



Montana Year-to-Career Initiative

End of Year Report

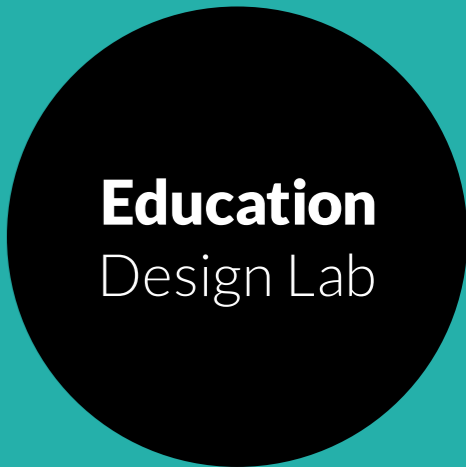
January 2025

About the Year-to-Career Initiative

As we close out the first year of Montana’s Year-to-Career (Y2C) Initiative, the Education Design Lab, the Office of the Commissioner of Higher Education (OCHE), and the Montana University System (MUS) are pleased to present this detailed end-of-year report. Through Y2C, we’ve developed design empowered partnerships that will continue to play a critical role in implementing skills aligned education and training opportunities for all Montanans.

Through a human-centered design process, college leaders, industry partners, and learners have collaboratively designed micro-pathway programs to meet Montana’s growing workforce needs in healthcare, trades, and education. These micro-pathways, stackable credentials that can be flexibly earned in less than a year, put learners on the path to an associate degree, to immediate employment in a high-demand field, and in some cases both.

This report highlights what we’ve learned about system-level design work, filtered through smaller workforce ecosystems across the State. Further, we provide a peak into how what we’ve learned informs our year-two strategy. The strong workforce partnerships and training oriented academic programs that existed across the System created an opportunity for our design team to validate the effectiveness of these programs, while enhancing them with employer-informed modifications to curriculum and modality. This work has not been about reinventing the wheel, but about capitalizing on the transformational work Montana’s college leaders do on their respective campuses every single day.



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Three Y2C Design Insights

	On a Cross-System Community of Practice	On Employer Collaboration & Industry Engagement	On Marketing & Student Recruitment
INSIGHT	<p>One of the most impactful experiences on the Community College Growth Engine is the organic community of practice that has formed across the nearly 100 colleges we support. The shared space emerged as a stimulant for the culture of collaboration required to effectively design across thirteen colleges. We needed to answer this question: How will the community of practice we created in the Montana design space continue to thrive after Y2C?</p> <p>The design team, across the colleges, was divided into three working groups, with pointed objectives that serve to address the most pressing areas of opportunity we identified in year-one: (1) Employer & Industry Engagement (2) Marketing & Communications and (3) Credit for Prior Learning. In the name of sustainability, these working groups will continue to share ideas and create synergy across these notable areas.</p>	<p>Many employers have been providing on the job training, across sectors, making it critical for college leaders and their industry partners to collaborate on program design in ways that build capacity and promote sustainability. Some job descriptions did not accurately reflect the evolving skills employers need, which created an opportunity for us to support the recredentialing of roles while establishing more formal talent pipelines.</p> <p>Employers have a “just ask us” approach to supporting the development and funding of micro-pathway programs, and as neutral conveners, we’ve been able to facilitate and strengthen the spirit of co-design.</p>	<p>Emerging classes of credentials, like micro-pathways and digital badges, were unfamiliar and confusing to most learners and not integrated into traditional student recruitment and marketing practices. This insight necessitated the development of a comprehensive taxonomy guide, as a first step in documenting this new(er) language and using it as a resource to rethink our marketing and recruitment strategies.</p> <p>The taxonomy guide will be owned by MUS and periodically updated in a joint effort with college leaders.</p>
IMPACT ON YEAR 2	<p>The working group objectives were added to the MUS flexible training action plan that includes key deliverables and deadlines for 2025. Additionally, the Community College Growth Engine has events and virtual workshops slated for 2025 that will be incorporated into opportunities for the Montana design team to engage with and inspire colleges across the country.</p>	<p>Employer collaboration and industry engagement are two points of focus that require intentionality. To kickstart the design of micro-pathways in education, we’re hosting a lunch and learn, with a panel of industry experts, to highlight the state of childcare and early childhood education in Montana. Subsequently, we’ll host skills mapping T-Profile sessions with employers to identify the optimal technical and durable skills needed in the workplace.</p>	<p>One of our objectives for year-two is to develop and implement a comprehensive marketing strategy to include digital and print media that creates visibility of the micro-pathway programs and the career opportunities connected to them.</p>



The Design of Micro-Pathways

Six colleges designed micro-pathways in medical assisting, dental assisting, welding, and HVAC. These programs were co-designed with local and regional employer partners and served as opportunities to iterate on the design of existing training and associate degree programs. With adaptations to existing curriculum and modality, we establish skills-focused and employer validated micro-pathways.



HVAC Technician

Career Advancement + Stackability: This program is intended to stack into the CTS HVAC apprentice program.

Length of Program: 4-10 months
[Offered in part-time]
Completion of this program satisfies the Montana Department of Labor and Industry requirement for the educational component of the HVAC apprenticeship program. In conjunction with the required work experience, this program provides students the training necessary to work in the field of heating, ventilation, air-conditioning, and refrigeration in residential and commercial applications.

Employer Partner(s): Thomas McDade
Salary: \$49,150



Welder

Career Advancement + Stackability: This program is intended to stack into the associates of welding technology program.

Length of Program: 10 Months
Students will learn to produce welds in all positions in accordance with national welding standards. They will demonstrate fabrication skills in diverse manufacturing environments in a conscientious, precise, and deliberate manner. Students will also utilize interpersonal communication techniques in individual group settings and demonstrate responsibility and accountability for decisions and actions taken in the work environment.

Employer Partner(s):
AFFCO, Montana Precision Products
Salary: \$47,830



Welder

Career Advancement + Stackability: This program is intended to stack into the associate degree program in welding.

Length of Program: 3-Week Bootcamp
This is a three-week bootcamp, in the form of a work-based learning program, that provides students with skills training specific to Allied Steel’s workforce needs. The program covers topics including cutting, brazing, and shielded metal arc welding. Students are able to focus entirely on their welding-related skills.

Employer Partner(s): Allied Steel
Salary: \$47,830



Certified Clinical Medical Assistant

Career Advancement + Stackability: This program is intended to stack into licensed practical nursing and associates of nursing programs.

Length of Program: 3 Months
This program trains students to assist physicians by performing functions related to the clinical responsibilities of a medical office. Instruction includes preparing patients for examination and treatment, routine laboratory procedures, diagnostic testing, technical aspects of phlebotomy, and the cardiac life cycle.

Employer Partner(s): Bitterroot Health, Barrett Hospital, Providence Medical Group
Salary: \$40,130



Dental Assistant

Career Advancement + Stackability: This program is intended to stack into a certified dental assistant and associate of applied science in dental hygiene programs.

Length of Program: 4 Months
This is a 16-week, non-accredited workforce training program. Students will complete dental assisting courses in infection control, chair-side assisting basics, and radiology basics, including lecture and hands-on skill practice. In addition, students will integrate concepts in the dental sciences, prevention, and oral health promotion to a variety of treatment situations in the dental setting.

Employer Partner(s): Riverstone Health
Salary: \$38,396

Did someone say durable skills?

During the skills-mapping T-Profile sessions, employers identified durable skills that are most critical, leading to eye-opening conversations about how workforce needs have evolved over time. The following highlights the top three durable skills identified across all sectors.



CRITICAL THINKING
Education Design Lab



RESILIENCE
Education Design Lab



ORAL COMMUNICATION
Education Design Lab



INITIATIVE
Education Design Lab

Salish Kootenai College

How might we co-design micro-pathways that support continued learning and employment opportunities for students, tracking towards a degree, while meeting the health care needs of the SKC community?

Salish Kootenai College is a private tribal land-grant community college in Pablo, Montana. The College's main campus sits on the Flathead Reservation. We visited Salish Kootenai College to learn more about the academic programs they offer and the ways in which they serve the tribal community. What was clear from our visit is that the programs we co-design must be tailored to address mental health challenges and substance abuse disorders, while also addressing the need for food sovereignty and cultural fluency. We identified occupations in the behavioral health sector as critical areas of opportunity and we've kicked off our design of micro-pathways in peer support specialist and community health worker.

LEARNER PROFILE

Atticus, 19

Pronouns:
He/Him/His

College:
Great Falls College

Program:
Dental Hygiene Assistant



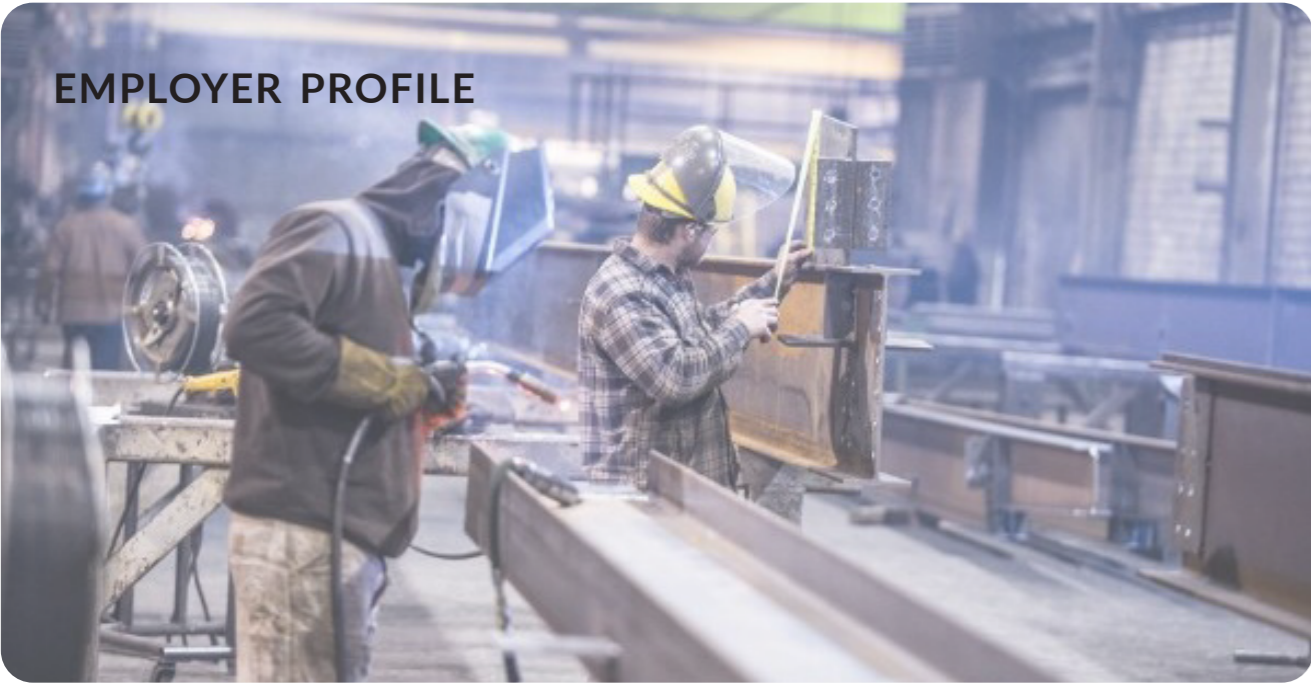
Atticus, a 19-year-old resident of Great Falls, Montana, shared his journey from high school to a role as a dental hygiene assistant. Initially interested in art, Atticus shifted his focus after his family experienced unexpected health challenges. Atticus started school in a dual enrollment program at Great Falls College, balancing high school classes, dental hygiene course work, and shifts at a local coffee shop. He appreciated the program's flexibility, hands-on experience, and supportive staff.

Post-graduation, Atticus actively sought employment, eventually landing a role assisting hygienists at a dental office in the community. Atticus values the supportive work environment, practical skills training, and the ability to maintain work-life balance. He plans to pursue additional certifications that will support career growth beyond his current role.

“It was super easy to do the program while I was in high school. **I could balance that.**

Most of our work was **online** [and that] was really helpful. You could **work at your own pace** and get assignments done when you had the time.

Having scheduled lab days **helped me work around school.** Getting **hands-on experience** and talking with classmates was really nice, especially getting to do X-rays and other practical skills.”



EMPLOYER PROFILE

Allied Steel

Location:
Lewistown, MT

Allied Steel specializes in structural steel fabrication for projects across the western United States, including Alaska and Hawaii.

On their experience with design:
“Allied Steel’s work with the Education Design Lab and Year-to-Career has **streamlined the development** of a three-week structural welding badge with MSU-Northern.

Working together, our company and MUS are able to **more quickly develop and deploy relevant education** that not only provides Allied Steel a **pipeline of skilled workers**, but puts students quickly on a **path to a high-quality career.**”
— Jeff Southworth, President & CEO



COLLEGE PROFILE

University of Montana Western

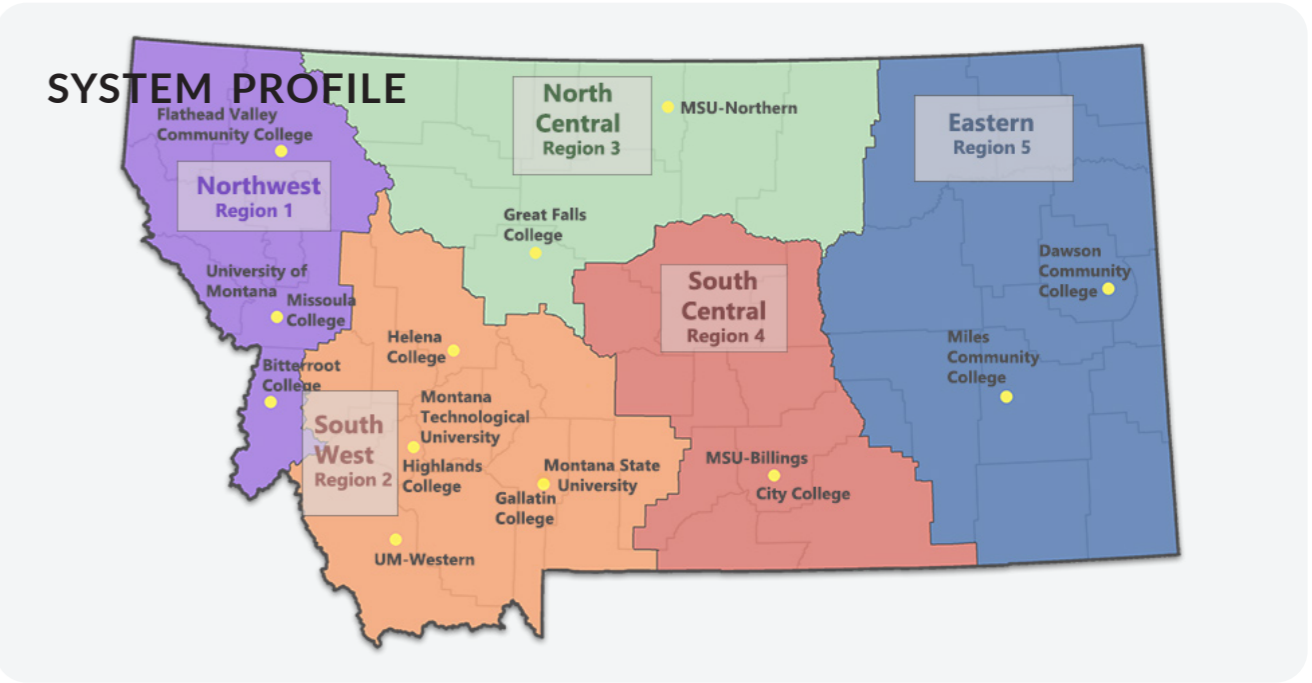
Location:
Dillon, MT

Student Body:
2,297 (2024)

College Tagline: Experience the difference.

On their experience with design:
“This past year was filled with excitement and energy, and I am completely **confident that the second year will start to showcase the outcomes** of our efforts from year one!”
— Bethanie Wharton, Program Coordinator, Workforce & Marketing, School of Outreach

“Year one was about connections. It continues to amaze me, for such a large state, that **the community is small but connected.** The connections are there and I look forward to **translating them into action in year two.**”
– Ryann Gibson, Program Manager, School of Outreach



SYSTEM PROFILE

Montana University System

Location:
Helena, MT

Under the direction of the Montana Board of Regents, the Montana Office of the Commissioner of Higher Education (“OCHE”) provides strategic direction and coordinates the overall structure, function, and budget of Montana’s dynamic collection of post-secondary institutions.

On their experience with design:
“The first year of the Education Design Labs work was transformational for the Montana University System. **Across the state, campuses partnered with employers** to design and deliver micro pathways to learners of all ages. It is exciting to see **Montana lead the nation in workforce training opportunities** that connect with our industry partners.”
— Joe Thiel, Interim Deputy Commissioner, Academic, Research & Student Affairs



NEXT STEPS



Year-Two: What's Next?

Our year-two micro-pathway design work will hone in on behavioral health, early childhood education, and additional programs in the trades. While we design, we are preparing a comprehensive marketing strategy to create visibility of the programs in ways that highlight in-demand skills and opportunities to stack credentials. Through the Lab's Data Collaborative, we are building a data infrastructure that tracks and collects enrollment and completion data, to better understand who our learners are and the impact these programs have on their careers. The Data Collab, with the support of our external partners and through the collection of multiple data sources, tracks the outcomes of learners with non-degree credentials, to include enrollment and completion trends, labor and wage information, and credential quality indicators. We are thrilled to continue supporting the Montana design team in connecting their learners to meaningful academic and career opportunities.

Acknowledgments

The college design leads, their students, their industry and community partners, and their colleagues across the state of Montana have championed the Year-to-Career Initiative. We are proud to work with kind, game-changing leaders who carry a passionate spirit of collaboration and who are dedicated to driving college transformation. We greatly appreciate the contributions of our funders. Thank you kindly to our Education Design Lab colleagues who continue to support and celebrate Y2C.

With gratitude to Dr. Angela McLean for her leadership and advocacy and to Terry Berkhouse for his support of Y2C.

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