

Montana Board of Regents Conference Call Meeting, April 16, 2020

Regent Tuss:

... Those instructions. Why don't we go ahead and call the meeting to order. According to my clock, it's 1:33, and I'd just like to thank everybody for taking time to attend this video meeting of the Montana Board of Regents in these unusual and unprecedented times. Hope you're doing well. Hope your family is healthy and that you're surviving this stay at home that we're all involved with.

Regent Tuss:

I would like to indicate that a Chair Lozar could not be with us today. That's why I'm sharing this particular meeting. He had another obligation he could not get out of, and so he does send his best and he wishes he could be with us today. And with that, Amy, if it's okay, I'm going to have you take roll for the minutes.

Amy Unsworth:

I'd be happy to. Regent Nystuen?

Regent Nystuen:

Here.

Amy Unsworth:

Thank you. Regent Sheehy?

Regent Sheehy:

Here.

Amy Unsworth:

I'll note her as here. Regent Miller?

Regent Miller:

Here.

Amy Unsworth:

Thank you. Regent Rogers?

Regent Rogers:

Here.

Amy Unsworth:

Regent Dombrowski?

Regent Dombrowski:

Here.

Amy Unsworth:

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Thank you, and Regent Tuss?

Regent Tuss:

I'm here.

Amy Unsworth:

Thank you. Commissioner Christian?

Commissioner Christian:

I'm here.

Amy Unsworth:

Thank you. And I know that we have Ms. McCall Flynn representing Governor Bullock on the line today, and that superintendent Elcy Arston is also listening in this afternoon.

Regent Tuss:

Outstanding. Well we do have, once again, I'd like to thank everybody for taking time from your afternoon schedule to be with us on this call. And before we get into the one and only action item that we do have on today's agenda, Commissioner, can I kick it over to you just very briefly for welcome from the Commissioner's office?

Commissioner Christian:

Yeah, absolutely. Thank you Mr. Chair. Welcome to everybody. Thanks for doing this call. Appreciate you taking time to join us. We have one item as our chair has said, that we felt like we were better to take action on sooner than later, so students understand what the criteria is as they look to make college application decisions coming forward. So I appreciate everybody's willingness to participate. With that, Mr Chair, if I can, I'll turn it over to Deputy Commissioner Testman and he'll describe the item.

Regent Tuss:

Yes, Deputy Commissioner?

Deputy Commissioner Tessman:

Thanks Mr. Chair and Commissioner Christian. First, can I verify, can you all hear me? I'm phoning this in so I want to make sure you can hear me clearly.

Regent Tuss:

Yes, I certainly can.

Commissioner Christian:

Yeah, we can hear you.

Deputy Commissioner Tessman:

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Okay, great. So as Commissioner Christian mentioned, the item before you today is about moving to a test optional admissions policy throughout the Montana University System, which would be effective upon a positive vote from the Board of Regents, all the way through September 1st of 2021. This would effectively take us through what is remaining in the current cycle and through the vast majority of the admission cycle that would lead to the entering class for fall of 2022. And all of this occurs within the system's commitment to resident student access, student access more generally, but resident student access within the state of Montana to all Montana University System campuses. Of course, this is also driven by what we see as the tremendous disruption caused by the COVID-19 outbreak and the stress that they put on students and their families. The changes in testing schedule that resulted from the outbreak and in general the uncertainty surrounding the current educational environment in Montana.

Deputy Commissioner Tessman:

I will tell you that I want to make this clear. Through our partnership with the office of public instruction, the Montana University System will continue to offer the ACT exam at no cost to all students who are currently Montana high school juniors. It is just that that exam will now be offered in October rather than its normal date, which would've been this spring. But we expect as we move forward, the majority of students if not a vast majority of students to continue to apply to our campuses, still using the same ACT and in some cases SAT scores that they more or less had been to date. And that's an important thing to note. Everything that I proposed to you today is not really about replacing test scores as a mode of applying campuses. It's about providing additional opportunities and removing them as an absolute requirement.

Deputy Commissioner Tessman:

The rest of my talks, and I'll be brief, I really want to talk about what we're proposing in the board policy item, and then I want to offer a couple of clarifications. One has to do with our continued attention to quality and preparation. We certainly want to make sure that students are arriving as well prepared. And the last form will have to do with the fact that we will still require standardized test scores for our merit scholarships. Most notably Montana University System Honors Scholarship, but certainly this would apply to merit scholarships that are more [inaudible 00:06:03] as well. So what are, what are we trying to do? This has to do with board policy 301 and 301-1. I think both of those are maybe either in front of you on your screen, I can't see right now, but they may be in front of you on your screen or they're certainly available as attachments to the board item that you've been looking at.

Deputy Commissioner Tessman:

Policy 301 actually has as Point B, a requirement that all students who apply to four year campuses in the Montana University System, by ACT or SAT test scores. Currently we do not require students to supply ACT or SAT test scores to our two year campuses. Though we do know that they can be helpful for placement purposes on those campuses. But one item in front of you today as we consider suspending certain parts of our board policy, is to waive that requirement. To waive the requirement that all students who apply to our four year campuses supply ACT and or SAT scores. And that requirement would be suspended from the date of the board vote through September 1st, 2021 which I mentioned before. The second component of what we have to do or what we have in front of you today relates to board policy 301-1. And this is really about demonstrating proficiency and preparation for college study.

Deputy Commissioner Tessman:

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If you have the opportunity to look at 301-1, you'll note that there are four ways in which students must demonstrate proficiency and preparation. The first way in which they must demonstrate preparation is through completion of the Regent's College Preparatory Program. Nothing about that will change. We're not suggesting that there's different curriculum now available to students in order to demonstrate their preparation for college study. That will stay the same, and I might circle back to that a little bit later as I highlight our continued attention to quality. Point B, that students must demonstrate its proficiency in mathematics. And currently that can be demonstrated largely through standardized test scores. For example, a 22 score on the ACT. Point C is a demonstration of writing proficiency and that is also determined with standardized test scores, most often through a score of 18 or higher on the combined writing portion of the ACT.

Deputy Commissioner Tessman:

So those two ways in which people demonstrate proficiency are heavily reliant on standardized tests. And I'll circle back to that in just a moment. The last point, students must demonstrate general preparation, and that can be through either an overall ACT or SAT score or a 2.5 GPA or placing in the upper half high school graduate. Just to be clear, it means that students can demonstrate general preparation in any one of those areas. If they check any of those boxes, a minimum ACT and SAT score, a minimum GPA of 2.5 or higher or a place in the top half of their high school class, then they're considered to be generally prepared. Points A and D will continue to be in place. We will continue to require completion of the Regent's college preparatory program and will continue to require either a minimum ACT or SAT score or a 2.5 GPA or higher or placement in the top half of your high school graduating class.

Deputy Commissioner Tessman:

Point B and C, math and writing proficiency, because they depend so heavily, right now on standardized test performance, we've added two additional ways in which students can general, generally demonstrate proficiency in math and writing. On one hand a students have a 3.0 GPA or higher overall, I consider them to be generally prepared in math and or writing. However they can also demonstrate preparation by having a 2.5 GPA or higher overall, and a C or better grade in Algebra 2 when it comes to demonstrating math proficiency, and in 11th Grade English when it comes to demonstrating writing proficiency. So to those two points, math and writing proficiency, again, we imagine we'll have many, many students who still submit ACT scores or other standardized test scores to generate, to demonstrate proficiency. However, we wanted to add a method of demonstrating proficiency in the event that students have had their preparation for those standardized tests disrupted or if there is a change in situation and they're unable to take those tests.

Deputy Commissioner Tessman:

Hence we've put in the course grades for Algebra 2 and 11th Grade English as a method, an additional opportunity for demonstrating proficiency. That is the "what" of our proposal in front of you today and what you're voting on. I just wanted to remind you as I wrap up, we are always interested in and promoting quality applications to the Montana University System. We pride ourselves on being in an open access state, is one of our key priorities as a system. However, we want to make sure students are prepared and I believe that this method of applying to our campuses still meets that commitment to college preparation. The third point, as I mentioned briefly earlier, we will continue to require ACT or SAT scores for our flagship merit scholarship at the system level, which is the MUS Honor Scholarship, and we will look, the campuses will continue to require standardized scores where they have in the past

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for their own merit based scholarships. With that I will wrap up and I'm happy to answer any questions that the Regents may have.

Regent Tuss:

Thank you Deputy Commissioner. I will open it up for questions or comments from members of the Regents. And I'll start out with a question that I had, which was the 30,000 foot view, and that has to do with the relevance of college entrance exams in general. And can you give this a little bit of the lay of the land, what's happening perhaps nationally with college entrance exams? And is this move, albeit temporary for very specific instances for in the Montana University System, something that we could potentially see down the road, as a permanent policy decision by this board to potentially remove college entrance exams as one of the things that's required for high school students to get into our system?

Deputy Commissioner Tessman:

Thank you Mr. Chair and members of the board. Yes, without a doubt. Nationally there is a move away from requiring standardized test scores for college entrance and there are multiple reasons for it. But I guess I'd boil it down this way. The study for study suggests that standardized tests tend to help a fairly narrow segment of the college application pool. And I guess to be candid, they tend to help a set of students who may not need a lot of extra support [inaudible 00:13:44]. However, standardized test scores tend to underestimate the academic potential and academic capabilities of students who we are trying to serve in the Montana University System.

Deputy Commissioner Tessman:

In other words, first generation students, students from a lower socioeconomic status, racial and ethnic minorities, tends to underperform on the standardized test scores. And thus nationally you see more and more campuses moving to different forms of evaluating students as they apply to other campus. I think in Montana of course it will be up to the board and the Commissioner and certainly in collaboration with our campuses. It may be something we would consider as a permanent change. I like our ability in this moment to enact this proposal as a way to address the immediate crisis from COVID-19, but also to gather some data, iron out wrinkles, talk to students, schools about how this is going, and then make a more informed choice should we choose to do so sometime in the future. Thank you.

Regent Tuss:

Thank you. Let me turn it over to other members of the board who may have questions or comments about this. Regent Nystuen?

Regent Nystuen:

Thank you Chair Tuss, thank you, Mr. Commissioner, and Deputy Commissioner Tessman. Question, what kind of conversations have you had with the campus CEOs about this particular change for us? Any feedback from emphasis? Thank you.

Deputy Commissioner Tessman:

Thank you Mr. Chair, Regent Nystuen. This, at this point in time I would consider this board item to be fairly thoroughly vetted at the CEO level. Personally, I've had a chance to walk through the proposal with our chief academic officers on each campus, and I would say there are two levels of support and both of

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them are very high levels of support. But one level of support is based on the immediate crisis, and recognizing that this is a time where we'll want to be as accommodating and flexible and as accessible as possible to students. The second level of support, which is exceptionally high, dovetails quite nicely with Chair Tuss's question, or I guess comment, which is that this is a national trend. There are good reasons to consider moving to optional, and I think our campuses very much are engaged with that national trend. Even our research doctoral campuses pride themselves on accessibility and services to underrepresented students and I think that this kind of change is a great fit with that mindset. Thank you.

Regent Tuss:

Are there additional comments or questions from members of the board?

Amy Unsworth:

Regent Tuss, this is Amy and I have a message on behalf of Regent Sheehy.

Regent Tuss:

Yes, please.

Amy Unsworth:

She asked me to please convey the following that she has reviewed this request for approval with Brock earlier, and that she is present for this discussion. She is having some outgoing audio issues. We're not able to speak with her directly unfortunately, but she is conveying that she is in support of this item and her vote is yes, and I'm happy to send that email to any board member if they wish.

Regent Tuss:

Thank you Amy. Thank you. Additional comments or questions from members of the board? Yes, Regent Rogers.

Regent Rogers:

Thank you Mr. chair. Deputy Commissioner Tessman, you know I'm always very concerned about our rural students and making sure that any decisions we're making aren't disadvantaging them in some regard. It seems like the way that this is written and the new exceptions that are allowed for specifically, should potentially help our rural students, but could you just speak to that a little bit?

Deputy Commissioner Tessman:

Sure. Well, certainly this change would apply to all students, whether they're in Bozeman or whether they're in Two Dot. I do think if you can imagine, for example, something I just learned about yesterday evening, which is that we may move to a kind of online at-home proctoring of certain standardized tests, including possibly the ACT exam. That may not be an issue. In fact, it could be for certain students around the country in urban areas with great internet access, and the ability to hop online and take that exam. In Montana, a lot of our students really have difficulty with that kind of scenario. Now clear we offer the ACT exam in schools, and we will continue to do that this fall. But you have to think should there be further changes with the coronavirus, in terms of how testing may be delivered, having the flexibility to demonstrate general preparation and proficiency based on your academic performance over the years, is something that would be appreciated in some of our smaller communities that don't

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have such ready access to broadband, high quality internet access, and what would be required to take some of those exams online.

Deputy Commissioner Tessman:

And I also think it puts a lot of faith in on our districts, our schools, our partnership with the Office of Public Instruction. We believe in the quality of preparation that students receive in our schools. And in some ways, this is a testament to that belief, because we are no longer saying that we rely solely or even largely on a national standardized exam. We find that it's helpful that we will not require it this year given all the variables in play.

Regent Rogers:

Thank you so much. And one more question, I know that it was so exciting for us to have this partnership with ACT data, to be able to utilize for OCHE purposes. Can you just give us a general understanding of if we still expect a good amount of students that take the ACT in the fall, and if this will impact our ability to gather that data. And if so, are there other ways to gather that data?

Deputy Commissioner Tessman:

Yeah, Mr. Chair, Regent Rogers, thank you. And the very, I think I got your question, but my apologies if I missed the first part of it. We still expect the vast majority of students, and I would say we would expect essentially the same number of students to take the ACT exam this coming fall as we've seen in previous springs. Again through a really solid collaboration and partnership with our K through 12 partners, the Office of Public Instruction, we'll continue to offer that exam the same way. In school, free of charge, and I think students, because of the convenience, because it is still a useful exam, will continue to take that exam. And we should continue to receive the data that we've agreed to take and receive from the Office of Public Instruction, and I think that's a positive thing. We view that as another way we can really improve our college access efforts. So we'll see, of course, we can't predict how things will be in the fall, but I would expect us to be close to or right at the same level of participation in terms of the state wide ACT exam.

Regent Rogers:

Thank you so much.

Regent Tuss:

Thank you. Would additional questions or comments from members of the board? Additional comments or answer questions from members of the board. I see none, that I can see. We will be, this is an action item, and so I would like to open it up to any additional comments from campuses or others at this point that happened to be on the call. Are there any comments from anyone else on the call about this particular item?

Commissioner Christian:

Amy, are you able to, are people able to unmute now if they want to comment before the vote?

Amy Unsworth:

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People do have the ability to unmute. I'm happy to run through and make sure folks are un-muted if you like, real quick, just to see if anyone wants to chime in and be real thorough about it? But they do have that ability. I'm not seeing any virtual hands raised. I'm checking the email here just to make sure.

Regent Tuss:

Right, there is the option to raise your hand virtually for this meeting to be un-muted. Is there any, I'll also call for any public comment, any members of the public that perhaps are tuning in, this particular item. I would remind everyone that should they want to comment on this, in a way, they can obviously send an email with their comments, questions or concerns to Amy at aunsworth, that's A-U-N-S-W-O-R-T-H @montana.edu. But prior to taking a vote on this, I will ask one more time if there is additional comments on this item. During the run in, and Amy, I'm assuming you see no virtual hands raised?

Amy Unsworth:

I'm seeing none, sir.

Regent Tuss:

I will, I would ask the Regents for what is, what is your preference on this particular item?

Regent Nystuen:

Mr. Chairman, I'd make the motion that we adopt the resolutions as presented to us today.

Regent Tuss:

You've heard the motion by Regent Nystuen. Once again, are there any additional comments on this item from members of the board, from the campuses or the public? Any additional comments? I'm hearing none. I would call for a vote on Regent Nystuen's motion. All in favor of the motion signify by saying aye.

Regent Nystuen:

Aye.

Regent Rogers:

Aye.

Regent Dombrowski:

Aye.

Regent Tuss:

Those opposed? No? And Regent Sheehy is recorded as voting yes, correct, Amy?

Amy Unsworth:

That is correct. She just confirmed once more, that she is an aye.

Regent Tuss:

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Outstanding. Well, thank you. The motion passes at this point. We're now at the [inaudible 00:25:14] meeting, as we are during all of our public meetings where it is time for public comment on those items that perhaps are not necessarily on our agenda. And I wanted to note that this meeting is open to the public electronically and anyone wishing to provide public comment is encouraged to do so, either in writing, via email, or by joining this meeting and submitting a chat, to the meeting host, noting the individual's name and desire to give public comment. The comments sent will be included as part of the public record for this particular meeting. Once again, comments, the email address to send comments to is aunsworth, that's A-U-N-S-W-O-R-T-H @montana.edu. So with that I would simply ask, is there any additional public comment on other items? Any additional public comments? Amy, are there any virtual hands raised?

Amy Unsworth:

I'm not seeing any, no.

Regent Tuss:

Okay. Well once again, I would like to thank everybody for joining us this afternoon. That really does conclude our very brief, a very brief meeting this afternoon. And I'd like to wish everyone well and thank you for being with us today. And with that, I will adjourn the meeting.

Commissioner Christian:

Thank you.

Regent Nystuen:

Chair, other members, thank you.

Regent Dombrowski:

Thank you.

Regent Nystuen:

Okay.

Amy Unsworth:

Thank you.