Senior Year

Twenty five years ago, I was in my senior year of high school. *Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventure* was the movie everyone loved to quote, most students listened to music on something called a cassette tape, and the Berlin Wall came down. My personal highlights were being selected as student of the month in Physics class, prom, receiving my acceptance letter to college and, of course, graduation. Mixed in between were many trials and tribulations. Outside of staying focused on school, passing all those tests and quizzes, and navigating the social challenges of high school, I was struggling to decide whether or not I should work for awhile before going to college, whether or not I was "college material" and which colleges I should apply to. There was also the ACT test, the FAFSA, and those complicated and expensive college applications. On top of all that, there was no shortage of adults offering advice and opinions regarding my future. It was a confusing and, at times, overwhelming process. Somehow I made it through and headed off to college to start life after high school.

A lot has changed since then. College now costs about twice as much, students have more choices and access to information, social media has made teen life more complex, and the world has become smaller and more competitive. Other things have not changed much at all. Adults are still trying to get students to see the world through their eyes, college access is still a complex process, and deciding what to do after high school is still a daunting task.

Another thing that hasn't changed is that students still need caring adults to help them navigate the challenges of senior year. As I reflect on my own experiences, the dedication of my teachers and my mother in ensuring that I had college options come to the forefront. If my teachers had not let me know in hundreds of little ways that I was college material, if my counselor had not repeatedly reminded me to get my college applications done, and if my mother had not taken it upon herself to understand college access and financial aid, I almost certainly would not have enrolled in college the fall after my senior year. It was their collective belief and investment in me that made college a reality.

As the world continues to change at a quicker pace and the challenges we face become more complex, the education of our students is more important than ever. That is why the work that we do in college access is so important. Good work is not always easy work, but without the passion and dedication of caring professionals, college would not be an option for so many of our students. Your efforts are making a positive difference in the lives of your students and the world. Twenty-five years from now, they will remember your belief and investment in them as they navigated the challenges of senior year.

DATES TO REMEMBER

December 1: Student survey opens
December 19: Parent survey closes
December 31: Updated services due in GEARS
January 8-9: OPI Assessment and Data Conference (Billings, MT @ Crowne Plaza)
http://opi.mt.gov/curriculum/MontCAS/#gpm1_8
January 12: Educator survey opens
January 15-16: OPI Assessment and Data Conference (Missoula, MT @ Hilton Garden Inn)
January 28: Montana GEAR UP Winter Liaison Meeting (Helena, MT @ Red Lion Colonial)
January 30: Student survey closes and updated services due in GEARS (1/31)
February 1: FAFSA Priority Deadline for most Montana Schools
February 8-11: NCCEP Capacity-Building Workshop (Philadelphia, PA)
http://www.edpartnerships.org/conferences-training/events/2013/05/01/capacity-building-workshop
February 22-24: IEFA Best Practices Conference (Bozeman, MT @ Holiday Inn)
February 28: Educator survey closes; student performance data and updated services due in GEARS

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COLLEGE ACCESS PIECES

Text Messaging Platform for Seniors

Seniors, are you overwhelmed? Having a hard time keeping track of all the next steps for college - FAFSA, dorm deposit, class registration, understanding your financial aid package? Are you worried about finding resources to be successful and feel at home your freshman year? Montana GEAR UP can help. Sign up for GEAR UP text messages. Our text messaging campaign will send you personalized texts a few times per month to help you get ready for college, as well as inform you about services and programs available to you on campus your freshman year. You can also text Montana GEAR UP questions and get help from a live person. Ask your liaison about how to sign up.

FAFSA and the First Lady's Reach Higher Initiative

First Lady Michelle Obama’s Reach Higher Initiative is challenging all high school seniors to complete their Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) in the FAFSA Completion Commencement Video Challenge starting in January. Participating schools are asked to create a three to five minute video that highlights how your school is stepping up. Submissions for the challenge will be accepted no earlier than January 1, 2015, and will be accepted until March 16, 2015. Video submissions must be uploaded to YouTube or Vimeo and be accompanied by an entry form completed by the School principal (or designee) with a link to the video. Winning videos will be chosen based on creativity and a school’s FAFSA completion growth rate as of March 16, 2015. To learn more about how you can officially participate in the FAFSA Completion Challenge and earn a chance for the First Lady to speak at your commencement ceremony next spring, visit http://www.whitehouse.gov/reach-higher/ffafa-commencement

Student Assistance Foundation is helping students get ready for filing the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) in January by requesting a FAFSA PIN now. Please check out their press release (link) for more information about requesting a FAFSA PIN.

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Fifteen GMM communities received more than $46,000 from the Graduation Matters Montana and Student Assistance Foundation College Readiness Fund to employ innovative strategies to support more students applying for federal financial aid (FAFSA) for college. GEAR UP schools receiving a grant include: Hardin, Libby, Rocky Boy, Saint Regis, Thompson Falls, and Troy. The range of activities supported by grant funding includes college and career exploration and mentoring opportunities, financial literacy, and outreach to students and families using this FAFSA outreach worksheet.

Wolf Point, along with three other schools, joined area college workforce readiness practitioners this fall to develop strategies to increase career pipelines, college access, and personal finance for high school students impacted by the massive economic changes brought on by the Bakken boom. The high schools are receiving funds from the Burlington Northern Santa Fe Foundation, which joined forces with GMM to support student success in the region.

Libby. Addressing an audience of Libby High School freshmen visiting Flathead Valley Community College's Lincoln County Campus on November 6, Director Chad Shilling proclaimed, "You've got to start thinking about your future today." And with that, Libby's newest high school students were off with a bang to experience college learning firsthand at their local campus. The 80 freshmen rotated between four classrooms in the morning and experienced interactive lessons in sociology, anatomy, drama and communication from college instructors. Read more at Graduation Matters Montana News and Events.

SAVE THE DATE - GMM Summer Summit - Thursday, June 25, 2015. If you have ideas of workshop topics you'd like to participate in or learn from, please contact Jennifer Bezanson at 444-3526 or jbezanson@mt.gov.

2014 College Application Week

"This week makes it possible for people that don’t believe they can go or don’t know how to ask to find help and figure things out; it is very helpful." 2014 MT College Application Week participant

Seniors from more than 125 high schools across the state filed 2,736 college applications to Montana postsecondary institutions with the fee either deferred or waived during Montana College Application Week November 3-7, 2014. To the benefit of students, all Montana University System institutions and private and tribal colleges participated in the initiative.

Montana College Application Week, in its third year, is a collaborative statewide initiative between Montana GEAR UP, the Office of Commissioner of Higher Education and the Office of Public Instruction. It is designed to support high school seniors as they navigate the complex college admissions process with a focus on low income students and those who might not otherwise apply, and it appears to be doing just that. Of students surveyed, 74% reported participating in the Free and Reduced-Price Lunch Program and 19% reported being the first in their family to attend college.

 Submitting an application is just one of the first steps to attending college. In preparation for Montana College Application Week, seniors participated in college readiness activities, such as college fairs, college visits, research, and counselor advising. Along with receiving a locker magnet that outlined the next steps to college enrollment, counselors and volunteers reminded students of the importance of submitting the FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid). Of the student survey respondents, 73% said they planned to complete FAFSA; however, 61% said they do not currently have an understanding of...
how to complete it accurately and on time. Montana GEAR UP, Student Assistance Foundation, and Graduation Matters Montana continue to collaborate on efforts to improve FAFSA completion rates, increase financial literacy, and support college and career readiness activities such as free ACT testing for all public high school juniors, dual enrollment opportunities, and College Goal Montana.

Thank you to all the high schools, site coordinators, postsecondary institutions, and students for making 2014 Montana College Application Week a huge success!

MONTANA GEAR UP 2013 GRADUATES POST-HIGH SCHOOL PLANS

Central to the work of a college access program, such as Montana GEAR UP, is the question of whether the students it works with actually enroll in college - one component of measuring the effectiveness of the program. In short, does the program work? Each year, Montana GEAR UP seeks to answer this question for every graduating class of seniors that have been a part of Montana's 2011 GEAR UP grant. With the assistance of the National Student Clearinghouse, the Montana University System data warehouse, tribal colleges, and the liaisons at GEAR UP schools, Montana GEAR UP is pleased to present information on the post-high school status of the 2013 class of GEAR UP graduates.

In 2013, 394 GEAR UP seniors graduated from high school. Sixty-three percent of these students enrolled in college the fall semester immediately following graduation. In comparison, Montana’s 2012 college enrollment rate, the most recent data available, was 60 percent.

As depicted in the graph below, the majority of Montana GEAR UP graduates enroll in a tribal college - 45 percent, followed by enrollment in the Montana University System - 37 percent, out of state colleges - 13 percent, and Montana private colleges - 5 percent.
Policy Research Topic

"Preparing High School Students for the Challenges of Postsecondary Math" by Michelle Hodara and Rhonda Barton, in Principal's Research Review, January 2014

Too often students who earn the requisite number of high school math credits to go to college find themselves, once enrolled in college, placed in remedial or developmental math courses before they can even take a college-level math course. Such detours may increase the cost of going to college, delay college graduation, and discourage students from completing their college degree. Of Montana GEAR UP's 2013 high school graduates who enrolled in a unit of the Montana University System the fall following graduation, 40 percent were placed in a remedial math course. In the article brief, Preparing High School Students for the Challenges of Postsecondary Math, Education Northwest researchers Michelle Hodara and Rhonda Barton discuss three research strategies on how to better transition students to college math. To access the article, please click on the following link: Preparing High School Students for PS Math

Good Reads:

The Last Good Halloween by Giano Cromley

As described on Amazon.com: "Like most teenagers, Kirby Russo doesn't want much: a calm home life, a couple close friends, a sense of direction and purpose. And a chance to relax with a cocktail now and then. And maybe some privacy whenever fantasy and hormones get the better of him. But his world's upended when he comes home from computer camp to find his stepfather gone and his mom sleeping with their neighbor. In short order, he has to plan an epic road trip to save his family. Never mind the fact that he's at that age where you take yourself seriously, but no one else does. Never mind the fact that he doesn't have a car—it's really more like borrowing when it's a friend's parent's car and they won't know it's gone. And never mind the fact that he doesn't know as much about life as he thinks he does."

Learn Me Good by John Pearson

As described on Amazon.com: "Jack Woodson was a thermal design engineer for four years until he was laid off from his job. Now, as a teacher, he faces new challenges. Conference calls have been replaced with parent conferences. Product testing has given way to standardized testing. Instead of business cards, Jack now passes out report cards. The only thing that hasn't changed noticeably is the maturity level of the people surrounding him all day. Learn Me Good is a hilarious first-person account, inspired by real life experiences. Through a series of emails to Fred Bommerson, his buddy who still works at Heat Pumps Unlimited, Jack chronicles a year-in-the-life of a brand new teacher. With subject lines such as 'Irritable Vowel Syndrome,' 'In math class, no one can hear you scream,' and 'I love the smell of Lysol in the morning,' Jack writes each email with a dash of sarcasm and plenty of irreverent wit."

The Parent, Family, and Community Connection to Education

“I alone cannot change the world, but I can cast a stone across the waters to create many ripples.” - Mother Teresa
The following was taken from "Making Family and Community Connections," a workshop publication of the Educational Broadcasting Corporation, by Maia Szalavitz et al.

"There are numerous benefits from well-implemented school and community partnership programs. They include increased student attendance, higher achievement and report-card grades, a sense of greater security, fewer behavioral problems, and an increase in positive attitudes about school and homework.

"Research also finds that parent participation tends to decline as students get older, unless school programs are put in place to encourage it. Affluent communities tend to have better connections to schools. Poorer communities need to organize programs that reach out to parents to increase involvement. Poorer communities tend to have more negative perceptions about parent involvement; this is largely because without a planned program, contacts tend to occur only when students have problems or are in trouble.

"The studies also find that most families are concerned with their children's education and want to help them succeed in school. Just about all teachers and administrators express interest in increased parental and community involvement. Despite their common interest in helping children succeed, however, teachers and parents may not communicate with each other, in part because of past fears and frustrations experienced by both sides. Good family-and-school partnership programs work to overcome these challenges, so that all parents can be involved in their children's education across the grades in positive ways. Planned partnership programs are needed to ensure equal participation by school, family, and community -- rich or poor."

To read the full article, use the following link:  
http://www.thirteen.org/edonline/concept2class/familycommunity/index_sub4.html

Other resources for involving parents, family, and community in Education:
What Kids Can Do
Growing and Sustaining Parent Involvement
Parent Involvement
Education Northwest

Montana College Access Network's mission is to support, serve, and enhance our affiliate members in their efforts to increase postsecondary participation and completion for all Montanans. Since last year, MCAN has undergone many changes. This July, MCAN's steering committee elected former vice chair Michelle Christianson as executive chair. Rhonda Safford of Student Assistance Foundation was elected as vice chair, and Peter Donaldson of TRiO was elected as secretary of the executive committee. Former network manager Pat Schlauch has been replaced by Melissa Huntington from Student Assistance Foundation. MCAN's next planning meeting will take place on December 9th at Carroll College, and all are welcome to attend. Once again, MCAN has begun planning its annual conference for 2015, this time welcoming its new conference partner MASFAA to the mix. The conference theme is Agents of Change, and we've got a lot of great speakers and events lined up, so
ALUMNI UPDATE

Last year, we conducted a survey of GEAR UP alumni that were college sophomores. We asked: What do you know now that you wish you had known as a freshman? Here are some of their answers:

"That the counselors are there to help you so don't be afraid to ask for help."

"How to use time more wisely."

"You should surround yourself with the right type of friends."

"GO TO CLASS."

"Study harder."

"To take my classes more seriously."

"There is a massive difference in both work load and the type of work that is given in college vs. high school."

"Money management skills and how to read class schedules."

"Ask for help."

"Dedication is key."

"College is a time to find yourself and have fun, while still keeping your goals in mind and knowing how to manage your time responsibly."

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Fall Career Day 2014 at St. Ignatius High School
by
Alan Pule
GEAR UP Liaison

Fall Career Day, November 18, 2014, started out like any other day in St. Ignatius. Seniors trickled in as the bell rang while busses waited to take freshmen, sophomores, and juniors on college visits and job shadowing treks. Teachers scrambled to organize students at every grade level.

Students looked sharp. Seniors took extra time to prepare their best looks for their mock interviews and juniors dressed to mirror the employees they were going to shadow. Freshmen and sophomores were geared up for tours of Flathead Valley Community College and Salish Kootenai College, as well as all three campuses in Missoula, respectively.

For seniors, career day was a time to hone their interview skills for jobs in the real world. Each senior had been prepped for his/her interview with assistance from a representative of the Lake County Job Service. Having worked on resumes and job applications and discussed interview attire, questions, techniques, and etiquette, students were ready for the very important and serious business of being interviewed.
Before interviews began, a representative from UM Missoula stressed the importance of a college education to students, imploring them to give every endeavor their best effort. The representative informed students of the steps they needed to take after being accepted to a postsecondary institution and then sent them to various rooms throughout the high school to face their first of two interviews for the day. Representatives from Glacier Bank, Montana GEAR UP, a local business, and UM Missoula, as well as two retired business professionals, sat at the ready to greet and grill each of their assigned seniors. Interviews ran between 10 and 20 minutes and students received grades based on eight different interview criteria.

Upon conclusion of the interviews, seniors were debriefed by the interviewers and complimented on their poise and interview savvy. An open forum provided students with an opportunity to get feedback, comment on their experiences, and ask questions.

The seniors were dismissed at lunch time to enjoy the rest of their day, while the rest of the student body returned from their trips shortly before 3:15. Seniors will write thank you letters to interviewers. All students will write reflective papers for their portfolios and prepare themselves for the Spring Career Day, involving hands on workshops and presentations from student-selected career fields.

St. Ignatius Seniors Dress for Career Day

Happy Holidays

from

MT GEAR UP Staff

STAY CONNECTED