

Memorandum

TO: Montana University System, Board of Regents
DATE: November 20, 2025
FROM: Montana Validated Skills (VST) Task Force
PREPARED BY: Dr. Tom Gallagher, Missoula College and Dr. Stephanie Erdmann, Great Falls College

Task Force Membership

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Overview

Montana's noncredit training ecosystem is full of promise, offering opportunities for rapid skill development, workforce advancement, and stronger connections between education and employment. Despite its potential, the system has lacked statewide coherence, leaving learners, institutions, and employers to navigate a fragmented landscape. Recognizing this challenge, state leaders convened the Validated Skills Training (VST) Task Force to bring alignment and focus to this vital area of workforce development. The Task Force was created to provide clarity, consistency, and coordination across institutions, agencies, and employers to ensure noncredit training in Montana is recognized, valued, and positioned to meet the evolving needs of the state's economy.

Vision

The vision for the VST Task Force was to establish a robust statewide infrastructure to deliver, track, and evaluate high-quality short-term training opportunities that equip learners with the skills demanded by today's workforce and advance them along clear college and career pathways.

Charge

To ensure economic mobility for all Montanans engaged in noncredit programs, the state of Montana, guided by recommendations from the collaborative Validated Skills Training (VST) Task Force, will pursue the design and implementation of a comprehensive framework to strengthen workforce training across the Montana University System. This framework will enhance connections between education and employment by introducing innovative digital credentialing methods, establishing rigorous quality assurance standards, and improving data collection and analysis. It will also prioritize communication and advocacy strategies that highlight the value of noncredit training while creating seamless, well-defined pathways for learners to transition from noncredit programs into academic credit, including promoting Credit for Prior Learning processes.

The Montana University System Validated Skills Task Force was charged with reviewing current practices and developing recommendations in the following areas:

- **Quality assurance and credentialing:** Establishing standards and credentialing approaches that promote transportability, transparency, and value of noncredit training across the state.
- **Measurement and evaluation:** Defining methods to assess the impact, effectiveness, and outcomes of noncredit offerings.
- **Pathway alignment:** Recommending processes, policies, and tools to better connect noncredit training with for-credit academic pathways.

- **Supporting infrastructure:** Addressing other critical needs—such as IT systems and related resources—that enable effective delivery and tracking of noncredit training.
- **Business models and funding:** Identifying sustainable funding sources and effective business models to expand noncredit training opportunities.

Over the past 18 months, the Task Force has strengthened Montana’s noncredit training ecosystem by:

- Developing shared definitions to create consistency in how noncredit training is understood and applied across the Montana University System.
- Starting the Montana Credential Registry and piloting data systems to more accurately track participation, outcomes, and alignment with workforce needs.
- Creating communication tools to increase transparency and clearly convey the value of noncredit training to learners, employers, and policymakers.

Building on this foundational work, the Task Force presents the following recommendations to advance Montana’s noncredit training system. These recommendations outline key next steps for the Montana University System and its Two-Year College to strengthen alignment, transparency, and workforce responsiveness, ensuring that noncredit programs meet the evolving needs of learners, employers, and the state’s economy:

1. Adopt the VST definition, taxonomy, and framework statewide.

Having a common terminology and framework is necessary to advance Montana’s noncredit training system.

- Formally adopt the Validated Skills Training (VST) definition, taxonomy, and framework to provide a standard which distinguishes high-quality, workforce-relevant noncredit education programs from the broader universe of noncredit offerings, providing institutions, employers, and policymakers with a common language for quality and value. (Appendix 1 & 2)

2. Build and sustain statewide data infrastructure.

IT infrastructure is essential for consistency in data collection and evaluation systems to track outcomes, measure impact, and guide continuous improvement, while supporting transparency, compliance with Federal Student Aid requirements, and demonstrating return on investment to learners, institutions, and the state. (Appendix 2).

- Develop a shared noncredit Student Information System (SIS) that integrates with credit-bearing systems.
- Expand the Montana Credential Registry pilot to all MUS institutions and coordinate with the Department of Labor and Industry on their credential registry build out in support of HB252 STARS Act.
- Investigate the use of Learning and Education Records (LERs) as a 21st century method to record and transcript VST training.

3. Advance credit for prior learning (CPL) policy and practice to accelerate pathways to degree completion.

Strengthen CPL to ensure learners receive recognition for VST learning and provide pathways to degree completion.

- Crosswalk VST across the MUS using the Course Numbering (CCN)
- Revise our CPL policies and processes to encompass VST.
- Possibly leverage AI-driven tools to align degree pathways with VST, CPL, and the CCN system.

4. Strengthen strategic communications and public awareness.

Strategic communication is essential to ensure that learners, families, policymakers, and employers clearly understand the value and impact of short-term credentials.

- Use brief (one-page), audience-specific communications that highlight VST impact.
- Coordinate communication strategies across OCHE, OPI, DLI, and employer partners to create a VST communications hub. (Appendix 3 & 4)

5. Establish a statewide VST position at OCHE.

A centralized, coordinated structure is needed to support VST to ensure consistency, accessibility, and alignment across the state.

- Add an OCHE leadership position to coordinate VST efforts including data system management, enrollment census reporting (biannual), strategic communications, policy development and funding alignment. The position will serve two-year colleges, employers, legislators, and state partners.

6. Establish predictable funding model(s) for VST.

Funding is available for VST, but it can be considerably more complex for learners to understand than traditional higher education.

- Ensure access to VST for adult learners, career changers, and underserved populations, and prepare for new forms of funding, including short-term Pell grants, by coordinating with state and federal agencies and industry employers to establish predictable models for VST learner financial aid.

7. Establish policies and standards of practice to ensure quality.

It is important that the employer-driven training programs are nimble and responsive to regional economic needs, yet consistent.

- Develop VST criteria to provide consistency, transportability, and value of noncredit training programs.