Closing Remarks Regarding Rigor, Relevance, & Relationships
BY SANDY MERDINGER, PROGRAM DIRECTOR

It was with mixed feelings that I made the difficult decision to retire at the end of December. I still love my work and I know there is so much left to do. However, my husband and I are excited to travel more, and I’m looking forward to new adventures. I will miss all of you, but I know this is the time for me to make some changes.

Thank you for your friendship, your commitment to students, and your work to prepare students for postsecondary education and successful careers. While I recognize the many accomplishments we have made since I took this position in 2003, I want to remind you of what I consider so important to student success. We’ve talked about the three Rs for years, but because I think they are so important I am closing with them – rigor, relevance, and relationships.

Rigor: Without rigor, your students are not academically prepared to be successful in their postsecondary endeavors and careers. Never “dumb-down” coursework – instead provide challenging coursework with the necessary academic supports. Students will step up if you have high expectations for them and when they take challenging courses in high school, they are better prepared to succeed in postsecondary education.

Relevance: When students see the relevance of what they are learning in the classroom, they connect it to real world situations, and they become more engaged. Career information and activities that make learning real help students see why their education is important. Remember the power of cultural relevance for your students who are Native American. Students who know that they need a college degree for the jobs that interest them are more likely to go to college.

Relationships: Many students don’t have mentors to encourage them in their educational efforts, to listen to them, and to have high expectations for them. Adult relationships are essential especially for students who may not have that support at home. Students who have relationships with people who expect them to go to college are far more likely to attend college.

Keep up your good work and I challenge you to take the three Rs to heart as you work with your students this year!

The Benefits of Statewide ACT Testing
BY JESSIE SALISBURY, PROGRAM COORDINATOR

This spring Montana GEAR UP is funding a pilot of the ACT Plus Writing test for all juniors in Montana GEAR UP schools, plus an additional 33 other public high schools in Montana. This pilot will be followed with a statewide implementation of the ACT Plus Writing at all Montana public high schools next year. Because of the many benefits statewide ACT testing offers students and campuses, Montana GEAR UP wrote this initiative into the 2011 grant. The Office of Public Instruction (OPI) will be responsible for the administration of the ACT.

Statewide administration of the ACT provides all students, regardless of economic background, equal access to all high school students, regardless of economic background, enlarging the pool of students who then consider and enroll in some sort of postsecondary option.”

A 2009 Case Study published by ACT titled Statewide Administration of the ACT: A Key Component in Improving Student Access to College and Work shows that the average ACT scores in Illinois and Colorado have increased since statewide administration began in 2001. Eighteen percent of Illinois students who had not planned to attend college at the time of testing ended up enrolling in college the next year. From 2002 to 2007, the percentage of Colorado and Illinois high school grads enrolled in college the following fall increased by 1 and 2 percentage points, respectively.

“We should do everything we can to eliminate barriers for young people in Montana to access higher education and achieve their dreams. Covering the cost of the ACT Plus Writing for every junior in Montana gives every student the . . . College is possible for all Montana students (continued on page 2)
College Goal Montana: FAFSA Completion Help for Montana Communities

BY THE STUDENT ASSISTANCE FOUNDATION

Free help for students and parents tasked with completing the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) — an essential stepping stone to attaining federal, state and institutional aid — will be available at College Goal Montana events in communities across the state in February. Employees of nonprofit Student Assistance Foundation (SAF), financial aid officers and volunteers will gather at several locations on February 8 and/or February 12 to offer one-on-one instruction for completing this important form. Check SmartAboutCollege.org for locations and times.

In addition, students should check with the guidance counselor at their school, visit the SmartAboutCollege.org website, or call 877-COLG4ME to find out if SAF is hosting a free College Goal Montana webinar in their community during the months of January and February. Webinar participants listen to a 30-minute presentation about the FAFSA, log on to www.fafsa.gov, and complete the form. Help from site hosts and subject matter experts via telephone will be available.

“Everyone who wants to attend college next fall should complete the FAFSA,” said Rhonda Safford, statewide coordinator of College Goal Montana. “Statistics show that 28 percent of eligible families did not complete the FAFSA last academic year because they didn’t know that help to pay for school was available, or they didn’t think they’d qualify. We don’t want anyone to miss out on this valuable aid resource.”

Students and parents should arrive at College Goal Montana locations prepared to complete and submit the FAFSA. No appointments are necessary. Don’t forget to bring:

• FAFSA PIN number — to get your pin, log on to www.pin.ed.gov
• Social Security numbers (students and parents)
• 2011 federal tax returns (or 2010 tax returns if 2011 are not complete)
• W-2s, tribal income, other aid information (TANF, child support, other benefits)
• Additional asset information (money market funds, stocks, other investments).

In addition to receiving FAFSA completion help, attendees who complete event evaluations at any of the College Goal Montana locations will be entered to win a $500 scholarship. 2012 will mark the eighth year that SAF has coordinated this event. To date, more than 10,000 Montanans have been served through the program.

The Benefits of Statewide ACT Testing (continued)

opportunity to assess their college and career readiness,” stated Montana’s Superintendent of Public Instruction, Denise Juneau. According to OPI data currently 60 percent of Montana high school students take the ACT. “ACT Plus Writing for every junior will give us a complete picture of how Montana’s K-12 public education system is preparing all our students for success after high school.”

According to ACT, adopting all or part of ACT’s College and Career Readiness System (EXPLORE, PLAN, and ACT) on a statewide basis provides significant advantages for educational and career planning, assessment, instructional support, and evaluation.

• Students benefit from this longitudinal growth model that includes coordinated measurement in 8th, 10th, and 11th grades.

GEAR UP Spotlight: Lodge Grass High School

BY JOHN PILCH, LODGE GRASS HIGH SCHOOL BIOLOGY TEACHER

This fall the Lodge Grass High School biology class along with Crow tribal historian and author Mr. Fredrick Lefthand, and tribal elder Mr. Adrian Medicine Horse, set out to explore the Bighorn Mountains. The class focused on the ecosystems of the Bighorn Mountains and its resources, as well as the spiritual and cultural significance of the Medicine Wheel to the Crow people and other Plains Indian tribes.

As we traveled south into Wyoming, Mr. Lefthand spoke of several significant cultural sites to the Crow people. The sites included Columbus Peak/Crazy Crane Peak, a fasting site of Chief Old Crow. The class also observed tipi rings near the mouth of the Tongue River canyon. The Crow people used this area for a summer camp due to the abundant game and cool waters of the Tongue River.

Making our way up the winding mountain road, we observed several geologic formations and discussed how the Bighorn Mountains formed. We stopped near the summit, looking (continued on page 4)
Montana GEAR UP’s First Cohort of Students’ Journey to Graduation

By Andrea Rankin, Program Manager

With the close of the 2005 grant, the journey of Montana GEAR UP’s first cohort of 7th grade students in 2005-2006 to seniors in 2010-2011 is over. With assistance from the Office of Public Instruction, Montana GEAR UP for the first time is able to calculate the four-year adjusted cohort graduation rate of this 2010-2011 class of seniors. The graduation rate is calculated by starting with this cohort of students when they were in 9th grade in 2007-2008, adjusting the number by students transferring in and out, and determining how many of these students earned a regular high school diploma by August 2011. The calculation does not include students who were enrolled in high school prior to the 2007-08 school year (e.g., were repeating 9th grade in 2007-08), nor does it include students who left the cohort sometime during the four years by transferring to, for example, a private school, home school, an out-of-state or out-of-country school, etc., or by discontinuing school for a medical reason.

Chart 1 compares Montana GEAR UP’s 2007-2008 9th grade cohort to the statewide 2007-2008 statewide cohort. Montana GEAR UP’s four-year adjusted cohort graduation rate is 73 percent compared to a statewide graduation rate of 82 percent. Twenty-one percent of Montana GEAR UP students dropped out of high school compared to 15 percent statewide. Six percent of the Montana GEAR UP cohort have not graduated yet, but are continuing their enrollment in high school.

When the data is drilled down further to examine graduation rates by ethnicity, some interesting trends are revealed as illustrated in Chart 2. Similar to statewide results, Montana GEAR UP also demonstrates a discouraging graduation gap between white students and American Indian students. The graduation gap comparison, however, also divulges a more positive development. The Montana GEAR UP graduation rates for both white students and American Indian students are higher than the statewide graduation rates for these groups of students.

One possible explanation for Montana GEAR UP’s higher graduation rate by ethnicity when compared to the state as opposed to Montana GEAR UP’s overall lower graduation rate when compared to state is the percentage of American Indian students in Montana GEAR UP. American Indians make up about 66 percent of Montana GEAR UP’s student population versus approximately 11 percent for the state.
Montana GEAR UP Pathways Scholarship applications sent to eligible Montana GEAR UP 2005 Grant seniors. Contact Cory Chenoweth, Financial Aid Manager with questions at cchenoweth@montana.edu or 406-444-0350.

January 11: Using Your EXPLORE and PLAN Test Results Webinar. More information will be sent to school GEAR UP teams the week of December 12th.

January 12 & 25: ACT Test Administration Training Webinar.

January 18: ACT Test Administration Training during the 2012 Assessment Conference in Helena.

January 20: Montana GEAR UP Achievement Grant recipients announced. Contact Cory Chenoweth, Financial Aid Manager with questions at cchenoweth@montana.edu or 406-444-0350.

February 7: Montana GEAR UP Liaison Meeting Webinar. More information to follow.

GEAR UP Spotlight: Lodge Grass High School (continued)

out over the Powder River basin; the students imagined what it was like millions of years ago as tropical plants and a warm water sea covered the area. We also observed the Buffalo Tongue, a rock slide resembling a Buffalo’s tongue to the Crow people, thus giving the name of the Tongue River valley below. Students also saw the geologic formations of Steamboat Rock, a limestone outcropping that once was at the bottom of the valley, and Fallen City, a limestone cave formation that collapsed eons ago leaving large, block-shaped rocks that resemble a crumbling ancient city. Students also pointed out and discussed the rust-colored pine trees. Pine bark beetle infestation is the culprit, a serious problem in the Rocky Mountain forests, and is possibly linked to climate change.

We gained elevation and observed the changes in the bio-diversity of the area. Students noticed the abundant deer, turkey, and antelope populations. Sagebrush hills and cottonwood-covered river bottoms slowly transformed to Lodge Pole and Spruce covered forests. We finally arrived at the Medicine Wheel, elevation 9200 feet, and started our hike to about 9800 feet. We discussed the habitat and organisms of the alpine ecosystem and looked at the differences between trees growing at tree line and those growing below tree line. We also discussed the pika, a small mammal living year round in the talus slopes above tree line. We observed the pika’s sound and behavior and discussed how they have adapted to survive in such an extreme environment. We also viewed the Crow Reservation side of the Bighorn Mountains, pointing out such features as Bull Elk Ridge, Windy Point, Garvin Basin, Devil’s Canyon and several other points of interest and lore to the Crow.

We gathered at the Medicine Wheel, an 80 foot diameter wheel made of stone. Mr. Lefthand explained how the area is used for fasting and vision ceremonies, the significance of the seven rock carvins, and the importance of the wheel’s 28 spokes. The spokes are perfectly aligned with the rising sun on the solstice. A very special lesson was shared with the students since the next day was the autumnal equinox. He explained the importance of the offerings placed around the outside of the wheel that were made to the Creator for health, prosperity and healing. We also looked out over the vision quest cliffs, witnessing the remains of a “Blow Down”, a natural phenomenon that occurs in the Bighorn Mountains, knocking down acres of trees when thunder storms collapse as they rise up over the Bighorns. For some students, this was their first trip to the historic sight, and they were thrilled by the sheer beauty of the area. This trip reflects the words of the great Crow Chief Plenty Coups, who led the transformation from the buffalo days to the reservation era, who said, “without education, you are his victim, and with it, you are his equal”.

Our mission: Montana GEAR UP believes that postsecondary education is possible for all Montana students, regardless of economic background. Montana GEAR UP supports schools, students, and their families to increase students' college and career readiness through academic preparedness, postsecondary planning, and financial aid knowledge so that they may succeed in their education beyond high school.