

EXHIBIT 6
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HB 369

To the committee
secretary -

Testimony by Sheila Stearns, Commissioner of Higher Education

I rise in support of HB 369.

As many of you know, I have been working very hard this past year on a set of initiatives we have named "Shared Leadership for a Stronger Montana Economy." This process has involved the Governor's office, legislators, business leaders, and hundreds of citizens from around the state.

We are currently working on three initiatives that have been identified to address the most pressing needs in Montana. One of these needs, and probably the largest, is to remove some of the barriers our students face in accessing postsecondary education in the state.

I think most of you have seen the data, but it is irrefutable. In today's economy a worker must have education beyond what we can provide in high school if he or she expects to earn even an average wage that keeps up with inflation. On average, a worker with at least some postsecondary education – one year certificates, AA or AAS degrees, bachelors or advanced degrees – earn 60% more than those with a high school diploma or less. Also, this country is facing a shortage of 14 million skilled workers -- about 10% of the total workforce – in just the next 15 years. We have the jobs, but if we don't increase the number of students entering into at least some type of postsecondary education we will not be able to fill them. And, because of our state's

demographics, Montana will experience this shortage to a greater degree than the rest of the country.

Now, helping our students overcome the various barriers to postsecondary education certainly requires us to look at tuition and need-based aid. The increasing cost to our students is certainly a significant issue. But not all barriers are related to grants, scholarships, or tuition.

One set of barriers we know keeps potential students from entering postsecondary education is that many people don't even think about going on to college. They just don't consider it an option, for any number of reasons, and essentially preclude themselves out of a lack of knowledge. This mind-set is especially pronounced for potential "first-generation" students – those whose parents have not had any experience with postsecondary education.

~~One~~ By providing greater access to a recognized college entrance exam, will accomplish two positive things.

First, it sends a clear message to our students that you, the leaders and policy makers in Montana, encourage everyone, regardless of means, to consider college as a viable option.

Second, it will get more students to start thinking about education beyond high school at a point in their lives when they can most effectively do something about it. With this bill, many students who

think they can't go to college will find out that they are, in fact, capable of succeeding there. Students who take a national college entrance exam also start receiving marketing literature from postsecondary institutions. In effect this is free marketing for the state to help reach a very important policy objective.

I want to emphasize that there are many things we need to do in order to get more of our students into postsecondary education. I am committed to working hard on all these issues. But the journey of a thousand miles begins with the first step. Getting more young people to really start thinking about postsecondary education, and then taking the first tangible step toward that education, is that first critical step.

Thank you.