



# Montana University System

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**TO:** Board of Regents of Higher Education

**FROM:** John Mercer

**RE:** AN AGENDA FOR PROGRESS

**DATE:** May 2003

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As you know, it is my belief the Montana University System is in the best position to bring Montana leaders together to determine the steps necessary to improve our economy and preserve our way of life. No doubt such efforts are presently underway throughout the state. It is not my intent to discourage those efforts or claim that such efforts are ineffective. Instead, my objective is to challenge the Board of Regents to focus on a dialog among our members, the University System campuses, and throughout the citizenry and leaders of this state on some very specific long-term objectives. The Board of Regents needs to take a greater responsibility for Montana. So goes Montana, so goes the Montana University System.

For this reason and others, the following proposals are set forth. These proposals comprise a tentative first attempt to begin to frame: **THE MONTANA UNIVERSITY SYSTEM: AN AGENDA FOR PROGRESS**. The system and the state need greater coordination among leaders, common goals and the courage to abandon expending excessive amounts of time on short-term crisis management. This is an attempt to focus on the long term and seek solutions for Montana's economic problems and for long-term planning within the University System itself. These topics could not be discussed or resolved at a single meeting of the Board or a single forum. Over the next several months, however, it is hoped that this Board will be able to work its way through this **AGENDA FOR PROGRESS**. With the help of other interested persons the **AGENDA** will no doubt change and evolve. But the process has to begin somewhere and, as the body charged with the duty and responsibility to govern and guide the Montana University System, the meetings of the Board of Regents are the proper place to commence. This constitutes a request that the Board consider a schedule to discuss the following items in a complete and systematic manner over the next several months. The topics are not listed in any special order of priority.

### **Topic One: Identify Core Functions of Each Campus**

For years each campus had a role and scope statement. Several years ago these were dropped and

MONTANA STATE UNIVERSITY — Campuses at Billings, Bozeman, Great Falls, and Havre  
THE UNIVERSITY OF MONTANA — Campuses at Butte, Dillon, Helena, and Missoula  
Dawson Community College (Glendive) — Flathead Valley Community College (Kalispell) — Miles Community College (Miles City)



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each campus developed mission statements (available at <http://www.montana.edu/wwwbor/AllMissionStatements.html>). These mission statements are so very general that they are of little use identifying the real core of the campus that must be protected, preserved and nurtured above all other components. The proposal would have the Regents direct each campus to begin a process involving faculty, staff, students and local residents to identify in concrete terms the core programs and functions of each campus. The point of this exercise is to identify priorities that are essential to each institution and deserve nurturing, support and protection. Because all of our campuses operate within a resource constrained environment, directing resources to core programs will require hard choices about where the resources for the core functions will emanate and will also provide the justification to those who make the decisions to commit additional resources. Consequently, the first step to making good management decisions is defining what is valuable, precious and unique about each campus.

### **Topic Two: Renewed Request to Congressional Delegation**

Several months ago the Board requested that Commissioner Crofts arrange a meeting with the Montana Congressional delegation. The purpose of the meeting was to explore ways that the Congressional delegation could assist the University System (and vice versa). Unfortunately the Board and the Congressional delegation have yet to begin this dialogue. I suggest that a renewed meeting request be transmitted to the members of the delegation. Areas that may be useful to the state and system are the delegation's insight or suggestions on whether Montana could increase its share of federal grants, contracts and defense spending, and how Montana could be a national leader in the hydrogen-based economy.

### **Topic Three: Environmental Studies/Resource Industries Détente**

A long running problem between the University System and many of the state's elected leaders and citizens is the perception that some programs within the University System foster and teach views that discourage even the wise and prudent use of the state's natural resources. This divisive issue surfaced again during the recently completed legislative session. The Regents should take the lead to open a dialogue between those persons within the System involved in research and teaching related to environment and natural resource issues with representatives of the related resource industries and environmental organizations. The goal is to consider encouraging our intellectual horsepower to create and refine existing methods that will permit the use of our natural resources while protecting Montana's natural environment.

### **Topic Four: Development of a Montana Economic Model**

Over the last year the Regents have listened to enlightening discussions on the Montana economy from faculty members from both the Missoula and Bozeman campuses. Implicit in these presentations was a model of the Montana economy that relates economic activity and public policy. Further study and development of an economic model with the participation of

government, business, labor and education leaders would be important to Montana. The model would give Montana an agreed upon tool needed to project where we are going and more importantly to know what changes we can make to better achieve our objectives. The model could generate a calculation of the Montana Gross State Product. By agreeing on the model, we could eliminate the endless debates over what makes Montana tick, and the endless arguments over the expected results of proposed public policy changes. Furthermore, in tracking the growth of Gross State Product, agreement could be sought on where the growth would be shared among education, government services and taxpayers.

#### **Topic Five: Definition of Minimum Acceptable Level of Quality**

For several years the shorthand description of the Regents' policy goal for the University System has been to balance quality, access and cost. Quality is not something that should be balanced. There is a level of quality that everyone must know they can expect to receive from the system. The Regents should foster discussions that permit us to define, set and guarantee that level of quality. Although the task is difficult, without such a definition, present attempts to attain quality amount to no more than vague and general aspirations, always subject to interpretation. Quality should not be compromised.

#### **Topic Six: The Agricultural Challenge to MSU-Bozeman**

For over 100 years the campus at Bozeman has pursued excellence in agricultural scholarship, often with significant benefit to agricultural producers within and outside the state. The Regents should request the administration of MSU-Bozeman, working with the leaders of the agricultural community, to submit an evaluation of how the College of Agriculture and related programs are faring compared to colleges of agriculture around the United States. In addition, the report should contain recommendations or options that would move MSU-Bozeman toward the top agricultural school in the country.

#### **Topic Seven: Match Educational Attainment and Career Objectives**

A topic that increasingly arises from parents and students relates to the cost of education versus the amount of coursework needed for students to reach their specific educational or career goal. The Regents should seek a method of measuring these items to determine if adjustments can be made and whether the students are receiving the educational products they need to succeed. It is possible some are receiving too much and some receiving too little, especially in light of on-line education.

#### **Topic Eight: Destination Education**

The types of academic programs and the physical attraction of Montana and its people lead many students to the Montana University System. The reasons for student choices include scenery, fishing, skiing, open land, lack of crowding, freedom from high visibility crime and other so-called urban problems, etc. The Regents should explore teaming up with the state Department of Commerce and the Office of Economic Opportunity to sell Montana as "destination education." Not just an education, but a way of life; Montana values, safety and scenery.

### **Topic Nine: Community Round Tables**

At most meetings the Regents schedule a breakfast meeting with local leaders. I think that this attempt to hear from the communities needs revision and additional structure that invites community leaders and officials to set some agenda items in advance. Shifting the focus from questions about the system, to one of brainstorming for Montana's long-term future could generate useful ideas and enhance the feeling of ownership of the University System for the round table participants. A method of processing and reporting back on ideas and discussions should be developed.

### **Topic Ten: Organization of the Montana University System**

A decade ago the University System organized itself into two universities, each with four campuses. The Regents have allowed the two universities to take very different approaches to the management and structure of the multi campus units. To this point, the Regents have never undertaken an examination of the current system and whether it operates in the best manner possible for each of the campuses. Because two different management options are presently in place, perhaps it is time to take a closer look at the strengths of such a system.