



# MONTANA UNIVERSITY SYSTEM

## OFFICE OF THE COMMISSIONER OF HIGHER EDUCATION

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### SELECTION OF HEALTH PROFESSIONS INITIATIVES

The Montana University System, in partnership with health care providers, state agency partners, elected officials, and community partners throughout the state, recognizes healthcare workforce development as one of our highest strategic priorities. While there are several challenges we face, including **demographic** trends, low unemployment rates, the rising cost of living, geographic remoteness, and Covid fatigue, our 16 campuses are all pushing positive change in meeting current and emerging healthcare workforce demands in Montana. Below, please find a brief selection of highlights related to our work in this area:

**Relevant Academic and Training Programs in the Healthcare Professions**, including expanding programs related to nursing (CNA, LPN, RN, DSN), a growing array of programs in health technology, and a series of new programs including but not limited to: A Midwifery Option within the Doctor of Nursing Program at Montana State University, a new Associate Degree in Substance Abuse and Addiction at Great Falls College, a new Associate Degree in Medical Coding and Insurance Billing at MSU Billings, and a Transitional Doctor of Occupational Therapy Program at the University of Montana. These programs produce over 1,000 graduates in health-related fields every year, reflect the evolving demand of healthcare workforce needs in Montana and represent the core of the MUS mission to train skilled and committed graduates who serve communities across the state of Montana.

**A Focus on Mental Health**, including an enhanced role for the MUS Suicide Prevention and Mental Health Task Force, the development of a Covid-19 mental health toolkit for the MUS, the launch of online applications that make mental health support easier to access for MUS students, faculty, and staff by providing mental health education, awareness, and referral services. Work in this area will continue to accelerate ahead of a landmark Mental Health and Wellness Summit that is planned to occur in conjunction with the September meeting of the Board of Regents in Billings. A recent report on our work on mental health for our students and employees is attached to this letter. These efforts complement the work taking place on campuses through units like the Center for Mental Health Research and Recovery (CMHRR) at Montana State University and the joint Behavioral Health Workforce Education and Training (BHWET) Program at UM and MSU.

**New Models for Program Delivery**, including the “Hub-and-Spoke” model used to expand the Respiratory Therapy Program offered through Great Falls College MSU to locations not only in Great Falls but also in Billings and Bozeman. Expand on successful pilot of “hub and spoke” programs where the traditional instruction can be delivered online through one of our MUS programs but where the student can gain their work-based learning experiences locally. This style of program helps to provide the correct distribution of training (ex: LPN, RN, BSN) and allows students to earn credentials and “upskill” without leaving their current location and without taking them out of the workforce where they are sorely needed. Additional opportunities for this model are currently under consideration, including those related to training for dental assistants.

**Record-breaking Investments from Private Donors**, including a record breaking \$101 million investment by Mark and Robyn Jones to establish the Mark and Robyn Jones College of Nursing at Montana State University and expand simulation and training labs in partnership with Montana hospitals, new academic programs, and additional teaching expertise in nursing related fields. Dave and Sherry Lesar donated \$7 million to Montana Technological University to establish the Lesar School of Nursing, create new simulation training space, update equipment, improve clinical opportunities for students, and recruit new nursing faculty.

**Rural Focus in Training and Placement**, including highly successful Montana Rural Physician Incentive Program (MRPIP) which provides medical school loan relief to medical doctors who agree to serve in rural Montana communities (program brochure attached), the flagship Montana AHEC Program at Montana State University, which includes a wide range of programs including the Community Health Worker program that trains individuals to serve as well-established and trusted front-line health professionals in their own communities, and the rural focused Family Medicine Residency of Western Montana, the IPHARM (Improving Health Among Rural Montanans) program at UM.

**System-wide Initiatives**, including a “Trunk Analysis” of the coursework across various healthcare programs and the coordination of course requirements so that students can take lower division courses that will apply toward a wide range of health degree programs, and thus allow them to easily pivot from one health profession pathway to another as they work their way through training. This approach provides students with more entry and exit points, streamlines advising and makes pre-req coursework timelier for a student’s academic completion. Additionally, mapping industry-recognized healthcare credentials through Prior Learning Assessment (PLA), would allow students a clear understanding of how their previous work translates to credit worthiness, without having to challenge coursework.

There is, of course, no finish line in this area of work. The staff at the Office of the Commissioner of Higher Education continue to support the Board of Regents, our campuses, and our statewide partners as we make progress on the above initiatives and others. Recently, a multi-sector working group on “MUS Healthcare Workforce Development” has been meeting to develop recommendations for action at the MUS-level that will complement ongoing work happening throughout our campuses. Some of those recommendations will be presented to the Board of Regents at their May meeting in Havre. On behalf of Commissioner Christian and the Board of Regents, my team and I are happy to provide follow up information or answer questions you may have in the future. Thank you for your time and interest in this very important work.

Regards,



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