they'd like to spend \$5-\$20,000 and 2 years on new employee orientation (employees who know some of the jargon but can't actually do much if anything.)
- The general education requirements are drawn more from the old Ivy League core curriculum concept than an actual fit to the program while wasting too much of the training time, especially for the many students who already have college coursework or a bachelor's degree.
- The two-year colleges think too much like four-year colleges. It doesn't take two years to prepare a secretary or a bookkeeper. It doesn't take two years to prepare a practical nurse. Why have summers off when you're preparing a workforce? We've

got adults in our communities working “whatever” jobs who would consider enrolling if they could be done and get a good job in a year.

- Dual degrees of technical competence plus business coursework so they can rise to supervision or entrepreneurship would be very powerful and the many technicians I've asked about it (and their bosses) seem genuinely interested.
- Small business ownership training is probably the other big missing piece of the 2 year campuses as the 4 years teach it badly because so much of their content consciously or unconsciously draws from how giant corporations approach business (especially GM, GE, P&G.) Small business owners don't need the credential (a huge paradigm shift for campuses), they need the actual working, practical knowledge (as opposed to theory in lectures.) But with 40-80,000 small businesses in Montana, they're actually the largest niche market of all and more numerous than recent high school graduates.
- Testing what folks know and what they're good at first, during, and after is really useful and something the campuses are already set up to do but that isn't getting out to the communities and employers, I guess, because they're not thinking training through.

Other

- I found the survey results for #6 particularly interesting in that few thought a focused marketing campaign was needed (to help overcome the thinking that everyone should go to a 4-year college and that many have perception that only “academically unskilled” should go to 2-yr colleges). It seems to me that a focused effort would help “rebrand” these organizations. Also, while online opportunities ranked high in earlier questions, as did improving access for working adults (in #6 – which I view as correlated items), expanding online course options did not rank as “Most Important.”
- MEDA and the community colleges (COTs, tribal colleges) should be working together hand in hand, not just in the communities (although about half the time, that *does* happen), but at the state level.
- I disagree with the results when it comes to the names of “colleges of technology.” Nobody knows what they are or how they've changed. They don't need to be called “community colleges” but they do need to be seen as colleges.
- I have really been impressed with the responsiveness and openness of private/proprietary institutions like the University of Mary and Phoenix University. There is a willingness to do whatever it takes to get the job done.