Spring 2015

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Montana GEAR UP Spring Planning Meeting
May 5-6, 2015
Helena, MT

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Director’s Note

Colleagues,

As spring approaches and the days get longer, we find ourselves approaching the assessment season. The Smarter Balanced Assessment is coming up, many GEAR UP schools are doing spring MAP assessments, students and teachers are preparing for AP exams, and 11th graders across the state will take the ACT test on April 28th.

All of these assessments present logistical and emotional challenges for both educators and students. Scheduling testing sessions and following protocols requires extra staff coordination and communication. Often this is viewed as one more thing in a seemingly endless list of tasks. We often wonder if the tests are really an accurate indicator of our teaching and our students' learning, and we question the overall validity of the results. We are aware of the inherent biases of standardized tests and any teacher knows there are multitudes of ways for a student to express their proficiencies outside of a test booklet and a bubble sheet. For students these tests mean lots of restrictions and time spent answering questions—many of which they may feel they're getting wrong—and wondering why they have to complete such an arduous task.

Despite these dilemmas, these assessments provide us useful information that allows us to demonstrate through data that the work we’re doing is serving the needs of our students. They are also an opportunity for students and their families to consider where they are on the educational continuum and to reflect on what they need to do to get where they want to go. When utilized appropriately, test data can be a useful tool for meaningful change in school curriculum and pedagogy. While standardized tests shouldn't be the only indicator of the effectiveness of our work and impact on students, it is an important piece of the puzzle.

I want to wish you all the best of luck as you administer your assessments in the coming months. While I understand and acknowledge the challenges,
I hope that each of you views this as an opportunity to both validate the important work you are doing and reflect on how you and your school can become better practitioners for your students.

Montana GEAR UP sincerely appreciates your efforts and your passion for helping your students reach their educational and career goals. We are proud partners in your efforts!

Sincerely,

Zach Hawkins
Director, Montana GEAR UP

FAFSA Completion Data at the Student Level
Counselor Resource Helps to Increase FAFSA Completion
The Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) is an essential tool for students to find Federal, State, and Institutional financial aid. As the cost of college continues to increase, financial aid becomes ever more important. While many factors are involved in the decision to attend college, a strong correlation exists between FAFSA completion and college enrollment.

High school staff previously relied on self-reported surveys to estimate their FAFSA completion rate which can be inaccurate, or they obtained overall completion rates through Federal Student Aid (FSA), which only showed the number of students who had completed the FAFSA. For this reason, the Office of the Commissioner of Higher Education (OCHE) and the Office of Public Instruction (OPI) are working together to provide high schools with important information on their students' progress in completing the FAFSA.

FAFSA filing information will be provided to schools through OPI's data system, Growth and Enhancement of Montana Students (GEMS). School counselors who sign up for access to the FAFSA completion data will be able view filing information for their school's seniors beginning February 16, 2015, through the end of the school year. In order to view the FAFSA data, counselors must complete the GEMS access form found here.

The Student Assistance Foundation (SAF) will also provide assistance to staff and students with questions on FAFSA filing.

Increasing college graduation rates is a priority in Montana and across the nation. Through this initiative students who have not completed the FAFSA can be given targeted counseling and filing guidance.

2014 Statewide ACT Plus Writing Results
Montana GEAR UP is entering into the fourth year of funding statewide the ACT Plus Writing test for all public high school juniors and the second school year of providing ACT Online Prep licenses at no cost to the school or student. Additionally, Montana GEAR UP funded licenses for the My Access! writing assessment tool to help students prepare for the test.
Administered through OPI, statewide testing continues to yield positive results such as more students qualifying for scholarships and meeting eligibility requirements for full admission into one of Montana's four-year colleges. In the spring of 2014, 8825 high school juniors took the ACT Plus Writing test during the school day at their school, with 36 percent of students meeting MUS admissions requirements and 50 percent eligible for the Governor's Best and Brightest Scholarship. According to ACT's The Condition of College & Career Readiness 2014 Montana report, 9,611 of Montana 2014 graduates, which is an estimated 100 percent of the graduating class, took the ACT. Montana's ACT-tested graduating class had 18 percent potential first-generation students and 87 percent aspired to enroll in postsecondary education. From 2010-2014, the number of ACT test-taking graduates has increased by 54.5%.

- The Readiness Report provides a snapshot of the ACT-tested graduates in Montana, focusing on their readiness for college and career success.
- The ACT Profile Report presents data about the performance of Montana's 2014 graduating seniors who took the ACT as sophomores, juniors, or seniors.
- ACT test data can also be found at gems opi mt.gov.

Statewide ACT Testing for H.S. Juniors
Tuesday, April 28, 2015
For the fourth year in a row, public high school juniors will be able to take the ACT Plus Writing at their school, during the school day, at no cost to them or their school thanks to a grant from Montana GEAR UP in partnership with the Office of Public Instruction. For questions regarding test day administration contact Ashley Makowski at 444-3511 or amakowski@mt.gov.

Free ACT Online Prep
Students can prepare for the ACT Plus Writing with ACT Online Prep free of charge. These licenses are available to Montana public high schools for students grades 9-12, and will continue through August 2015.

Students get timed or untimed practice tests with real ACT test questions and practice essays, and scores are available instantly. The practice tests can be accessed anywhere, anytime via the Internet, at home or at school with support. ACT will also send out a Question of the Day, a new ACT Test practice question to help students get comfortable with the type of questions asked on the ACT, and provide more experience with the test, hopefully reducing test anxiety.
The practice tests give administrators and counselors the total time each student spent on each section of the site; scores and usage details for each student; reports organized by test and subject area; and analysis of responses to each question to assist teachers in curriculum review.

ACT test coordinators received administrator and login information in November from OPI. High school counselors or GEAR UP liaisons who have questions regarding ACT Online Prep and would like access can contact Ashley Makowski at 444-3511 or amakowski@mt.gov.

**GEAR UP Achievers Chosen**

Montana GEAR UP has recently selected two GEAR UP Achievers to be honored at the Montana College Access Network (MCAN) Conference on April 10th. This is the second year that GEAR UP has participated in this event and we are once again excited to highlight the accomplishments of two of our students. Thanks to all who nominated their amazing students and alumni for this award.

Sanner Sattler is a freshman at MSU Bozeman majoring in Civil Engineering. Sanner credits his attendance at numerous GEAR UP summer camps with his interest in the field of engineering. Sanner graduated as valedictorian from Lame Deer High School and was a recipient of the GEAR UP Pathways scholarship. In addition to pursuing his degree, Sanner is working hard to make the MSU Bobcats football team.

Kaitlyn Downey is a 9th grader at Troy High School and is already enrolled in two dual credit courses through Flathead Valley Community College. She scored in the 99th percentile on her 8th grade ACT Explore test, prompting her GEAR UP liaison to recommend her for dual enrollment as a 9th grader. Kaitlyn is currently taking two college courses and is outperforming her classmates who are juniors and seniors. Her academic excellence has generated a lot of pride and interest in her school and community. Kaitlyn is interested in pursuing a degree in medicine when she finished high school.

Congratulations Sanner and Kaitlyn! Montana GEAR UP looks forward to honoring you and your accomplishments on April 10th.

**Student Financial Services**

**Financial Education Video Resources**

One of the goals of the MUS Student Financial Services (SFS) is to minimize student loan debt and improve college access and completion through enhanced outreach and communication to students and families regarding financing post-secondary education. A recent example of how SFS continues to enhance a coordinated and collaborative financial literacy education program throughout the State of Montana is by partnering with KPCN. KPCN is an award winning, nationally recognized, student-based production group housed in the Office for Student Success at The University of Montana. This collaboration created...
visually engaging, informational videos to help students and their families prepare and pay for college; understand financial aid; create a college spending plan; and understand student loan repayment options. The goal is to help students have access to and complete their education while making responsible and informed financial decisions.

Campuses are embedding these videos on their own websites, as well as sharing with students during workshops, orientations and entrance and exit counseling sessions.

The latest video is Filling Out the FAFSA. The release of this video is extremely timely as school financial aid deadlines are approaching. Please see the video here. The entire series of Financial Education videos can be found at www.mus.edu/Prepare or www.youtube.com/user/MUSFinLit.

School & Community Spotlight
Harlem High School
On February 18, Harlem High School held their monthly GEAR UP sponsored family night. However, this one was more special than most as it was a culmination of months of work by students on their traditional Native American pipes. Working with a Tribal elder, students spent a quarter making a traditional pipe and learning about the historical and cultural significance of pipes. Once the pipes are complete, students showcase their pipes at the family night and, in some cases, have even sold them for hundreds of dollars. Harlem has been doing this event for several years now and their staff has expressed that this activity is always a big event that draws students, family and community members as well as members of the Tribal Council.

Kudos to the students, staff, and community members in Harlem who make this event happen every year and celebrate the success of their students in a meaningful and culturally relevant way.
Upcoming Events & Deadlines

Statewide

- **March 15th**: Montana University System Honor Scholarship Application Deadline
  - [Click Here for Information and Application](#)
- **March 15th**: Governor’s "Best and Brightest" Scholarship Program Application Deadline
  - [Click Here for Information and Application](#)
- **April 8th-10th**: Montana College Access Network (MCAN) Conference - Helena
  - [Click Here for Information and to Register](#)
- **April 8th-12th**: MIEA Conference - Billings
  - [Click Here for Information and to Register](#)
- **April 15th**: Youth Serve Montana 2015 Scholarship Deadline
  - [Click Here for Information and Application](#)
- **April 16th-17th**: Montana School Counselor Association (MSCA) Conference - Bozeman
  - [Click Here for Information and to Register](#)
- **April 17th**: Global Youth Service Day
- **April 29th**: Montana Advanced Placement® Professional Development Workshop Registration Deadline
  - [Click Here for Information and to Register](#)

For GEAR UP Schools

- **March 6th**: Local Summer Program Proposals Due
- **March 6th**: Montana GEAR UP Pathways Scholarship Application Deadline
  - [Click Here for Information and Application](#)
- **March 6th**: 2015 NCCEP/GEAR UP Annual Conference Presentation Proposals Due
  - [Click Here for Information and Application](#)
- **March 9th**: GEAR UP Alumni Leadership Academy (GUALA) Nomination Deadline
  - [Click Here for Information and online Nomination Form](#)
- **March 31st**: 2015 NCCEP/GEAR UP Applications Due to State Office
  - [Click Here for Application](#)
- **March 31st**: 2015 NCCEP/GEAR UP Youth Congress Nomination Due to State Office
  - [Click Here for More Information](#)
- **March 31st**: March Services Due in GEARS
- **March 31st**: State Summer Camp Registration Begins
- **March 31st**: NCCEP/GEAR UP Annual Conference Application Deadline
- **April 3rd**: State Notification of Local Summer Program Approval
- **April 15th**: APR Due to the U.S. Department of Education
- **April 28th**: ACT Plus Writing Statewide Testing
- **April 30th**: April Services Due in GEARS
- **May 5th-6th**: Montana GEAR UP Spring Planning Meeting - Helena
  - [Click here to RSVP for your hotel room](#)
- **May 29th**: May Services Due in GEARS
all Montana students, regardless of economic background. Montana GEAR UP supports schools, students, and their families to increase students' college and career readiness through academic preparedness, postsecondary planning, and financial aid knowledge so that they may succeed in their education beyond high school.

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