



The University of Montana Western Campus Report

DATE: March 2026

TO: Board of Regents

FROM: Michael Reid, Chancellor

RE: Campus Report for the March Board of Regents' Meeting

- **TEDx University of Montana Western Scheduled for March 21**

TEDx University of Montana Western will take place on Saturday, March 21, 2026, offering a full day of ideas, conversation, and connection focused on building resilience in rural communities.

Open to the public, the event features eight filmed TEDx talks, interactive workshops, live performances, speaker engagement opportunities, and a provided lunch, with attendees participating as a live studio audience.

Hosted by Montana Western's Theatre and Environmental Sciences departments and sponsored by the Fund for Experience One, the conference aims to strengthen academic culture, encourage critical thinking, and foster interdisciplinary collaboration. Speakers include local and regional leaders whose work highlights adaptability, innovation, and collaboration aligned with the university's mission and values.

- **UMW Announces Heather Hoyer as 2026 Commencement Speaker**

The University of Montana Western has announced Heather Hoyer, Montana University System Board of Regents member and Superintendent of Great Falls Public Schools, as the Commencement speaker for its 129th Annual Commencement on May 9, 2026.

A Montana native and alumna of Western Montana College, Hoyer brings 31 years of experience as an educator, spanning adult education, secondary teaching, administration, and executive leadership. Widely recognized for her advocacy of hands-on learning and Career and Technical Education, she was named the 2024 Montana ACTE Administrator of the Year.

Hoyer holds advanced degrees from the University of Montana and serves on numerous statewide and local boards, contributing a K–12 perspective to higher education policy. Deeply connected to UMW, she and her family exemplify a lasting commitment to public education in Montana.

- **2026 Night of Stars Education Hall of Fame Induction Ceremony**

The University of Montana Western Education Department and Alumni Office, in partnership with Stockman Bank, will host the 13th Annual Night of Stars Education Hall of Fame Induction Ceremony on Saturday, April 25, 2026.

The event will take place in the Lewis & Clark Room of Mathews Hall on the UMW campus, beginning with no-host cocktails at 5:30 p.m., an Italian buffet dinner at 6:00 p.m., and the induction ceremony at 7:00 p.m.

Night of Stars celebrates Montana Western alumni who have made significant contributions to the field of education, while also recognizing current students preparing to enter the profession. Five alumni—Tim Love, Katherine Sunwall, Jamie Courville, Quinn Kelly, and Tricia Schumann—will be inducted into the Education Hall of Fame. Additionally, ten students will be honored as Outstanding Teacher Candidates, highlighting the next generation of educators.

- **UMW and MCH Host 2026 Colt Challenge & Sale**

The annual Colt Challenge and Sale, hosted by UMW and the Montana Center for Horsemanship, will take place March 27–28, 2026, at the Montana Center for Horsemanship in Dillon.

Students and colts compete in a series of events demonstrating training and skills, followed by a public auction. All proceeds support scholarships for Natural Horsemanship majors.

Head Instructor Eric Hoffmann said, "This event allows students to develop an in-depth understanding of each horse, while giving prospective buyers the chance to see and invest in quality young horses with real-world experience."

- **56th Annual UMW Rodeo Banquet**

The University of Montana Western will host the 56th Annual Montana Western Rodeo Banquet on Friday, March 27, 2026, in the Keltz Arena. This longtime fundraising event supports the Montana Western Rodeo Team and brings together alumni, supporters, and community members for an evening of celebration.

Doors open at 5:00 p.m. with no-host cocktails, followed by a prime rib dinner, silent and live auctions, and time to meet the rodeo team. The evening's guest speaker is J.R. Vezain, a six-time NFR bareback rider turned motivational speaker, rancher, and advocate for perseverance. Proceeds benefit rodeo scholarships, travel, and program needs, helping student-athletes continue a tradition of collegiate rodeo excellence.

- **Montana Western Appoints Dr. Estee Aiken as Interim Provost**

The University of Montana Western has appointed Dr. Estee Aiken as Interim Provost and Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs. Dr. Aiken currently serves as Dean of Strategic Initiatives, where she oversees the School of Outreach, the Office of Sponsored Programs, and university accreditation efforts. She previously served as Division Chair of Education and is a tenured professor at Montana Western.

Dr. Aiken brings extensive experience in academic leadership, statewide education initiatives, grants authorship, and policy development, with active involvement in dual enrollment, workforce preparation, undergraduate research, and artificial intelligence initiatives. She will serve in the interim role while the university prepares to launch a national search for a permanent Provost once its next Chancellor is in place.

- **Iola “Olie” Else Chosen as MCHF 2026 Saddle of Honor Recipient**

The University of Montana Western announced that Iola “Olie” Else was selected as the 2026 Saddle of Honor Recipient by the Montana Cowboy Hall of Fame and was honored on February 14, 2026, during the MCHF Induction Ceremony in Great Falls.

The award recognized Else’s lifetime contributions to Montana’s western heritage, education, agriculture, and cowboy culture. A defining figure at Montana Western for more than three decades, Else led the university’s rodeo program to six national championships and was twice named NIRA Coach of the Year. Beyond rodeo, she expanded equine education programs, mentored generations of students, and served her community through leadership in agriculture, education, and youth development.

- **UMW Alumna Accepted to Medical School**

Madeline Bradbury, Class of 2025, has been accepted to both the Washington State University Elson S. Floyd College of Medicine and the University of Washington School of Medicine, and will begin her medical training at UW in July 2026.

A Biology major in the Pre-Professional Medical and Veterinary Sciences option, Madeline completed all required medical school coursework at Montana Western through the Experience One model while also earning a minor in Glass.

She credits courses such as Human Anatomy with shaping her confidence and academic growth. Madeline conducted undergraduate research in microbiology and anatomy, presenting her work at national conferences, and participated in competitive summer programs at UW. A licensed EMT, she was recognized with the 2025 Zella K. Flores Top Female Student Award. Madeline plans to pursue a career in medicine and encourages students to follow their own unique path.

- **Montana Western Appoints Michael Piazzola as Dean of Students**

The University of Montana Western announced the appointment of Michael Piazzola as Dean of Students. A UMW alumnus, Piazzola brings more than 20 years of experience in student affairs and has played a key role in campus life for decades. Chancellor Michael Reid cited Piazzola's long-standing commitment to students and the university as central to his selection.

Piazzola earned a B.A. in Secondary Education from UMW in 2004 and a Master of Education in Educational Leadership from the University of Montana in 2016. Most recently, he served as Senior Director of Student Life, overseeing Residence Life & Housing, Orientation, the Bulldog Card Center, the Bookstore, the Student Wellness Center, and other programs. Piazzola emphasized his commitment to fostering an inclusive, supportive campus community.

- **Fourth Annual BrainFest Mathematical Modeling Competition**

The University of Montana Western Department of Mathematics hosted BrainFest on Friday, February 6, 2026, welcoming high school students to campus for a hands-on mathematical modeling competition.

The free event offered participants the opportunity to earn \$500 or \$250 scholarships while exploring real-world problem solving through computer-based modeling. This year's competition, Trilobite Invasion!, challenged students to design and simulate deep-water trilobite species competing to recolonize shallow seas after extinction events.

Supported by Montana Western mathematics majors and faculty, students collaborated, refined their models, and tested them in a simulator to determine the most successful design.

- **Montana Western Names Students to 2025 Fall Semester Dean's List**

The University of Montana Western is proud to announce that 524 students have been named to the Dean's List for the 2025 fall semester. To earn this distinction, students must be enrolled full-time (a minimum of 12 semester credits) and achieve a grade point average of 3.33 or higher.

- **English Honor Society Inducts Four Montana Western Students**

The UMW English Department inducted four students into the Alpha Epsilon Iota chapter of Sigma Tau Delta, an international English honor society recognizing academic excellence in English language, literature, and writing.

This year's inductees are Ian Ferguson, Adeline Michels, Cordelia Sinz, and Ella Wanamaker.

Founded in 1924, Sigma Tau Delta now includes more than 800 chapters worldwide. The society provides opportunities for scholarships, internships, conferences, publications, and service projects that promote literacy and engagement with the humanities.