

HB 435 – House Education Committee

Testimony by Sheila Stearns, Commissioner of Higher Education

I rise in support of HB 435.

Last Friday I testified on the importance of postsecondary education for both the State's economy and the individual Montana citizen. In the interest of brevity, I will not repeat all of that testimony. I would like to summarize my comments last Friday with this statement: That removing the barriers our students face in accessing postsecondary education is one of the most important issue facing the state.

Today, Montanans face increasingly high postsecondary education costs relative to income levels. In 1994 Montana's average in-state tuition was \$27 below the western state's average but by 2004 it was \$703 above that average. Montanan's now pay a 40% higher share of their income for resident tuition than the other western states' average. This is not as much of a barrier if this higher tuition is combined with high tuition assistance, but Montana's need-based aid averages just \$62 per student compared with \$238 for the western states.

As David Longenecker from WICHE (Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education – basically the 15 western states) summarizes the problem in Montana: "Many states have found good success in using a high tuition / high aid model. Some states have been successful in using a low tuition / low aid model. Almost no state has

been successful with what you do here in Montana which is use the high tuition / low aid model.”

HB 435 takes a big step forward by making postsecondary education more affordable, and in particular providing additional need-based aid for our students. We are thankful that the Governor has given a priority to helping remove this barrier for our citizens.

I would also like to point out that in the work we have been doing to remove barriers to postsecondary education through our Shared Leadership initiatives, we ^{also} have identified the need for a coordinating council to help advise Montana’s policy makers all the state’s aid & scholarship programs. HB 435 also recognizes that need and we look forward to working with the Governor’s office on the implementation of that council.

Thank you.