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### Life After High School: Interviews With GEAR UP Graduates

The journey through middle and high school for Montana GEAR UP’s first cohort of graduates from the 2005 grant is over and the adventure of college has just begun. Several of these Montana GEAR UP graduates have agreed to discuss their experiences during their first semester on a college campus. Montana GEAR UP will be conducting a series of interviews over the next few months in order to learn about their transition both academically and socially. The first interview was conducted with Simms High School graduate Katherine Leonardson who is attending MSU in Bozeman. She is pursuing an Undergraduate Degree in Animal Science and plans to continue on to veterinary school.

- **How did you decide which college to attend?** Originally, I had planned to attend a university out-of-state. After receiving certain scholarships which were only applicable in-state, I chose to attend Montana State University.
- **Did you receive any financial aid?** Yes, after filing my FAFSA I received a financial aid package that included both grants and student loans. I also received a number of scholarships which allowed me to only use grants and scholarships to fund my freshman year – no student loans!
- **What influence did GEAR UP have on your college and career aspirations?** GEAR UP was influential through the scholarship opportunities, which have funded my education and therefore, my career.
- **How would you describe your first semester of college?** My first semester of college was indescribable – filled with both challenges and blessings. I learned a great deal about myself and what I want for my life.
- **What advice can you give about living away from home with a roommate?** Moving away from home and entering a new environment is difficult for everyone, no matter how unfraid they may seem. Remembering this fact will help bridge the gap between you and your roommate and also with other acquaintances you will meet along the way. Allow yourself to realize that the adjustment period is unique for everyone and be patient in learning likes and dislikes between you and your roommate. If problems do arise, contact your resident advisor (RA) – they really are there to help! Eventually you will establish a type of “flow” and over your winter break you will find yourself missing your roommate – trust me, I have!
- **So far, do you feel prepared academically for college courses?** I do feel academically prepared, even though many small schools do not have the budget or staff to expand the class offerings. However, my high school experience taught me how to study and how to look for resources to succeed.
- **What has been the biggest challenge academically transitioning from high school to college?** The biggest challenge has been time management. In high school, you sit in classes for nearly eight hours a day and in many classes, assignments can be worked on and even completed in class. College is nothing like that. You may have four classes a day or even just one and the assignments must be completed on your own time, however, since you don’t have eight hours of class a day you have a great deal of free-time to work on those assignments and study. Also, you will not receive phone calls from your college if you miss classes. You must establish the self-discipline to wake up and get to class. If you don’t go to class, exam-time will be extremely difficult.

- **What has been the biggest challenge socially transitioning from high school to college?** Socially the biggest challenge lies in transitioning from a Class C school with around 150 students to a university where many of my classes have 150 students enrolled! After attending such a small school since my elementary days with the same students, moving to a university where I knew maybe 10 people was different – but, mostly exciting! You have the opportunity to find friends that have the same exact interests as you do.

- **What do you wish you had known before you started college?** I wish I would have received more education about the financial aspect of college, including information about the various fees, like residential life fees (for dorm floor activities) and lab fees.

(continued on page 2)
FAFSA Time!

BY CORY CHENOWETH, FINANCIAL AID MANAGER

It’s time to turn the calendar to 2012, which means it is now time to start working on completing the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). FAFSA completion is the most important step students and their families must take in order to make postsecondary education more affordable, as the FAFSA will help students qualify for grants, scholarships, fee waivers, and student loans. Studies show that over 80% of students who complete the FAFSA end up enrolling in college; however only 50% of students who start the FAFSA follow it through to completion. While it can sometimes seem like a daunting task, the rewards are worth it.

Last year there were just over 50 Montana GEAR UP students who started the FAFSA, but didn’t complete it. If these students had received additional guidance to finish the FAFSA this could be another 40 students who went on to enroll in college courses. The FAFSA has become increasingly easier to complete with numerous resources for help. If your students are having difficulties completing the form, please encourage them to go online to fafsa.ed.gov, attend one of the College Goal Montana sites (see page 4 for more information), or they can contact the financial aid office of the college to which they are applying.

Additionally, please feel free to contact me with any FAFSA or financial aid resource questions at 406-444-0350 or cchenoweth@montana.edu.

MCAN Education Calls to Resume on January 24th

The Montana College Access Network (MCAN) will again be hosting Education Calls starting this month. All calls take place at 3:30 pm (MST). A list of dates and topics follows:

Tuesday, January 24, 2012 – College Goal Montana By Rhonda Safford

Tuesday, February 28, 2012 – Montana Career Resource Network (MCRN), What’s New? By Shaunda Hildebrand

Tuesday, March 27, 2012 – Career Development Facilitator (CDF) Training By Mary Ellen Earnhardt

For more information or to become member of MCAN visit knowhow2gomontana.ning.com.

Life After High School: Interviews With GEAR UP Graduates (continued)

- What best prepared you for college? The most influential preparation for college and adulthood was my upbringing. My mother always taught my sister and me to be very independent and hardworking. I have met a few people in college who did not know how to do laundry or who to contact to answer a question. I am very grateful my mother allowed me to learn these aspects of adulthood prior to being an adult! Also, being involved in school clubs and community events made conversing with people much easier.

- What advice would you give current high school students?
  1. Take the ACT your junior year: This way if you want to improve your score, you will have time during your senior year.
  2. Apply for colleges early: You don’t have to decide which college you want to attend until the spring time, but applying early will allow you to meet the scholarship deadlines at each college. Knowing how much financial aid you will receive can often be the deciding factor for choosing your college.

- Apply for scholarships: Yes, applying for scholarships is time consuming. But, working on an application for three hours that can provide you with a $1,000 scholarship is well worth it. What job can you do in three hours that will give you a $1,000 paycheck? Think about it.

- Talk, Network, and Communicate: Speak with your counselors, teachers, and other adult figures. Simply taking the time to talk to a resourceful person can take a great deal of stress off your plate. Adults want to help you succeed and will be willing to help you with anything you may need including: assistance with an application, scholarship project, and various letters of recommendation.

Upcoming Conference Calls to Cover Scholarships Questions

The Montana University System, Student Financial Services, Scholarship Coordinators have scheduled two upcoming conference calls for high school counselors and GEAR UP liaisons to answer questions about the scholarship application process for the Governor’s Best and Brightest Scholarship Program and the MUS Honor Scholarship. Calls are designed to cover changes in the application process, new deadlines, and to answer any questions that counselors and GEAR UP liaisons may have now that they have their application packets in hand. Application packets for the scholarships must be postmarked by March 15, 2012.

For further information regarding these scholarships visit: scholarship.mt.gov.

The upcoming calls are scheduled for:
- Wednesday, February 8th at 8:30 a.m
- Thursday, March 8th at 12:00 p.m.

To participate in the conference calls dial 1-866-200-5786 and enter the conference I.D. number 442778 when prompted.
GEAR UP Spotlight: Wolf Point Students Participate in Science Olympiad

BY VICKI BISBEE, WOLF POINT CAREER COUNSELOR/GEAR UP LIAISON

Ken Taylor, new science teacher at Wolf Point High School (WPHS), took nine students from his Physics and Chemistry classes to participate in the school’s first appearance at the Montana State Science Olympiad held on the MSU-Bozeman campus November 22nd. While most schools competing have a good month to prepare, by the time Mr. Taylor finalized arrangements to take this first-time group, the students only had 2 ½ weeks to prepare.

Students did not have the opportunity to submit competitive projects but did participate in the testing portion of the Science Olympiad. Although they did not expect to do well, they were pleased to place 24th overall among the 37 high schools competing! Two of the Wolf Point teams placed in the top 10 in two of the 15 events: Seniors Dakota Robinson (accepted to West Point) and Pryce Paulson (planning to attend MSU-Bozeman) competed in Fermi Questions, where they “guestimated” solutions to various problems and Juniors Carly Tattoo and Katelyn Smith competed in the Rocks and Minerals category. Other students participating included seniors Liara Grubbs (planning to attend Miles CC), Dustin Kinzie (planning to attend MSU) and juniors Kyle Goodman, Ashley Parsley, and Austin Wortman.

Students who attended the Science Olympiad had the opportunity to visit the MSU-Bozeman campus and meet college professors as well as graduate students. WPHS is excited to be a part of this annual event and look at it as a great opportunity for students to develop rigor and interest in the sciences and become college ready!

Five Recommendations for Increasing Access to Higher Education

To support the services provided by Montana GEAR UP in the 2011 grant that can help develop college- and career-ready students, Montana GEAR UP referenced the What Works Clearinghouse (WWC) 2009 research guide Helping Students Navigate the Path to College: What High Schools Can Do. The WWC was established in 2002 to provide educators, policymakers, researchers, and the public with a central and trusted source of scientific evidence of what works in education. These guides are evidence and research-based recommendations and strategies for secondary classrooms and schools. This particular publication offers five recommendations to develop practices that increase access to higher education and are summarized below:

Recommendation 1: Offer courses and curricula that prepare students for college-level work, and ensure that students understand what constitutes a college-ready curriculum by 9th grade

- Implement a curriculum that prepares all students for college and includes opportunities for college-level work for advanced students.
- Ensure that students understand what constitutes a college-ready curriculum.
- Develop a four-year course trajectory with each 9th grader that leads to fulfilling a college-ready curriculum.

Recommendation 2: Utilize assessment measures throughout high school so that students are aware of how prepared they are for college, and assist them in overcoming deficiencies as they are identified

- Identify existing assessments, standards, and data available to provide an estimate of college readiness.
- Utilize performance data to identify and inform students about their academic proficiency and college readiness.
- Create an individualized plan for students who are not on track.

Recommendation 3: Surround students with adults and peers who build and support their college-going aspirations

- Provide mentoring for students by recent high school graduates who enrolled in college or other college-educated adults.
- Facilitate student relationships with peers who plan to attend college through a structured program of extracurricular activities.
- Provide hands-on opportunities for students to explore different careers and assist them in aligning postsecondary plans with their career aspirations.

Recommendation 4: Engage and assist students in completing critical steps for college entry

- Ensure students prepare for, and take, the appropriate college entrance or admissions exam early.
- Assist students in their college search.
- Coordinate college visits.
- Assist students in completing college applications.

Recommendation 5: Increase families’ financial awareness, and help students apply for financial aid

- Organize workshops for parents and students to inform them prior to 12th grade about college affordability, scholarship and aid sources, and financial aid processes.
- Help students and parents complete financial aid forms prior to eligibility deadlines.

A panel which included authors of the guide, college readiness experts, and practitioners discussed current research regarding preparing students for college during a webinar which can be found here: ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/multimedia.aspx?sid=3. The full guide can be found at ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/pdf/practice_guides/higher_ed_pg_091509.pdf.
Montana GEAR UP Reminders & Upcoming Events

January 12 & 25: ACT Test Administration Training Webinar. For more information visit opi.mt.gov/curriculum/MontCAS/#gpm1_12.

January 17: EXPLORE and PLAN Data Interpretation Webinar, 9:00 am. Please see email regarding login information.

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 chenoweth@montana.edu or 406-444-0350.

February 7: Montana GEAR UP Liaison Meeting Webinar, 1:00 p.m. - 3:00 p.m. More information to follow.

February 8 & 12: College Goal Montana, various locations. Visit SmartAboutCollege.org for locations nearest you.


Website Offers Valuable Resources to Students, Teachers, and Parents

The numbers don’t lie. Nationally more than 30 percent of high school students are not making it to graduation. That is roughly 7,000 dropouts every single school day across the country. How can we keep students in school? Research suggests that keeping them engaged in a safe, supportive environment is critical.

www.boostup.org is a website that offers many resources, tips, and advice to students, parents, teachers, and community members who deal with students that are at-risk of dropping out of school. BoostUp is about giving potential graduates, at-risk of dropping out, the support they need to stay in school and on track for graduation. This site is full of great resources and ideas to help make a difference in the lives of students.

College Goal Montana: FAFSA Help Fast Approaching

Free help for students and parents tasked with completing the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) 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 February 12, 2012 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.

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.

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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.