EXHIBIT 4
DATE 1-10-04
HB 16

Testimony in support of HB 16
Sheila Stearns
Commissioner of Higher Education

I rise in support of this bill for many reasons:

In October of 2003 I traveled with Governor Judy Martz to Fort Peck Community College. She was there to participate and congratulate the Assiniboine and Sioux tribes on important economic development projects on the Fort Peck Reservation, including at that time the announcement of a new program with Northrop-Grumman Corporation. Northrop Executives had flown out from the East Coast for the occasion.

Following that trip, over the course of last year, I had the opportunity to visit six of our seven tribal colleges. The leadership, energy, student and faculty enthusiasm, creativity, and success of each of the tribal colleges are obvious.

When I visited the Chief Dull Knife College in the far southeastern corner of the state, I joined a group of mathematic and science advisors from all over the country who were doing a site visit to a college in which they had provided grants. I had lunch with several of them. They were very impressed with the academic programs that they observed, and the quality of the students, the faculty, and the curriculum.

The Board of Regents held their July, 2004, meeting on the campus of Salish-Kootenai College, where we were treated to a tour of one of the most robust two-year colleges in the country. President Joe McDonald is perhaps the dean of tribal college presidents in the country. In a modest but effective way, he has been a state and national leader in the tribal college movement. I am proud to say that he is a graduate of UM-Western in Dillon, the college I served for six years as chancellor.

At the same time, during the course of the last year, I have been working on a project that has come to be known as Shared Leadership For A Stronger Montana Economy. One of the priorities that rose to the top, with participation from citizens all over the state, is the need to strengthen two-year education in the state of Montana, for the sake of Montana's future in an economy that increasingly demands higher skilled workers. Our State's ability to create more good-paying jobs and fill them with Montanans

depends greatly on our ability to provide greater access, for all our citizens, to a high-quality two-year college system.

More to the point, the Board of Regents approved, last fall, a series of budget initiatives for the Montana University System for the upcoming biennium:

The Board approved a request to the executive to fully fund the non-beneficiary students who are being educated in the tribal colleges. The amount of the request was $896,500, which is derived based upon funding approximately 300 non-beneficiary students per year at the statutory limit of $1,500 per student currently allowed.

Unfortunately, as you know, the statutory amount has rarely if ever been fully funded. In this biennium the amount appropriated was only $96,500 which funded $257 per non-beneficiary student in the first year of the biennium only. This was a very small allocation to the tribal colleges who do not close their doors to non-Indians, but are educating more and more Montana citizens with or without funding. In that respect, Montana's tribal colleges are like the church parsonage, which is not going to turn away someone in need who lives in their town, their neighborhood. Montana benefits enormously when all our citizens, including those place-bound in relatively isolated areas of Montana, receive a certificate, or a two-year degree, or a head start on a baccalaureate degree, whether or not they are members of an Indian tribe.

This bill increases the statutory limit for aid provided per student in Tribal Colleges to a level similar to that provided for Montana's community colleges. **I must make it clear that while the Board of Regents has approved a request for funding up to $1,500 per non-beneficiary students, up to a maximum $896,500, they have not had the opportunity to study this particular bill nor to pass a resolution on it. I speak for them in the limited sense that I know they supported at least an increase of funding up to the current statutory limit. They also are prepared to support the recommendations of the Shared Leadership committees.**

Even though the tribal colleges are not part of the Montana University System, we work closely together. I know we can work even more closely together in a way that protects and respects autonomy, but that strengthens educational opportunity in every corner of the state. Each of Montana's

tribal colleges has strong and detailed agreements about course transfer for their students. In some cases, transfers to the units of the University System are smoother from the tribal colleges than from units within the system. I say that with some chagrin, and with a pledge for change. But it seems to me that any language in this bill about transfer courses should be clarified or even eliminated, so that we do not have an administrative nightmare in accounting for the funds.

Under this legislation, as written, in order to receive state money, the coursework for every nonbeneficiary student would have to be analyzed to determine if it meets the "transferability standard." The difficulty with this is that transfers occur after a student has completed the coursework, so for most students and for most courses the decision about transferability comes after the tribal college has received the state funds. An example: a student attends a tribal college intending to complete a Bachelors degree in education at UM Western. Two years later, this student changes his or her mind (something that almost NEVER happens) and decides instead to pursue a civil engineering degree at MSU Bozeman. While every effort is made to transfer credits, the significant differences in curriculum means that some course work may not transfer toward the new degree and this is only known two years after the fact. The point is that while the University System is going to work hard to significantly improve "transferability" in general, there will always be a lot of factors beyond our control that determine what counts for different degrees and in the current bill it is unclear how we would define "transferable credits."

Now back to the broader issue before you. Right now in Montana we have 17 public two-year college programs delivering education and training in somewhat different ways:

- Three community colleges in Glendive, Miles City, and Kalispell;
- Two colleges of technology in Helena, Great Falls;
- Three colleges of technology that are connected to the universities in Butte, Missoula, and Billings;
- Seven tribal colleges in Fort Peck, Browning, Pablo, Lame Deer, Poplar, Harlem, and Crow Agency; and
- Two universities that provide associate agrees at MSU-Northern and UM-Western.

The state of Montana benefits from each and every one of them. They each serve a large area of the state that, in many cases, would be without

community access to postsecondary education and training without them. They all need to grow and prosper for a stronger Montana.

I have personally seen the vibrancy, and the life-changing experiences that students, including non-beneficiary students, are having at the tribal colleges. They are getting better prepared for better futures, including the higher-paying jobs that Montana so desperately needs. The tribal colleges are located in regions that clearly could benefit from additional state investment, and there are few better ways than work-force training and education.

It is my personal and professional opinion that this investment will be very good for Montana citizens, and for the personal and economic future of thousands of Montanans. I urge you to support this bill, perhaps somewhat clarified, because a stronger set of two-year institutions in Montana is, as we have found in our Shared Leadership research, one of the best investments we can make in the future of our state.