

A JOURNAL OF EDUCATION, POLITICS, AND CULTURE | FOUNDED 1991

# MONTANA

*Professor*

- 2 CRITICAL ISSUES IN HIGHER EDUCATION
- 6 FOCUS ON TEACHING
- 10 CURRENT RESEARCH



# MONTANA *Professor*

**A JOURNAL OF EDUCATION, POLITICS, AND CULTURE | FOUNDED 1991**

## EDITORS

- Philip Gaines, English,  
MSU Bozeman, *Editor*
- Henry Gonshak, English, MT  
Tech-UM, *Associate Editor*
- Keith Edgerton, History,  
MSU-Billings, *Assistant  
Editor and Treasurer*
- Marvin Lansverk, English,  
MSU-Bozeman, *Assistant  
Editor for Book Reviews*
- Steve Lockwood, English,  
MSU-Northern, *Assistant  
Editor and Webmaster*
- O. Alan Weltzien, English,  
UM-Western, *Assistant  
Editor*
- George Madden, *Founding  
Editor and Publisher*

## EDITORIAL BOARD MEMBERS

- Victoria Cech, Education/  
Research, St. Vincent's  
Hospital, Billings
- Barbara Zuck, Business,  
MSU-Northern
- Chris Danielson, Liberal  
Studies, MT Tech-UM
- Linda Gillison, Classics,  
UM-Missoula

## EDITORIAL OFFICES

Department of English  
Montana State University  
Bozeman, MT 59717

gaines@montana.edu  
mtprof.msun.edu

## DESIGN AND LAYOUT

MSU Publications and  
Graphics  
University Communications  
MSU-Bozeman  
www.montana.edu/  
communications

Photo, front cover: Bridger  
Range by Kelly Gorham

Photo, back cover: Storm  
clouds by Kelly Gorham

*Montana Professor* is published twice each academic year—Fall and Spring—by Montana Professor, Inc., a non-profit Montana corporation. The journal receives the bulk of its financial support from the University of Montana and Montana State University and is supplied free of charge to active and retired members of the faculties and academic administrations of the two universities, the state's tribal colleges, the Office of the Commissioner of Higher Education, the Board of Regents of the Montana University System, the Office of the Governor, and the members of the Montana Legislature. *Montana Professor* is a forum for those involved in higher education to discuss issues of common interest and concern. The journal does not publish specialized discipline-specific scholarly research.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>FROM THE EDITOR.</b> . . . . .	1
<b>CRITICAL ISSUES IN HIGHER EDUCATION</b>	
<b>An Absolute Embarrassment: Administrative Bloat in Montana Higher Education</b>	
<i>John Snider</i> . . . . .	2
<b>FOCUS ON TEACHING</b>	
<b>Sustaining a Community of Learners</b>	
<i>Allison Wynhoff Olsen</i> . . . . .	6
<b>CURRENT RESEARCH</b>	
<b>Understanding and Confronting Obesity and Diabetes in Montana Native Communities</b>	
<i>Blakely Brown</i> . . . . .	10
<b>NEW PROGRAMS</b>	
<b>UM Receives Grant to Support Recruitment, Retention of American Indian Students in STEM Graduate Programs</b>	
<i>Press release</i> . . . . .	15
<b>TRIBAL COLLEGE REPORT</b>	
<b>Blackfeet Community College: Accomplishments and Challenges</b>	
<i>Billie Jo Kipp</i> . . . . .	16
<b>THE MP INTERVIEW</b>	
<b>A Legislator's Perspective on the 64th Legislative Session and Higher Education</b>	
<i>MP interviews Sen. Mary Sheehy Moe</i> . . . . .	19
<b>BOOK REVIEWS</b>	
<b>Excellent Sheep: The Miseducation of the American Elite and the Way to a Meaningful Life</b>	
<i>Reviewed by Henry Gonshak</i> . . . . .	22
<b>In Defense of a Liberal Education</b>	
<i>Reviewed by Marvin Lansverk,</i> . . . . .	26

### Philip Gaines, PhD

Associate Professor of Linguistics and Chair, Department of English,  
Montana State University Bozeman

Welcome to the latest issue of *Montana Professor*. In **Critical Issues in Higher Education**, we lead off with a full-on rant from Prof. John Snider about administrative bloat in the Montana University System. As with any unbridled polemic, you'll find it crowded with hyperbole and sarcasm, but don't miss the earnest concern Snider has about priorities in higher education.

In **Focus on Teaching**, English Education professor Allison Wynhoff Olsen walks us through the elements of a deeply learning-centered and visionary approach to training future middle- and high school teachers. Good chance you'll be inspired by the ways that her students are responding and reaching out.

Considerable space is given in this issue to developments with and for Native American populations in *Montana Professor*. Blakely Brown shares her **Current Research** on understanding the problems of overweight, obesity, and diabetes among Indian people; her

findings are at the same time troubling and encouraging. In **New Programs**, we offer an adapted press release about a major grant providing support for recruiting and retaining Native graduate students in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics. Finally, President Billy Jo Kipp of Blackfeet Community College shares with us a **Tribal College Report** on the history, achievements, and challenges of their forward-thinking institution.

In this issue's **MP Interview**, Sen. Mary Sheehy Moe offers an open, honest critique of the efforts and shortcomings of Montana's 64th legislature with regard to issues in higher education. I found it compelling reading.

*MP* editors Henry Gonshak and Marvin Lansverk give us two highly readable **Book Reviews**—both of fairly recent monographs dealing with unnerving trends in American higher education and offering apologies for keeping to the higher ground.!



Philip Gaines

*A (final) personal note: After several years of service as general editor of Montana Professor, the time has come for me to make a change. I am embarking on a major new research project—work that demands more time and attention that I am currently able to devote. I have genuinely enjoyed working with the many contributors to the journal, the dedicated and caring editors and board, and the production staff—particularly Kristen Drumbheller, a graphic artist and designer whose talent and imagination has never failed to impress me. My thanks goes also the respective presidents and provosts of the University of Montana and Montana State University; their very generous financial support has provided a sturdy stage for this voice of the Montana professoriate. Questions about the future of MP should be directed to the editor of your choice (see masthead to the left). My very best wishes to all of you who care about teaching and research in the Montana University System!*

—PG



### AN ABSOLUTE EMBARRASSMENT: ADMINISTRATIVE BLOAT IN MONTANA HIGHER EDUCATION

**John Snider, PhD**

*Montana State University, Northern*



John Snider

In 2009 Erskine Bowles, the President of the University of North Carolina system, got it right when he referred to the unchecked growth of administrators in his system as “an absolute embarrassment” (Selingo). In 387 B.C. Plato began teaching at his Academy which continued its existence until the year 529, almost one thousand years later. Unlike our modern universities the Academy had no administrators. There were simply teachers and students engaged in the pursuit and celebration of the truth. Imagine for a minute if Aristotle or Plato would have tolerated an endless meeting to discuss outcomes assessment, or if they would have listened to the presentation of a strategic plan, or if they would have abided some huckster from, say, Thrace, who was hawking “best practices.” Imagine any of the important intellectuals of the last two thousand years who would have endorsed a Director of Student Success or the foolish notion that students are the most important persons in a university. The administrative caste that now controls American Universities has betrayed the ideals of truth and beauty that are the foundations of genuine learning and instead has created a vast bureaucracy concerned only with its own perpetuation.

Emerson in “The American Scholar” reminds us that “[o]ur American colleges will recede in their public importance, whilst they grow richer every year” (61)—millions of dollars for stadiums and computer gadgets and fancy buildings while the value of faculty is diminished every day. As I write this, I read that our campus in Bozeman is poised to spend 12 million dollars on a parking garage. Now, the high ideals of the university are not contained in buildings. The true intellectual values of a genuine university are transcendent—they have intrinsic value. Too often we think that if we can find enough parking spaces our job is done. The last chancellor up here in Havre spent thousands of dollars on banners—now tattered by the hi-line wind; we advertise our name but do not know its real worth. And as the events surrounding the Law School in Missoula have taught us, our names, no longer sacred, are always for sale.

The sheer size of this collection of administrative workers is staggering. Although the data is a bit stale, in 2005 there were 675,000 college or university faculty in the United States, but there were “756,405 executive, administrative, and managerial . . . [and] other professional employees” (Ginsberg 24). Virtually none of these workers teach any students at all. The growth of administrators and professional staff relative to faculty has been well-documented. Benjamin Ginsberg in his excellent book *The Fall of The Faculty* reports that between 1975 and 2005 faculty grew 51% while administrators grew 85% and other professionals by 240% (25). Farhad Mirzadch concludes, “From 1987 to 2012, universities and colleges hired 87 administrative and professional workers a day, or 517,636 total” (Mirzadch). Nationwide, roughly only one-third of all employees in all colleges and universities actually teach (Ginsberg). All of this excessive administration drives up the cost of college for students and their families. Writing in the April 4, 2015 *New York Times* Paul Campos observes, “A major factor driving increasing costs is the constant expansion of university administration. According to the Department of Education data, administrative positions at colleges and universities grew by 60 percent between 1993 and 2009, which Bloomberg reported was 10 times the rate of growth of tenured faculty positions” (Campos).

According to The New England Center for Investigative Reporting, in the public universities of Montana the number of professional staff grew from 675 in 1987 to 1736 in 2011, or a growth of 257% while the enrollment grew only 60%. If the Montana University System could somehow maintain the same ratio of professional staff to students that it had in 1987, the system could save from 40 to 50 million dollars a year—that is one thousand dollars for every student in the system. Moreover, the number of employees in The Office of the Commissioner of Higher Education in Montana was only seven in 1974 (Aristad). Today the Commissioner’s office lists some 88 employees. According to the Montana Board of

Regents' 2015 budget, in the public colleges and universities of Montana only 29% of all full time equivalent employees teach students. This means that in our state fully 71% of all full time employees in our universities do no teaching at all. Here at Montana State University Northern, where I have taught for the past 26 years, we have no professors of music, physics, psychology, foreign language, or philosophy; at the same time, the university lists some 78 administrative and contract professional employees for a student enrollment of just a little over 1,000 students.

Now imagine that you own a farm or ranch in Montana. Imagine further that the numerous buildings on your property are in need of painting before the winter sets in. You call a painting company, and they assure you that they will send 100 workers to get the job done, or as the former Mayor of Havre was fond of saying, "Get 'er done!" Now, of course, you are thrilled. One hundred painters working away will surely get the job done quickly. One day you come home from town to see how the job is progressing. And what do you discover? 29 people are painting while 71 folks are sitting around your lawn at tables writing reports, holding meetings, discussing outcomes assessment, and anticipating the next strategic plan. Over two-thirds of the people you have hired haven't even touch a paint brush. As in this scenario, perhaps the chief reason for the proliferation of "support" personnel is the fact that the very administrators whose ranks are swelling beyond any sense are the ones with the sole authority to hire workers for the university. Prestige follows those administrators with the biggest staff.

Perhaps the most damning bit of data comes to us from the Montana University System where the 2015 Operating Budget shows that less than 50% of all funds in the system are spent on instruction (<http://mus.edu/board/meetings/2014/Sept2014/Admin-Budget/OpBudgetMetrics/MUS-Total.htm>.) Think about this for a minute. *Less than half* of all the money spent in our state in public higher education is spent on instruction. But isn't instruction the heart of any university? Imagine that you are asked to contribute to a charity to help poor children with food or medicine. Then you find out that less than 50 cents of every dollar actually goes to food or medicine for these unfortunate children.

In addition to being bloated, the administrative staff in any university is organized along hierarchical lines—a system that compromises effectiveness and initiative. The least important director or dean is beholden to the one above; hence an authoritative and fawning relationship exists up and down the food chain. Those on top are often dictatorial to those below while those below are obsequious to those above. More than once I have been present in meetings with deans or presidents where their bosses were present. I was always struck by the shameful kowtowing of these administrators, who themselves—on their own campus—were often "little Hitlers" when dealing with faculty, students, or their dean underlings. Of course, psychologists have long noted that aggressive and passive behavior is usually two sides of the same coin. Moreover, administrators and professional staffers do not have tenure and can be sacked without explanation, hence they are timid and even afraid. They are always waiting to see what those on top want, and they become so worried about various outside agencies or political entities that they lose all track of the real demands of the higher intellectual task at hand. They are (to adapt a familiar cliché) inside the box.

Administrative bloat has now developed a new meta-level: There exists a doctorate degree in higher education administration to train these functionaries. Even here in Montana, the Board of Regents has jumped on the bandwagon. In their proposal, the various deans and provosts and presidents no longer apologize for the fact that educational leaders will be wholly unconnected with the genuine intellectual work of the university. Here we read the proposal from Bozeman presented at the Montana Board of Regents meeting held in March of 2015: "The shift in who is being hired for higher education administration positions has occurred as the roles and duties of higher education administrators and executives have become more corporate, managerial, and based on outreach and fund raising." (<http://mus.edu/board/meetings/2014/Nov2014/ARSA/Level-II-Memorandum.pdf>). This same proposal is replete with the obligatory buzzwords: stake-holders, data-driven, cutting edge, labor market professionalization. As a long time college writing teacher, I might add that any essay for freshman composition that used so many worn phrases would surely fail.

**THE ADMINISTRATIVE CASTE THAT NOW CONTROLS AMERICAN UNIVERSITIES HAS BETRAYED THE IDEALS OF TRUTH AND BEAUTY THAT ARE THE FOUNDATIONS OF GENUINE LEARNING AND INSTEAD HAS CREATED A VAST BUREAUCRACY CONCERNED ONLY WITH ITS OWN PERPETUATION.**

### WHEN WE LOOK FOR LEADERS OF OUR UNIVERSITIES, WE NEED TO LOOK FOR POETS AND SCIENTISTS AND ARTISTS AND MUSICIANS WHO ARE SCHOLARS FIRST AND WHO KNOW THAT THE CENTER OF ALL UNIVERSITY INTELLECTUAL LIFE ARE THESE HIGHER IDEALS OF LEARNING.

When a new college president is introduced as a CEO without any embarrassment on the part of the speaker, then we know we have finally gone down the rabbit hole. When we look for leaders of our universities, we need to look for poets and scientists and artists and musicians who are scholars first and who know that the center of all university intellectual life are these higher ideals of learning. Emerson put the question concisely, “Is not the true scholar the only true master?” (57). In Montana the leader of our educational enterprise is a businessman. Now I do not discount business just as I do not discount the flossing of teeth or the counting of beans—enterprises of differing value but all of no relevance to the enterprise of higher education. I do not want to read in the paper that our university president has put on a tie and schmoozed with the timber lobby, or attended a football game, or yucked it up with the Chamber of Commerce, or peddled soft-drinks. I want to read that he or she has reread the works of Immanuel Kant, or learned Italian in order to read Dante in the original, or gone into the public square to demand simple honesty and kindness from our civic leaders, or gone into the banks to kick the moneylenders out into the street. But instead the leaders of our universities are more likely to fit the description of the ruling caste given by C. Wright Mills nearly 50 years ago in his book *The Power Elite*:

*The characteristic member of the higher circles today is an intellectual mediocrity, sometimes a conscientious one, but still a mediocrity...[H]is public utterances [are] pious and sentimental, grim and brave, cheerful and empty in their universal generality. He is open only to abbreviated and vulgarized, predigested and slanted ideas. He is a commander of the age of the phone call, the memo, and the briefing (353-54).*

And we might add the e-mail, the twitter, and the webinar.

Ultimately, the administrative juggernaut becomes its own justification—an end in itself. No longer is this proliferation of meetings and reports set out to serve the higher end of learning and research and the celebration of the ideals of beauty and truth. No longer is the measure of its success whether or not it has made the world a better or fairer or safer place.

The administrative edifice has become its own *raison d'être*. Perhaps the best diagnosis of this disease comes from Emerson: “Public and private avarice make the air we breathe thick and fat... The mind of this country, taught to aim at low objects, eats upon itself. There is no work for any but the *décorous* and the *complaisant*” (68). Low objects indeed. A large part of the growth in professional staff is accounted for by growth in so-called student services. Let us be clear: The primary purpose of a university is *not* to serve students; they are not the most important part of any university. The proper purpose and mission of a genuine university is to discover and proclaim the truth, to celebrate beauty and the ideals of learning—all of which will make us more fully human. This task is more often than not likely to threaten students because it forces them to get outside themselves and to encounter a larger universe. And certainly this purpose will anger the corporate donors who want passive and compliant workers.

One of the things that anyone who has worked in higher education has observed is that the vast majority of tasks performed by administrators could be done by a competent clerk. There are, of course, defenders of the army of administrators. None other than Stanley Fish has argued that being a Dean demands delicate skill and great intellectual acumen. Not the easy tasks set for Adam and Eve before the Fall but tasks that Fish claims “require calculations of incredible delicacy” (Fish). Really? And what are these delicate tasks? Assigning Space! Yes indeed, the momentous task which is the culmination of 3,000 years of intellectual work and is done in the shadow of Plato, Aquinas, Shakespeare, Milton, and Newton is deciding who gets what office. How are the delicate deans going to proceed? Do they consult Bacon or St. Anselm or perhaps Nostradamus? Next the good dean informs us of the difficulty of resolving differences among various workers in the university. Now I will confess that these problems do require some skill, but they hardly require a dean making hundreds of thousands of dollars a year with dozens of assistants to do the job. Scheduling, advising, the endless series of reports for the Office of Public Instruction, or the myriad accrediting agencies all require a few simple skills that any fairly bright high school graduate has learned. Folks in higher

education know that they key person on campus is the administrative assistant or executive secretary who has been at the university forever and knows what to do better than anyone else. I say pay this person what she is worth—usually it is a woman in this position—and can the various deans and provosts. The savings would be significant!

Let our universities return to the educational purpose that is their only legitimate function. First, universities must establish real governance by the faculty. The faculty is the university. Period. Faculty and student learning and teaching together are the university. All other workers, though important, are not the center of the university. They are secondary. The administrators who do no teaching hold all the power. Second, require that at least half of all employees actually teach students. Eliminate the army of underpaid adjuncts and hire only full time tenure track faculty. If the universities in the land hired adjunct administrators at the same rate as they hired adjunct faculty they could save billions of dollars. Here in Montana the university system saves 22 million dollars a year by hiring part-time and adjunct faculty instead of full time faculty. Of the 2500 contract faculty in the MUS, 20% of the credits taught are paid for at 25% of the cost for a full time instructor. For example, here at Northern we have 64 full time faculty who teach full time, but 84 contract faculty. The 20 additional contract faculty are comprised of adjunct faculty and overload and summer school all of which are paid for at a considerably lower rate than full time faculty. These credits include adjunct faculty, summer school, and overload credits. If the MUS could somehow hire administrators and professional staff at the same adjunct rate, they could save 19 million dollars a year. Now I do not think any worker should be nicked and dimed and forced to scramble for a living by having to work part time. However, our universities should put first things first and hire faculty—recognizing that faculty are the center of the university. By returning to the ratio of administrators and professional staff that existed 30 years ago, universities could bring themselves back into balance. We need to recognize that many administrative tasks are simply not worth completing. Outcomes assessment is nothing more than white collar featherbedding. It has no intellectual value and should be discontin-

ued. The value of administrative retreats, junkets, training sessions, and strategic plans is dubious at best. The money saved by eliminating these needless exercises should go to reducing student tuition and hiring permanent faculty. Any university that does not spend the lion's share of its resources on faculty and instruction should have to face closure. We need real universities, not jobs programs for bureaucrats. 🍌

### Works Cited

- Aarstad, Rich. "Re: First Commissioner of Higher Education." Message to author. 20 Feb. 2015. E-mail.
- Emerson, Ralph Waldo. "The American Scholar." in *Emerson's Prose and Poetry*. Porte, Joel, and Sandra Morris. New York: Norton, 2001. P. 61.
- Campos, Paul F. "The Real Reason College Tuition Costs So Much." *New York Times Sunday Review Opinion*. 4 April 2015.
- Fish, Stanley. "First, Kill All the Administrators." *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. 4 April 2003.
- Ginsberg, Benjamin. *The Fall of the Faculty: The Rise of the All-Administrative University and Why it Matters*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011. P. 25.
- Ginsberg, Benjamin. "Re: What percentage of all university employees actually teach." Message to author. 1 Mar. 2015.
- Jamrisko, Michelle and Ilan Kolet. "College Costs Surge 500% in U.S. Since 1985: Chart of the Day." *Bloomberg Business*. 26 Aug. 2013.
- Marcus, Jon. "New Analysis Shows Problematic Boom In Higher Ed Administrators." *The New England Center for Investigative Reporting*. <<http://necir.org/2014/02/06/new-analysis-shows-problematic-boom-in-higher-ed-administrators/>>
- Mills, C. Wright. *The Power Elite*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1956.
- Mirzadch, Farhad. "The Higher Education Bubble is Suffused with Administrative Bloat." *David Stockman's Contra Corner*. 19 Jan. 2015.
- Rogers, Jenny. "3 to 1: That's the Best Ratio of Tenure-Track Faculty to Administrators, a Study Concludes." *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. 1 Nov. 2012.
- Seligo, Jeff. "UNC President Embarrassed by Report on Administrative Bloat." *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. 29 Aug. 2009.



## SUSTAINING A COMMUNITY OF LEARNERS

Allison Wynhoff Olsen, PhD

Assistant Professor of English, Montana State University Bozeman



Allison Olsen

I am most at home in a school bustling with activity, hallways lined with student lockers, and classrooms filled with the energy of youth. A teacher for the past seventeen years, I have taught high school and middle school students English, reading, and speech; tutored individual students across disciplines; taught graduate and undergraduate students' education courses; and currently teach English education, linguistics, and writing to MSU students. In so doing, I have attended at least 30 potlucks, directed a handful of theatre productions, coached over 100 hours of dance practice, and engaged in face to face and online conversations on topics ranging from phonetic pronunciations to the pace of life, privileges, and relationships within Jane Austen's *Emma*. Focusing now on the pedagogies that promote student learning, I center research, service, and teaching on relationships.

Throughout this essay, I will explain the initiatives I have been a part of since I began working in the English department at MSU in the fall of 2013. I will discuss three areas of focus: the addition of service learning components to our program, instructional moves I have made to foreground a shift from student to teacher identities, and the community of learners who make up the MSU English Education Community. Depending on the context, I refer to our MSU students in our program as "students" and as "pre-service teachers."

### Service Learning

I had one simple goal for my first year (2013-14) at MSU: Get into high school classrooms and meet local, practicing English teachers. It is important to me that as an English teacher educator, I am connected with practicing English teachers and their students. I do not want to talk to my pre-service teachers *about* teaching and solely use my experiences

when I was at the secondary level; rather, I aim to know and begin understanding the local teachers, students, and curriculum that my pre-service teachers will be exposed to in their various field experiences. My English education colleague, Dr. Robert Petrone<sup>1</sup>, shared my interest. During my first semester at MSU, we met with the English department teachers at one of our local high schools.

At this meeting, Rob and I established connections with the teachers and had generative conversations about the high school and its English curriculum. We shared ideas for connecting our students with more high school classrooms during their English education program and brainstormed ways we (as a program) may help support the teachers.

While at the meeting, one of the teachers asked us a telling question: What are your feelings about the Common Core? Before I share my answer, I will offer a brief overview of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS).

At present, the United States K-12 educational system is entrenched in the CCSS, a political initiative adopted by 43 of the 50 states (National Governors). Not a national curriculum per se, the CCSS is a shift from previous state-created and -adopted standards. Written by the National Governors Association, the CCSS is an attempt to offer more similar curriculum across the nation. The stated exigence is for students to be "college- and career-ready," and literacy is foregrounded across grade levels and disciplines. As standards-based expectations before them, the CCSS documents identify curricular outcomes via anchor standards and grade-specific expectations. States and school districts purchase company-created (e.g. Pearson), computer-based, CCSS aligned assessments for students to take in the Spring of the year; depending on the school district, students and teachers may be held accountable for the results.

---

<sup>1</sup>*It is significant to note that Robert Petrone and I work alongside one another in the MSU English education program. This essay offers my perspective as a newer colleague, yet does not suggest I work alone. In fact, I hope that my essay makes obvious that my work is centered on relationships and collaboration and for me, that begins with my partnership with Rob.*



Given the political nature of the CCSS, I was not surprised that Rob and I were asked how we felt about it; rather, I saw the question as a way to gauge our investment (or not) in standardized curriculum/assessments and to see how/if we aligned with the teachers' ideologies. As I shared in the lunch meeting, teachers are intelligent professionals who do not need documents like the CCSS to know how to set goals for their students or develop their curriculum. Yes, we teachers must know the CCSS and attend to it because it is a part of federal funding and many schools' initiatives; however, effective teachers are already going well beyond the standards in what they offer their students. In addition, I take issue with the standardized approach that assumes all students learn at the same pace. I also disagree with the notion that students can show their understanding through a few questions on a decontextualized, a priori assessment. Finally, the CCSS documents have "no mention of the social complexities of classroom life; no call for teachers to require students to "experience, imagine, think, and feel" (Rives & Wynhoff Olsen, in press, p. 6).

This meeting also marked the beginning of our service learning connections with four of these local teachers, with the goal of forging a relationship between our two English departments. Guided by the needs of the high school students and our pre-service teachers (who specifically desired more time working with "real" students), we created after-school tutoring sessions. Over the next two semesters, we shifted the work into classrooms: our pre-service teachers served as additional support systems for the students, facilitated writing workshops, and helped the teachers provide feedback on student work. This spring many of our students branched out of the classroom and worked as prom chaperones.

Simultaneously, I initiated conversations to connect with additional English and writing educators at another local high school and at Gallatin College. For two semesters, I sent teams of students to serve as writing tutors on three specific writing days at the second local high school. I also co-coordinated a partnership with Dr. Jeff Hostetler and his WRIT 101 class. For three semesters, I sent a team of pre-service teachers to facilitate writing groups with the 101 students, offering them additional audience and feedback. Across both of these writing-

specific opportunities, our pre-service teachers were able to consider their developing pedagogies and practice how to talk with fellow writers during the drafting process and how to provide feedback on written essays. Both teams were also able to experience writers developing over time, a facet to teaching that is not easy to simulate prior to the student teaching semester.

During my second year, I also reached out to two of our recent graduates who were teaching writing to high school students out of the local area: one in rural Montana and one in a larger city. We created online writing connections, taking part in both one-on-one writing exchanges and online writing groups. Both of the teachers use Google Drive with their high school students, so we linked into their work on that platform. This offered our pre-service teachers opportunity to think about how to provide feedback via the written "insert comments" feature, particularly because they are navigating across corrective and rhetorical feedback. The two teachers we worked with also offered perspectives that helped situate the assignments and the writers, reminding the current MSU students that writing is subjective yet that objective expectations and assignments are critical.

I am humbled by the teachers who granted us access to their classrooms and their students. At present, three of our English education courses have become infused with new service learning opportunities that stretch our students and help us isolate and discuss tensions that occur while moving them into teaching roles. Dr. Petrone and I could easily bemoan the theory/practice divide that permeates much of teacher education; instead, we are carving out relationships with teachers and students so our pre-service teachers can solidify content understandings and experience both teaching and learning.

### **Shifting Identities**

It is typical for teacher educators to consider much more than coursework objectives while preparing future teachers. While it matters how students perform on assignments and the consistency (or not) of their attendance record, there are more telling indicators of whether they will be successful teachers: how they position their upcoming students, how they connect with the field of education in general and with in-service teachers specifically, and

**AT PRESENT, THREE OF OUR ENGLISH EDUCATION COURSES HAVE BECOME INFUSED WITH NEW SERVICE LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES THAT STRETCH OUR STUDENTS AND HELP US ISOLATE AND DISCUSS TENSIONS THAT OCCUR WHILE MOVING THEM INTO TEACHING ROLES.**

**RATHER THAN ENCOURAGE OUR STUDENTS TO “DO SCHOOL,” WE SHOULD PROMOTE THE MESSINESS OF LEARNING.**

how (if?) they assume a teacher identity. I am beginning to understand that another indicator is how the students conceptualize learning.

During my second year at MSU, my goals were to continue service-learning initiatives and make transitions from student to teacher more embodied. To do that, I took a risk. I explicitly removed some traditional aspects of schooling in my pre-service English education courses with the intent to make my students *wobble*—defined as “a calling to attention, a provocation of response” as well as a “liminal state, a state of transition” (Fecho, 2011, p. 47) and to foreground *cognitive dissonance* (Festinger, 1957; McFalls & Cobb-Roberts, 2001), explained informally as “psychological tension or dissonance” “an individual can experience... when new knowledge or information is incongruent with previously acquired knowledge. Because dissonance between opposing ideas is unpleasant, people are motivated to reduce the dissonance” (McFalls & Cobb-Roberts, 2001, p. 165). Given that they are preparing to be secondary English teachers, I need my students to feel the emotions and stressors involved with learning, not to remain in the comfortable role of student—a role they understand and enact without much thought—and instead embody our shared spaces. Embodying the learning experience and marking it as physical and emotional allows for rich, meta-level conversations that are necessary for us to discuss as they transition and take on teacher identities.

The move that caused the most dissonance was a direct statement I made in week one, “I will not give you a syllabus for this class.” I did post a document explaining signature assignments (those assignments that I would use as indicators of learning and would grade) as well as overall course expectations to our class D2L site; what was withheld, however, was a fixed calendar of readings/tasks/topics for the term. I explicitly shared that I was aware that many of them were uncomfortable not knowing every detail from the beginning, and I welcomed individuals to come talk with me during office hours. I was interested in being responsive to their needs with the freedom to select readings that would help us move forward as a class community. I had no desire to use an a priori agenda; rather, I intended to model how to move with the ebb and flow of a class.

I began teaching, asking my students to pay attention to in-class announcements and weekly or multi-week reading calendars posted to D2L. A major tension developed with a few students who wanted to work ahead on their projects. At first, I was unaffected and easily talked with individuals or restated what I was not providing this term; however, as the semester continued I felt more unease and irritation. I knew that I was giving information with enough time for students to accomplish the objectives and be assessed fairly, yet it was becoming more and more apparent that the ways I was teaching did not match the ways that several of my students were comfortable learning. It took me several conversations and workouts at my gym for me to recognize the underlying issue at play: my students were still “doing school,” entrenched in being students, working toward grades, and planning their tasks and readings in ways that fit their schedules rather than slowing down and following my lead and my timeline as I unveiled it. Put more academically, my students were engaged in *procedural display* (Bloome, Puro, & Theodorou, 1989): the display of a set of academic procedures that are recognized by teachers, students, and the outside community, rather than investing in learning—a topic we far too often do not consider.

As I reflect on these experiences, I am reminded of Fecho’s (2011) premise, “For where there is wobble, change is occurring” (Fecho, 2011, p. 47). I set out to make change and better a program not because it was flawed, but because my colleague and I are developing a shared vision that challenges us and our students to be vulnerable. I was prepared for students to push back and work toward relieving their own dissonance, yet it was not until I experienced dissonance in time *with* them that I recognized my new goal for our program: Foreground theories of learning as a base for how we teach, interact, assess, and share time with youth. Rather than encourage our students to “do school,” we should promote the messiness of learning.

### **MSU English Education Community**

The final area of impact came through social media and an impulse: “Let’s make a Facebook group for our program!” Currently a closed group of 74 people, our members are current MSU English education students, program

graduates, professors, practicing teachers, and a few English education scholars whose work we study. Since its conception, our FB group has provided us a fast, easily accessed platform on which to share changes in service learning (e.g. cancellations, the need for a car pool), advertise and support local events, and connect with one another in-between class and across distance. Current students post questions about the upcoming PRAXIS exam and student teaching placements, graduated students who are teaching ask for advice with curricular planning, and several of us post inspirational quotes and current news to discuss with the group. Over the last few months our students and graduates have taken ownership of the space and most recently used it to start a summer book club.

While not all of our students partake in the Facebook group, the networking it offers is incredible. Everyone is busy, yet people make time for social networking; people who do not regularly check email get Facebook alerts on their phone and then respond. This simple way of being an online presence emulates our broader field, as English education, strands within the National Council Teachers of English (NCTE) and the American Educational Research Association (AERA), as well as professional journals in literacy (e.g. JAAL) have a dialogic presence on Facebook.

The MSU English Education community is full of people playing active roles, a “community of learners” with an “asymmetry of roles” (Rogoff, 1994, p. 213). In schools, students are often segregated from adults—the knowers of information (Rogoff)—yet when teaching and learning is enacted outside of school walls, roles are more fluid. It is this fluid infusion of a “community of learners” approach that we are working to create and sustain.

### Closing Comments

I strive to embody a critical, sociocultural approach to English in the state of Montana. As an English teacher educator, I position my students, colleagues, and extended community of practicing teachers and youth as members of a community. Wobble, cognitive dissonance, meta conversations, service learning and networking are occurring within the English education program at MSU. I am equal parts grateful and exhausted to be a part of the change. 🍌

### References

- Bloome, D., Puro, P., & Theodorou, E. (1989). Procedural display and classroom lessons. *Curriculum Inquiry*, 19(3), 265-291. doi:10.1080/03626784.1989.11075331
- Fecho, B. (2011). *Teaching for the students: Hearts and habits of mind*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Festinger, L. A. (1957). *A theory of cognitive dissonance*. Evanston, IL: Row, Peterson.
- McFalls, E. L. & Cobb-Roberts, D. (2001). Reducing resistance to diversity through cognitive dissonance instruction: Implications for teacher education. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 52(2), 164-172. doi: 10.1177/0022487101052002007
- National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers. (2010a). *Common Core State Standards for English language arts and literacy in history/social studies, science, and technical subjects*. Washington, DC: Authors.
- Rives, A. & Wynhoff Olsen, A. (in press). Where's the rhetoric? Exposing the (mis) alignment in the Common Core State Writing Standards. *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, 1-10.
- Rogoff, B. (1994). Developing understanding of the idea of communities of learners. *Mind, Culture, and Activity*, 1(4), 209-229. doi: 10.1080/10749039409524673



# UNDERSTANDING AND CONFRONTING OBESITY AND DIABETES IN MONTANA NATIVE COMMUNITIES

**Blakely Brown**

*Professor, Department of Health and Human Performance, University of Montana Missoula*



*Blakely Brown*

**EVIDENCE FROM PRIOR STUDIES SUGGEST BEHAVIORAL APPROACHES THAT INCREASE DAILY PHYSICAL ACTIVITY AND DECREASE CALORIC INTAKE CAN REDUCE RISK FACTORS ASSOCIATED WITH CHILDHOOD OVERWEIGHT AND OBESITY. HOWEVER, THE PREVALENCE OF CHILDHOOD OBESITY HAS TRIPLED IN THE LAST THREE DECADES,<sup>12</sup> SUGGESTING ADDITIONAL STRATEGIES ARE NEEDED.**

### Background

Obesity/overweight has been declared an epidemic and a “public health crisis” among children worldwide.<sup>1</sup> The prevalence of pediatric overweight in the U.S. tripled between 1980 and 2000. African Americans, Latinos and American Indian (AI) populations have the highest prevalence of obesity among North American youth.<sup>2</sup> Overweight in children is defined using Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) age- and sex-specific nomograms for body mass index (BMI).<sup>3</sup> A BMI-for-age between the 85th to the 95th percentile is considered overweight; and  $\geq 95$ th percentile is defined as obese. Pediatric overweight/obesity has been linked to increased risk for prediabetes,<sup>4</sup> metabolic syndrome<sup>5,6</sup> and type 2 diabetes,<sup>7</sup> with insulin resistance being a primary mediator of these conditions.<sup>8</sup> Impaired insulin secretion is also a main feature of type 2 diabetes. Having a first-degree relative with diabetes and being American Indian are risk factors for type-2 diabetes.<sup>9</sup> Studies show that minority children are more insulin resistant than non-minority children, regardless of degree of adiposity and other biological and behavioral factors.<sup>8</sup> Although Montana ranks low in the nation (46th) for overall prevalence of childhood overweight/obesity,<sup>10</sup> our surveillance study of five rural Montana Indian reservations found approximately 57% of AI youth ages 5-19 years old were overweight/obese.<sup>11</sup>

Evidence from prior studies<sup>9-14</sup> suggest behavioral approaches that increase daily physical activity and decrease caloric intake can reduce risk factors associated with childhood overweight and obesity. However, the prevalence of childhood obesity has tripled in the last three decades,<sup>12</sup> suggesting additional strategies are needed. Individual behaviors that contribute to obesity, such as diet and exercise, are influenced by factors such as early childhood development, income, education, food security, and chronic stress that impact health in general and work synergistically on individual, community and societal levels.<sup>13,14</sup>

### Montana Tribal Nations and Community-Based Participatory Research

There is great diversity among the twelve tribal nations of Montana in their languages, cultures, histories and governments. Each nation has a distinct and unique cultural heritage that contributes to modern Montana. Each of the seven Indian reservations in the state has its own tribally controlled community college. Under the American legal system, Indian tribes have sovereign powers, separate and independent from the federal and state governments. Sovereignty ensures self-government, cultural preservation, and a people’s control of their future.

Developing effective obesity interventions for AI youth that encompass their distinct and unique cultural heritage requires collaborative design of methods based on input from members of the communities in which the interventions are to be implemented. A community based participatory research (CBPR) approach can help identify and support protective factors within Indian tribes and may be the most effective and culturally appropriate way to develop intervention strategies to reduce obesity. CBPR is especially appropriate for use with American Indians who have historically been vulnerable to researchers’ insensitivity and exploitation.<sup>15</sup> CBPR actively engages community members in the project development and implementation process,<sup>16</sup> builds upon existing community strengths,<sup>17</sup> and holds significant promise for implementing effective and sustainable public health approaches.<sup>18,19</sup> By promoting long-term, equitable partnerships between researchers and communities, CBPR approaches create a balance between the scientific rigors of tightly controlled researcher-driven studies with community control and respect for local wisdom.

### Diabetes and Obesity Prevention Studies

Since 2004, the author, several MUS and tribal college faculty and students, and community members from Montana Indian reservations, have been developing collaborative,



participatory approaches to preventing obesity and type-2 diabetes in Native youth and adults. The partnership with tribal communities across the state that has occurred over 12 years has been a rich learning experience for everyone involved.

Our seminal preliminary childhood obesity prevention research was conducted in collaboration with two small reservation communities located in rural north central and south eastern Montana. Between 2004-2007 we partnered with tribal health and health board administrators and staff, and community members, to develop and submit a National Institute of Diabetes, Digestive, and Kidney Diseases CBPR proposal to adapt an evidence-based curriculum for preventing diabetes in adults to be age and culturally relevant for Native youth, aged 10-14 years. During these years, we also developed a Code of Research Ethics Memorandum of Understanding to guide and set specific protocols for conducting research with tribal communities in Montana. The MOU, approved by UM Legal Counsel, and Tribal Councils at each reservation site, contains protocols for data sharing and ownership, individual and community anonymity, publication and dissemination processes. We continue to adapt the MOU for other studies with Montana tribal communities and UM.

We received funding for the study, and between 2007 to 2010 developed and tested the Journey to Native Youth program (R34DK7446) which was a 9-session, 12 week age and culturally relevant, nutrition, physical activity and healthy weight behavioral program.<sup>20,21</sup> Sixty-four Native youth from the two reservation communities were randomized to the Journey program or a health-oriented comparison condition. Parents participated in the first and last sessions and received weekly information sheets. The Journey group significantly increased their overall nutrition knowledge, attitudes and beliefs score by 8% while those in the comparison group had no change. The comparison group had detrimental changes in daily moderate-to-vigorous physical activity and an increase in sedentary activity while those in the Journey group were protected from these detrimental changes over time. These physical activity measures translated to a 31% reduction in kcals expended for the comparison group and a

non-significant reduction of 13% among the Journey group. As expected, given the short (3 month) duration of treatment, there was no overall effect on BMI at end of the intervention. Among youth who were overweight/obese at baseline, however, the Journey program was favorable for reducing BMI growth.<sup>21</sup> While the pilot study was helpful for developing study protocols, feasibility and instrumentation, and its outcomes were promising, the findings suggested that the Journey intervention lacked intensity (i.e., frequency and duration) necessary to result in sustained change in the primary outcome for obesity (BMI category). Further, it did not *specifically target family members support for their child's diet and activity change*, and it was specific for Native Americans residing in two linguistically and culturally distinct reservation communities. Since completing the Journey study in 2010, we have received funding to conduct additional studies to address these limitations, strengthen our approach and augment the work with gardening programs and capacity building projects in reservation communities. These studies are described briefly below.

In 2012, we partnered with the Missoula Boys and Girls Club to conduct a one-year study that further developed family-based materials and tested the feasibility of a high-intensity nutrition and exercise intervention for children attending the Club program. Family members took part in a focus group and interviews, which generated relevant statements for ways to better connect caregivers to what their children are doing in the afterschool program and ways to have children teach caregivers at home. We then conducted a two-week pilot study of the intervention. Seventeen children and 11 of their caregivers participated in a three-day per week, after-school nutrition and exercise intervention that included family activities. 41 percent of children enrolled were overweight or obese. Eighty-two percent of the children participated in at least three days/week of intervention activities. Eight of the eleven families participated in family night and five of eleven families attended a nutrition education session. Parents gave high satisfaction ratings to the program. Following the two-week intervention, significant improvements were observed in child outcomes, including knowledge about fat, intentions to eat healthy food, and daily vigorous activity

**FOLLOWING THE 2-WEEK INTERVENTION, SIGNIFICANT IMPROVEMENTS WERE OBSERVED IN CHILD OUTCOMES, INCLUDING KNOWLEDGE ABOUT FAT, INTENTIONS TO EAT HEALTHY FOOD, AND DAILY VIGOROUS ACTIVITY AND ENERGY EXPENDITURE.**

**... OUR FINDINGS CONFIRMED THIS INTERVENTION THAT INVOLVES FAMILIES IS FEASIBLE TO IMPLEMENT AND HAS POTENTIAL TO DECREASE RISK FOR CHILDHOOD OBESITY IN AN AFTERSCHOOL SETTING.**

and energy expenditure. Positive parent outcomes included increased levels of parent support for their children's exercise and healthy food choices. Similar to our Journey study, as expected, due to the short duration of the pilot study, no significant changes were detected in children's BMI. However, our findings confirmed this intervention that involves families is feasible to implement and has potential to decrease risk for childhood obesity in an afterschool setting.

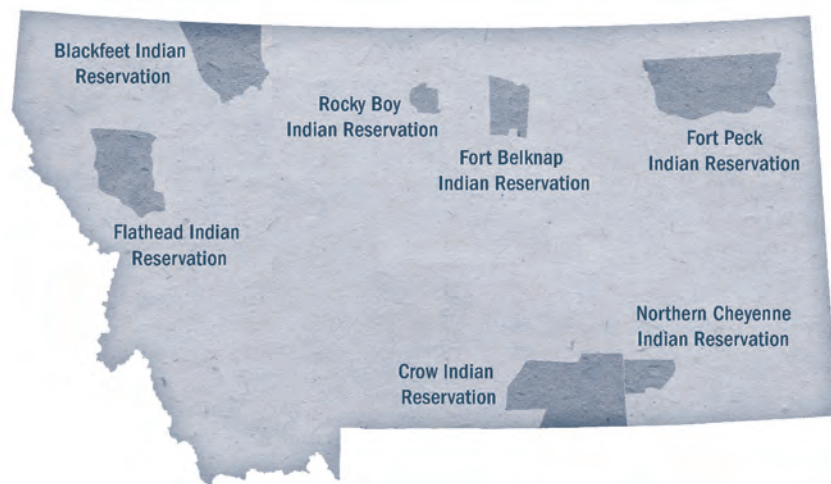
In 2013 we received National Institutes of Health funding to further develop the afterschool and home-based intervention for Native and non-Native children and families living on a Montana Indian reservation. The Generations Health Project (P20GM103474) is a 2-year collaborative study with the Community Health and Development program at Salish-Kootenai College, the School of Public and Community Health Sciences and the HHP Community Health and Prevention Sciences option at UM and the Flathead Boys and Girls Club. Similar to the Journey and the Missoula Club studies, we conducted focus groups and interviews with parents of children enrolled in the Club to explore ways to engage caregivers and families in the after school nutrition and exercise program and develop culturally relevant activities for the intervention. Then, the parents' suggestions helped to further adapt the intervention materials. We recently conducted an individually randomized pilot test of the intervention versus a measurement-only condition at the Flathead Club. Twenty-three child/parent dyads participated in the

pilot study, 96% were retained in the intervention activities, and 100% completed post-test measures. Preliminary outcomes are encouraging—from pre- to post-test, only children in the intervention group significantly increased minutes of physical activity (as measured by activity monitors) and reported increased intention to eat healthy foods. We are in the process of further refining and expanding the intervention materials, and preparing for a 6-month test of the program on the Flathead reservation, Fall 2015. SCK Students in Allied Health degree programs will assist with the study and gain skills in research and evaluation.

### Related Studies

Communities at Play (R13HD080904-01) is a 3-year study (2014-2017) that develops partnerships between Flathead Reservation communities and UM faculty in the Psychology Department, School of Public and Community Health Sciences and the HHP Community Health and Prevention Sciences option to identify interventions for decreasing the risk of childhood obesity. The setting for this project is the Flathead Indian Reservation located in rural northwest Montana, where the minority of the reservation population is American Indian (24%) and the majority of the population is white. The service systems on the reservation are complex and serve many residents. The reservation is large and—in many places—difficult to traverse. Despite the demographic, socio-economic and place-based complexities that exist on the reservation, residents and community organizations are

**Figure 1. Location of Montana Indian Reservations**



interested in working together to overcome rural health disparities, and specifically, prevent childhood obesity. During the first year of the grant, we have established an Advisory Board comprised of 12 community members, and have assessed community readiness to tackle childhood obesity in one of eight communities on the reservation that we are/will be working with. We've also assisted this first community with developing networks with organizations and people interested in organizing further for childhood obesity prevention.

The Gardening Program for American Indians (SP20MD002317-03) was a 2 year, CBPR-based study developed with the Rocky Boys Indian reservation, the HHP Community Health and Prevention Sciences option and the UM Center for Health Sciences. The primary aim of the study determined the effect of a community garden program for American Indian adults with pre-diabetes and diabetes on glycemic control and mental health indicators. 32 adult participants enrolled in Tribal Diabetes Prevention or Health Promotion programs were recruited, consented, and then randomized into the treatment intervention group (e.g., gardening group) or measurement only group. Of these, 17 participants dropped out of the study for various reasons. At the end of the garden season (end-of-treatment; Fall 2011) there were 7 participants in the garden program and 8 participants in the measurement only group. Participants in the garden program met bi-monthly during the summer months with tribally enrolled project directors, staff and a Master Gardener to take part in 10 educational sessions about gardening. Participants helped construct eight raised garden beds behind the Diabetes Clinic and then grew vegetables and fruits in the community garden area during the summer. Two canning classes were held at the end of the season. Results showed no difference in BMI, blood pressure, or HgbA1C (a marker of glycemic control) between treatment and measurement-only groups at the end of the study. Although there were no differences in depression or quality of life scores between groups, the garden program (treatment) group had significantly better mood scores than the measurement only group. That both groups moved to higher stages of change levels for growing produce at the end of the study suggests the gardening program may have sparked community interest in growing more

fruits and vegetables on the reservation. Another positive, sustainable outcome of the study was establishing 36 raised garden beds behind Stone Child College for all community members to use. Rocky Boys also used the data in a USDA and Robert Wood Johnson Foundation grants that increased local food production and improved safe routes to schools walking and biking paths.

### Looking Ahead

Over the years, much time and effort has been expended in developing collaborative partnerships with Montana Indian reservations to confront and tackle the obesity and diabetes epidemics in their communities. Understanding the multitude of factors that impact risk for these diseases, and working alongside community members to develop and implement interventions requires a long-term, authentic commitment to create sustainable disease prevention programs. My approach adheres to the Elements of an Indigenous Research Paradigm described in Shawn Wilson's book, *Research is Ceremony*.<sup>22</sup> That paradigm puts forth that the shared aspect of Indigenous ontology and epistemology is relationality and the shared aspect of Indigenous axiology and methodology is accountability to relationships. The shared aspects of relationality and relational accountability can be put into practice through choice of research topic, methods of data collection, form of analysis and presentation. It is my hope that my ongoing journey of learning in this area with Indigenous scholars, researchers and community members will enhance our collaborative projects that seek to identify and support protective factors for health promotion and disease prevention in tribal nations. 🍌

### References

- <sup>1</sup>Lobstein T, Baur L, Uauy R. Obesity in children and young people: A crisis in public health. *Obes Rev* 2004;4:4-85.
- <sup>2</sup>Ogden CL, Flegal KM, Carroll MD, Johnson CL. Prevalence and trends in overweight among US children and adolescents, 1999-2000. *JAMA* 2002;288:1728-32.
- <sup>3</sup>CDC Growth Charts: United States. Advance Data No. 314: Vital and Health Statistics of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention; 2000.

*References continued on the next page.*

**UNDERSTANDING THE MULTITUDE OF FACTORS THAT IMPACT RISK FOR THESE DISEASES, AND WORKING ALONGSIDE COMMUNITY MEMBERS TO DEVELOP AND IMPLEMENT INTERVENTIONS REQUIRES A LONG-TERM, AUTHENTIC COMMITMENT TO CREATE SUSTAINABLE DISEASE PREVENTION PROGRAMS.**

- <sup>4</sup>Goran MI, Bergman RN, Avila Q, et al. Impaired glucose tolerance and reduced beta-cell function in overweight Latino children with a positive family history for type 2 diabetes. *J Clin Endocrinol Metab* 2004;89:207-12.
- <sup>5</sup>Cook S, Weitzman M, Auinger P, Nguyen M, Dietz WH. Prevalence of a metabolic syndrome phenotype in adolescents: findings from the third National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey, 1988-1994. *Arch Pediatr Adolesc Med* 2003;157:821-7.
- <sup>6</sup>Cruz ML, Weigensberg MJ, Huang TT, Ball G, Shaibi GQ, Goran MI. The metabolic syndrome in overweight Hispanic youth and the role of insulin sensitivity. *J Clin Endocrinol Metab* 2004;89:108-13.
- <sup>7</sup>*Type 2 diabetes in children and adolescents. American Diabetes Association. Pediatr* 2000;105:671-80.
- <sup>8</sup>Cruz ML, Shaibi GQ, Weigensberg MJ, Spruijt-Metz D, Ball GD, Goran MI. Pediatric obesity and insulin resistance: chronic disease risk and implications for treatment and prevention beyond body weight modification. *Annu Rev Nutr* 2005;25:435-68.
- <sup>9</sup>Standards of medical care in diabetes--2006. *Diabetes Care* 2006;29 Suppl 1:S4-42.
- <sup>10</sup>*National Survey of Children's Health*; 2007.
- <sup>11</sup>Brown B, Noonan C, Friede P, Giroux J. Acanthosis nigricans and obesity in Northern Plains Indian children and adolescents. *Diabetes* 2008;57:SA744.
- <sup>12</sup>Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. School Health Guidelines to Promote Healthy Eating and Physical Activity. *MMWR* 2011;60.
- <sup>13</sup>Loddie R, Wien F. *Health inequalities and social determinants of Aboriginal peoples' health*. Prince George, B.C., Canada; 2009.
- <sup>14</sup>Liu DM, Alameda CK. Social determinants of health for Native Hawaiian children and adolescents. *Hawai'i Medical Journal* 2011;70:9-14.
- <sup>15</sup>Rhoades ER. Research ethics and the American Indian. In: Rhoades ER, ed. *American Indian health : innovations in health care, promotion, and policy*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press; 2000:246-433.
- <sup>16</sup>Israel BA, Schulz AJ, Parker EA, Becker AB. Review of community-based research: assessing partnership approaches to improve public health. *Annu Rev Public Health* 1998;19:173-202.
- <sup>17</sup>Israel BA, Schulz AJ, Parker EA, Becker AB. Community-based participatory research: policy recommendations for promoting a partnership approach in health research. *Educ Health* 2001;14:182-97.
- <sup>18</sup>Garfield SA, Malozowski S, Chin MH, et al. Considerations for diabetes translational research in real-world settings. *Diabetes Care* 2003;26:2670-4.
- <sup>19</sup>Teufel-Shone NI, Siyuja T, Watahomigie HJ, Irwin S. Community-based participatory research: Conducting a formative assessment of factors that influence youth wellness in the Hualapai community. *Am J Pub Health* 2006;96:1623-8.
- <sup>20</sup>Brown B, Harris KJ, Harris JL, Parker M, Ricci C, Noonan C. Translating the Diabetes Prevention Program for Northern Plains Indian youth through community-based participatory research methods. *Diabetes Educ* 2010;36:924-35.
- <sup>21</sup>Brown B, Noonan C, Harris KJ, et al. Diabetes Prevention Program for Native American youth: The JOURNEY to Native Youth Health feasibility study. *Diabetes* 2011;60:A82.
- <sup>22</sup>Wilson S. *Research is ceremony: indigenous research methods*: Fernwood Publishing; 2008.





### UM RECEIVES GRANT TO SUPPORT RECRUITMENT, RETENTION OF AMERICAN INDIAN STUDENTS IN STEM GRADUATE PROGRAMS

*Press release, UM News, January 16, 2015 (used by permission)*

MISSOULA – The University of Montana Graduate School recently was awarded a \$730,000 grant as part of a \$2.4 million National Science Foundation Alliances for Graduate Education and Professoriate. The grant is titled “Collaborative Research: The Pacific Northwest Alliance to Develop, Implement and Study a STEM Graduate Education Model for American Indians and Native Alaskans.”

The goal of the grant is to increase the number of American Indian and Native Alaskan doctoral students who complete graduate programs in science, technology, engineering or mathematics, known as the STEM fields. The partner institutions forming the Pacific Northwest Circle of Success: Mentoring Opportunities in STEM, or PNW COSMOS, include UM, Washington State University, University of Idaho, Montana State University, Heritage University, Salish Kootenai College and Montana Tech.

“The reality is that the numbers of indigenous students in STEM fields obtaining graduate degrees, in particular doctoral degrees, continue to be very small,” UM Graduate School Dean and principal investigator Sandy Ross said. “Our hope is that the Pacific Northwest AGEP will help start and support a positive change. This makes the PNW COSMOS a unique, important effort.”

During the three-and-a-half year funding period, the Montana institutions will focus on developing a culturally relevant and collaborative indigenous mentoring program for American Indian and Native Alaskan students in STEM degree programs and their advisers. The goals of the indigenous mentoring program are to improve student retention and success and coordinate resources among PNW COSMOS alliance institutions.

UM co-principal investigator Blakely Brown, MSU co-principal investigator Sweeney Windchief, and Michael Munson at Salish Kootenai College, are leading the development and implementation of the model, assisted by UM co-principal investigator Aaron Thomas, director of UM Indigenous Research and STEM Education. UM co-principal investigator Dusten Hollist is a participant on the project’s social science research team. The research team will identify and evaluate culturally attuned mentoring approaches that are effective for American Indian and Native Alaskan graduate students and that also encourage American Indian and Native Alaskan undergraduate students in STEM fields to proceed into graduate school. Ross and Thomas will collaborate on student and mentor recruitment strategies.

Contact: Sandy Ross, UM Graduate School dean, chemistry and biochemistry professor, 406-243-2572, [sandy.ross@umontana.edu](mailto:sandy.ross@umontana.edu).



*University of Montana’s Payne Family Native American Center was the site of the planning meeting of the partner institutions.*



## BLACKFEET COMMUNITY COLLEGE: ACCOMPLISHMENTS AND CHALLENGES

**Billie Jo Kipp, PhD**

*President, Blackfeet Community College*



*Billie Jo Kipp*

**BLACKFEET COMMUNITY COLLEGE IS A CULTURAL AND EDUCATIONAL TRIBAL COLLEGE THAT PROMOTES LEARNING AS WELL AS A PLACE THAT HONORS THE TRIBAL IDENTITIES OF THE BLACKFEET PEOPLE.**

In October of 1974, the Blackfeet Tribal Business Council chartered the Blackfeet Community College by executive action to “provide post-secondary and higher educational services” to the residents of the Blackfeet Nation and surrounding communities. The impetus for this action grew from early tribal efforts to provide an educational opportunity to its residents in a physically, climatically, and culturally isolated area. As Blackfeet, we not only love our children but we revere our elders, as well. We look to the older generations to pass down their extensive bodies of traditional knowledge. This traditional knowledge was preserved in the minds, spirit, and heart of the Amskapi Pikuni, and it is important to remember that it was passed down in the language given to them at the beginning of time. Blackfeet Community College embodies this wisdom and incorporates indigenous knowledge in the modern education of our Native scholars.

Education was the vision of our ancestors, just as it is the vision of BCC. The Blackfeet linguistic and cultural ways are old and they extend far back to creation. Such ways provide the basis for progress in education. BCC is a cultural and educational tribal college that promotes learning as well as a place that honors the tribal identities of the Blackfeet people. BCC develops the potential of minds and fulfills dreams of an education.

The Blackfeet Tribe of Montana is one of the largest native groups in the Northwest. The tribe has approximately 16,000 enrolled members, and approximately 8,500 reside within the reservation boundaries. The Blackfeet Tribe is traditionally known in the native language as the Pikuni, or “Beings of Abundance.” The Creator gifted us generously, and the Pikuni were rich in the necessities of life. Respect for life in all forms has traditionally been a foundation of the Blackfeet culture.

Over the last 200 years, the life of abundance has been altered drastically. Starvation winters, the Baker Massacre and

other U.S. Department of War endeavors, and numerous smallpox epidemics reduced the population from 60,000 people to less than 400 nuclear families by 1893. The Blackfeet people have been subjected to intense cultural disruption over the last four or five generations. Values were annihilated and students abused at mission schools and government boarding schools; Blackfeet understandably came to mistrust educational institutions. Traditional social systems were disrupted, and total tribal grief is but one outcome for the Amskapi Pikuni (Southern Blackfeet). There are a few elders remaining who know personal accounts and have personally witnessed these events and observed the effects of this devastation on their families.

Approximately one-fourth of the reservation population lives on small ranches and family homesteads reached by unpaved roads in every direction, from the Canadian border to Birch Creek, 80 miles south; and from the Rocky Mountain/Glacier Park border to Cut Bank Creek, 75 miles east. The population of the Blackfeet Reservation and nearby communities (Cut Bank, Valier, and Dupuyer) is comprised of approximately 75% Blackfeet members or tribal descendants.

The Blackfeet child is in the top ten for those living in poverty; the reservation ranks as the 5th poorest reservation in the United States. The current Blackfeet One Stop Center services 2,217 welfare recipients, and this population includes 748 two-parent families affecting the lives of 1,416 children. Currently, the Blackfeet TANF program provides social and financial support to 360 children age five and under. The risk of poverty for children born to married parents or co-habiting couples is larger (74% unemployment, and 22% below the poverty level).

Unemployment is an enormous problem. The Bureau of Indian Affairs reported in the 2000 Indian Labor Force Report that of 5,359 employable civilians, 74% were unemployed and 22% of those employed were below the poverty level. The average Blackfeet resident

survives on approximately one-third the average national income and nearly one-half of the Montana state average income—\$5,574 per year. According to the 2000 US Census Bureau, the Blackfeet Reservation (most of Glacier County) is 35th of the 100 poorest counties in the United States. Most notably Tom Rogers presents the following analogy: “[T]he annual [native] unemployment rate is 69 percent. The national unemployment rate at the very peak of the Great Depression was around 25 percent. That means that each year the Blackfeet people, whose aboriginal lands once comprised Glacier National Park, suffers an employment crisis nearly three times as severe as the Great Depression.”<sup>1</sup>

The social and economic conditions on the reservation explain why 90% of students receive Pell grants. Social and economic instability contributes to unusually high levels of attrition and low student graduation rates. Recent statistics report that the school dropout rate is 65%.

Blackfeet Community College is charged with the educational needs of the Blackfeet and expected to respond to local workforce trends. The education and training of the Blackfeet Tribe is the critical focus of the mission and vision for improvement of the reservation economy.

Blackfeet Community College (BCC) has seen an increase in enrollment of around 13% from FY2013 to FY2015 with a total student body of 484; 96% are Native American. A comprehensive recruitment plan, an increased number of program of study offerings, increased student-led research capacity, and the implementation of student support services as well as scholarships have provided BCC with strategic initiatives to address enrollment growth. BCC employed 20 full-time and 17 part-time faculty in the 2014-15 academic year; over 85% are Native American. BCC's eight academic and two workforce divisions offer five Associate of Arts, five Associate of Science, and five Associate of Applied Science degrees. Additionally, six One-Year Certificates and one Endorsement are offered for students and community members engaged in the local workforce.

The primary source of operational funding for BCC is the Tribally Controlled Community College Assistance Act (TCCCA, 1978). Funding for this act is presented to Congress as

part of the President's annual budget. Congress then determines the final appropriations, and this amount is then distributed to all tribal colleges and universities (TCU) on a formula basis. The amount of funding per TCU is determined through each TCU's Indian Student Count (ISC). The TCCCA appropriations have increased over the past ten years, but the level remains well below what other public higher education institutions in the United States receive per Full-Time Equivalent (FTE).

The college is underfunded while trying to meet the significant support needs of an impoverished community. To meet financial needs, the college works hard to win federal, state, and private grants that supplement general fund requirements.

BCC continues to strive for providing quality education to those most in need. The development of training programs, provision of transferable academic courses, and meeting the holistic needs of the students has become the synergistic balance that most mainstream community colleges aren't required to address. Providing rigorous academic education—as well as community-based job skills—and developing cutting edge research at BCC has proven to be the trifecta of success for Blackfeet Community College.

In an attempt to assure more gainful employment, BCC has focused on the nation's fastest growing industry—healthcare—and developed several Health Care Paraprofessional programs. This has become a notable success for BCC. Along these lines, we offer medical billing and coding, certified nursing assistant training, emergency medical tech training, and phlebotomy and CNA/EMR/EMT refresher courses. The BCC School of Nursing is addressing the overwhelming deficit of native nurses by training and education through the LPN and RN programs.

A unique attempt to support the community is the development of the Behavioral Health Aid program. This project will empirically evaluate the efficacy of a culturally-adapted and empirically-based curriculum designed to train a behavioral workforce in core mental health domains within a tribal college. The rural and remote location of the Blackfeet Community College has created barriers towards accessing educational opportunities for this tribal

**THE BLACKFEET PEOPLE HAVE BEEN SUBJECTED TO INTENSE CULTURAL DISRUPTION OVER THE LAST FOUR OR FIVE GENERATIONS. VALUES WERE ANNIHILATED AND STUDENTS ABUSED AT MISSION SCHOOLS AND GOVERNMENT BOARDING SCHOOLS; BLACKFEET UNDERSTANDABLY CAME TO MISTRUST EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS.**

## THE BHA CURRICULUM IS PROVIDING ENTRY-LEVEL EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES TO IMPROVE THE HEALTH INFRASTRUCTURE OF THE COMMUNITY AND HELP ADDRESS POSTTRAUMATIC STRESS, DEPRESSION, AND SUBSTANCE USE DISORDER WITHIN RURAL/REMOTE RESERVATION POPULATIONS IN MONTANA.

community. The BHA curriculum is providing entry-level employment opportunities to improve the health infrastructure of the community and help address posttraumatic stress, depression, and substance use disorder within rural/remote reservation populations in Montana. This cutting edge project exemplifies the action oriented academic programming that improve the health of tribal communities.

BCC has focused on solar construction to provide a new venue for our students to attain a unique job skill. The Workforce Development Division is responsive to current building trends and is providing plumbing, electrical, and carpentry classes. The classes offer certificates and degrees to support the building industry. This division is constantly monitoring local construction trends to assure that the Blackfeet are trained and positioned for job placement.

The positioning of BCC as a minority research institution has increased the capacity for the Blackfeet to be qualified partners in any research project. Currently on the campus of BCC in the platinum LEED Southwind Lodge, students are involved in projects in the BCC Metabolic Research Center. The Center has the goal of improving the health of members of the Blackfeet Nation.

The best approach to achieving this goal is to enhance the capacity of the tribe itself to address its own health disparities through the development of interventions that are

considerate of and consistent with Blackfeet cultural beliefs. We also believe that Native researchers are best suited and prepared to perform both research and effective interventions in Indian Country and that BCC-MRC could eventually be the vehicle through which the Blackfeet community does indeed address its own health problems. This program is a partnership of BCC and Montana State University and is carried out in a cutting edge research lab.

From the youngest, bright-eyed students who are just beginning their educational journey to the older students who are juggling classes, jobs, and child rearing, Blackfeet Community College benefits the entire tribe and community.

BCC is an institution that is guided by tribal values and incorporates methods of learning geared towards American Indian students to more aptly prepare students for success. Lack of funding and the minimal resources of the tribes continue to be obstacles, but BCC's perseverance confirms the belief that community-based colleges of their own can also strengthen their tribal nations. 🦅

### Endnote

<sup>1</sup><http://www.spotlightonpoverty.org/exclusivecommentary.aspx?id=0fe5c04e-fdbf-4718-980c-0373ba823da7#sthash.HaeHW-wLc.dpuf>

*The South Wind Lodge is the new math and science building at Blackfeet Community College in Browning.*





### A LEGISLATOR'S PERSPECTIVE ON THE 64TH LEGISLATIVE SESSION AND HIGHER EDUCATION

**Montana Professor interviewed Sen. Mary Sheehy Moe (D-Great Falls) about the recent legislative session**

*How do you think higher education fared in the 64th session of the Montana legislature?*

I'd give the legislature a grade of B- on the Montana University System (MUS) issues. On the plus side, we funded the system sufficiently to allow for another tuition freeze while supporting the employee pay plan. We added an additional \$15 million in one-time-only funding to leverage university-based research for strategic advancements for Montana's economy. Those were big-ticket items and the highest priorities for the system.

The 64th legislature also continued the investment the 63rd session made in WWAMI slots for medical students. In 2013 legislators expanded the number of WWAMI slots from 20 to 30, the first expansion in 40 years. This session we provided additional base funding to support the full four years of the program.

Unfortunately, we did very little to address the issue of student debt and, most unfortunately, we failed to pass the bill allocating over \$34 million to infrastructure needs on Montana campuses. With just one more legislator pushing green, you would have seen an \$18.4 million project in Bozeman, a \$10 million project in Missoula, a \$3 million project in Great Falls, and a \$2.65 million project in Billings. Not modernizing/expanding these facilities is a huge disservice to students and faculty, as well as hundreds of construction workers and associated businesses in those communities.

As scholars and lovers of Montana, you should also decry the failure to fund the renovations to the Montana Heritage Center (nee, the Montana Historical Society), Virginia City and Nevada City, and the Lewis & Clark Caverns. All for the lack of one more vote!

.....  
*How have legislative priorities changed since you first started working with the legislature in 2001?*

I worked closely with legislators as part of the university system for 10 years, but I've followed the legislature pretty closely for the past 25 years. Over that time period, the prevailing perspective

of legislators with regard to the university system has been consistent: pragmatism.

Legislators, particularly those who serve on the committees that wrestle with funding requests, want to be persuaded of a return on their investment in higher education. In 2001, that pragmatism manifested itself in the legislature's emerging interest in two-year education. That interest was partly the result of a certain antipathy toward "pointy-headed intellectuals" and the perspective of some legislators that many of the majors students were pursuing led to nothing but tedious exercises involving angels dancing on the head of a pin. Partly it was the result of a political reaction to some university programs, faculty, or students. Partly it was their sense that Montana's two-year colleges were the red-headed stepchildren of the university system.

But mostly this focus resulted from their pragmatic view that students who go to two-year colleges spend less money and time in college and emerge with a credential that leads directly to a job. From 2001 through 2011, I'd say that priority remained a high one for legislators.

We're seeing a shift in focus now, especially in the area of research. The \$15 million allocation this session for strategic deployment of the universities' research capacity is a big win for the system—and the state. That happened because legislators are seeing how research fits into their pragmatic mindset. They see its connection to agriculture and its impact on economic development.

OCHE deserves a lot of credit for this shift, especially Dr. Sylvia Moore, the former Deputy Commissioner for Academic and Students Affairs and Research. Sylvia added the word "research" to her title and during her years at OCHE she tilled the respect for research that has led to this harvest. She was tireless in promoting the research assets of our universities and her legacy should not be forgotten.

One other gradual shift in priorities should also be mentioned. Most legislators directly involved in setting education policy and funding feel very strongly about the importance of tying funding



Mary Sheehy Moe

to performance metrics. I'm not as keen as they are on this issue (see later question), but again it's a reflection of the very pragmatic mindset that most legislators have about higher education.

.....  
*What other legislative issues affecting higher education arose in the 64th session?*

Most of the bills were minor in impact, but two reveal important themes that your readers should be aware of. We once again saw a bill allowing students to carry firearms on our campuses. I've participated in this debate for several sessions now, so for me it's become somewhat enervating. Underlying it, however, is an age-old attempt by the legislature to undermine or overtake the authority of the board of regents, and that's a fight I'll always show up for.

Amazingly (at least to me), I was actually around when our current state constitution was ratified and, as a student of that process and a relative and friend of many who participated in it, I'm pretty well-grounded in the experiences and perspectives that led to the establishment of the board of regents. After 15 years of controversy, in 1972 Montanans were sick of legislative interference with intellectual freedom and student expression on Montana's college campuses. They were tired of having professors harassed and programs imperiled because of some legislators' political, religious, or life views. They also saw that having one board of education, charged with oversight of both K-12 and higher education in Montana, served neither sector well. The result was the creation of two separate boards, one of which was the board of regents, whose decisions about how the campuses would be run and what programs they would offer could not be dictated or even trifled with by the legislature.

Of course, that doesn't mean legislators won't try. Legislators rightly view themselves as representatives of the people, but some of them wrongly believe their office empowers them to tell the campuses and the people on them what to do. This in turn puts the regents and the commissioner in the uncomfortable position of simultaneously asking the legislature for a lot of money to fund the system while insisting that the legislature butt out of management and control issues.

I don't think professors can be very effective in straddling this duality of purpose either. That leaves it to the public and to members of the

legislature themselves. Over the years, Montana professors have been very fortunate to have the likes of Bob Ream, Harry Fritz and Frankie Wilmer speaking truth to power on this issue. Today, you're very well-served by senators like Mary McNally of MSU-Billings and Dick Barrett, former UM professor. Again, it isn't the particular legislation—in this instance, weapons on campus—that is important. It's preserving the apolitical and insulated oversight of the system guaranteed by our constitution.

A second bill that seemed OK on the surface but was troubling underneath was a bill changing the mission of the state lottery to generating STEM scholarships for Montana students. I've got nothing against majors in science, technology, engineering, and math ... although Sen. Dick Barrett and I sometimes share Kleenexes over the poor billing we economics and English scholars get. I don't believe, as some do, that the lottery is like a gateway drug for more addictive forms of gambling. I do think its financial impact is regressive in nature and it plays to a kind of "magical thinking" that is the antithesis of wisdom and prudence. Mainly, I just get queasy about the lottery using Montana kids to sell its wares. That's exploitive and I wonder what truly motivates it. Whatever the answers to that question are, ultimately such exploitation makes the system look bad.

A lot of bills advance a lofty purpose to justify a not-so-lofty practice. We were able to amend this one to mitigate my concerns, but not eliminate them. Ultimately, I held my nose and voted for it because the lottery was first established to benefit education and this would do it in a tangible way that won't be backfilled with cuts elsewhere.

.....  
*Are higher education lobbying efforts effective?*

On the whole, yes. I've always been impressed in particular by the student lobbyists; they reflect so well on the system. This year the system effort to emphasize research prior to the session was very effective. Legislators mentioned it throughout the session.

OCHE does a good job of tracking bills and keeping in touch with individual legislators. However, as I mentioned earlier, asking for substantial sums of money from people you are also trying to keep at arm's length with respect to control of the system is a difficult position to maintain and unfortunately you have to do both

**AMAZINGLY (AT LEAST TO ME), I WAS ACTUALLY AROUND WHEN OUR CURRENT STATE CONSTITUTION WAS RATIFIED AND, AS A STUDENT OF THAT PROCESS AND A RELATIVE AND FRIEND OF MANY WHO PARTICIPATED IN IT, I'M PRETTY WELL-GROUNDED IN THE EXPERIENCES AND PERSPECTIVES THAT LED TO THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE BOARD OF REGENTS.**

as commissioner of higher education in Montana. This commissioner seems to me to be too conciliatory when he needn't or shouldn't be, but the proof's in the pudding and the university system has fared well during his tenure.

My only caution would be to your readers as Montana professors. This is the first commissioner's office in my memory in which only one person on the entire cabinet has ever been a tenured professor and that one handles budgetary, not academic, issues. That means legislators don't have direct access to the perspective and breadth of experience that come with years in the faculty ranks. Although I have high regard for the commissioner and his cabinet, that deficit concerns me.

.....  
***What do you see as major legislative issues for higher education in the years to come?***

I'll focus on three.

Student debt. In 1992, the state paid 77% of the cost of a student's education; today, Montana pays only 39%. Not coincidentally, today nearly 2/3 of our bachelor's degree graduates leave college with an average of \$27,000 in debt. Nearly 3/4 of Montana's associate degree graduates leave with an average debt load of \$17,000.

Yet the only debt-related bill we passed was one eliminating jail time and licensure revocation as penalties for failing to repay student loans in a timely manner. As for need-based scholarships, the lottery scholarship would have been a good opportunity to advance the system in this much-needed area. Instead, the scholarship is merit-based. High GPAs are positively associated with students of means, just as we do with dual enrollment, we're using scarce resources to give financial breaks to a great number of students who don't need them.

Performance-based funding. It's all the rage, I know, but performance-based funding will lead to mischief. Most metrics don't capture either the causes or the results of a college education with anything approaching precision. The more you simplify the factors to legitimize the calculus, the less informative and/or valid the result is. Probably the best thing about performance-based funding is that it emphasizes campus-wide innovations on the important subjects of remediation, retention, demographic achievement gaps, and post-graduate

employment and engagement. But I fear that oversimplified formulas will lead to overly simplistic conclusions on the part of legislators.

K-12 and "the Common Core." The battle over "the Common Core" standards for English language arts and mathematics, feverishly fought in other states, has now spread into Montana. At the lengthy hearing on the bill to repeal Montana's core standards in English and math... well, suffice it to say that many of the proponents failed to meet those very standards.

If you think this issue has nothing to do with higher education, think again. Montana's common core standards are the most important step we've ever made in ensuring that students leave high school college- and career-ready. Nothing would be more helpful to the current debate than the presence of college professors saying, "We need standards at least this comprehensive, specific, and rigorous." I've been disappointed to see so few professors so far. It's not too late. This issue is not going away, and its seemingly peripheral issues—dissatisfaction with the Board of Public Education, confusion about the difference between standards and curriculum, misinformation in general—could ripple into higher education. ✍

*Sen. Mary Sheehy Moe (D-Great Falls) just completed her first term in the legislature, where she served on the Senate Judiciary, Education and Cultural Resources, and Rules Committees. She retired from her position as Montana Deputy Commissioner for Two-Year Education in 2010 after 38 years as a high school and college teacher and higher education administrator.*

**THIS IS THE FIRST COMMISSIONER'S OFFICE IN MY MEMORY IN WHICH ONLY ONE PERSON ON THE ENTIRE CABINET HAS EVER BEEN A TENURED PROFESSOR AND THAT ONE HANDLES BUDGETARY, NOT ACADEMIC, ISSUES. THAT MEANS LEGISLATORS DON'T HAVE DIRECT ACCESS TO THE PERSPECTIVE AND BREADTH OF EXPERIENCE THAT COME WITH YEARS IN THE FACULTY RANKS.**

Montana State Capitol Building





## EXCELLENT SHEEP: THE MISEDUCATION OF THE AMERICAN ELITE AND THE WAY TO A MEANINGFUL LIFE

William Deresiewicz

New York: Free Press, 2014, 245 pages, \$26.00

Reviewed by Henry Gonshak, PhD

Professor of English and History, Montana Tech of the University of Montana



Henry Gonshak

**AS ITS TITLE IMPLIES, THE ESSAY ARGUED THAT THE IVY LEAGUES WERE PRODUCING STUDENTS WHO WERE SHALLOW CAREERISTS, OBSESSED WITH THE MONEY AND STATUS THEY WERE SURE WOULD BE CONFERRED ON THEM BY THEIR DEGREES, RATHER THAN SEEING THEIR EDUCATION AS A CHANCE TO ACQUIRE THE BREADTH OF KNOWLEDGE AND SELF-AWARENESS THE HUMANITIES HAVE TRADITIONALLY PROVIDED.**

In 2008, just after he'd been denied tenure at Yale, William Deresiewicz published an essay in *The American Scholar* entitled, "The Disadvantages of an Elite Education." As its title implies, the essay argued that the Ivy Leagues were producing students who were shallow careerists, obsessed with the money and status they were sure would be conferred on them by their degrees, rather than seeing their education as a chance to acquire the breadth of knowledge and self-awareness the humanities have traditionally provided. Given *The American Scholar's* small circulation, Deresiewicz expected his article to reach a limited audience composed mostly of fellow academics. Instead, as the author reports in *Excellent Sheep: The Miseducation of the American Elite and the Way to a Meaningful Life* (an expansion of the essay into a book), after only a few weeks the piece had been viewed over a hundred thousand times, with many more viewings to come in the months and years ahead.

Deresiewicz realized he'd struck a nerve. "As it turned out from the many emails I began to get," he writes, "the vast majority from current students and recent graduates, I had evoked a widespread discontent among today's young high achievers—a sense that the system was cheating them out of a meaningful education, instilling them with values they rejected but somehow couldn't get beyond, and failing to equip them to construct their futures" (3).

*Excellent Sheep* is divided into two long sections. The first discusses what Deresiewicz sees as wrong with today's Ivy League (and, by extension, with much of higher education in general). The second section outlines Deresiewicz's prescription for a college education he argues should replace the current system. It's unfortunate that Deresiewicz chooses to focus narrowly on the Ivy Leagues because his incisive analysis is highly relevant to academia as a whole. On the other hand, since the Ivy Leagues are generally seen as the pinnacle of American

higher education, and since these schools contribute much of the country's leadership class, perhaps the author's focus is justified. In any event, *Excellent Sheep*, while not perfect, is an extremely important book that anyone concerned about the American university should read."

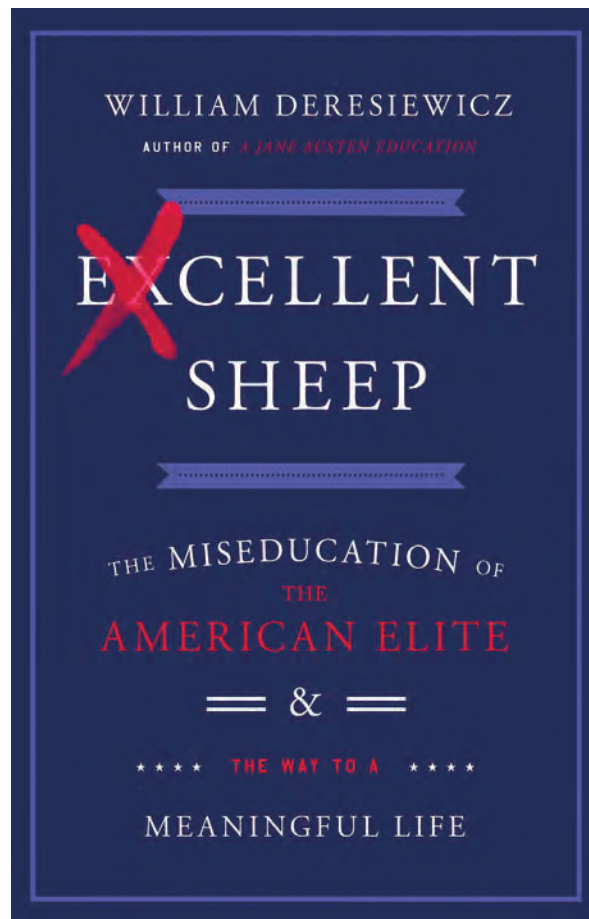
Deresiewicz's portrait of the typical Ivy League student will ring true for many professors, and not only at Harvard and Yale. Such a student has been groomed almost from birth by his or her parents to enter the Ivy League. The author maintains that starting in the 1980s "the decade saw the explosion of the college admissions industry: test prep, tutors, guidebooks, consultants" (34). Especially wealthy parents spent hundreds of dollars preparing their children for the SATs and other standardized tests, while pressuring their offspring to take as many Advanced Placement courses as possible, rack up extracurricular activities—anything to pad their resumes. Such opportunism also abounds in the composition of college application essays, says Deresiewicz, where "experience itself has been reduced to instrumental function," as students learn "to commodify [their] experiences for the application" (57). In other words, rather than having experiences and then writing about them, students have experiences in order to supply them with topics for an application essay.

Like many other recent books on higher education (e.g., Gerald Graff's excellent *Professing Literature: An Institutional History*, 1987), *Excellent Sheep* discerns a basic conflict between the two primary models for the contemporary American university: the British "teaching college" and the German research university. While the British system focuses on student instruction, mostly conveyed through small-group tutorials, the German model sees the university's primary function as the production of professor-scholars who then pursue research



far too advanced to be understood by the average American undergraduate. In Deresiewicz's estimation, the German model has won out in America. He detects a strong anti-teaching bias, especially in the Ivy Leagues, where promotion is determined almost exclusively according to the "publish or perish" imperative, and star professors are given so much release time to do their research that they rarely see an actual underclassman. In particular, introductory courses (which Deresiewicz views as the most important in the entire curriculum) are largely taught by untenured junior professors, or by ill-prepared, woefully underpaid adjunct instructors. Indeed, adjuncts compose the most rapidly growing population among college teachers, since, in our depressed economy, when university budgets have been cut, this is by far the cheapest way to instruct students.

Deresiewicz also questions the common claim made by elite schools that they educate a "diverse" student body, one whose placement in these select institutions has been determined by individual "merit," rather than, as in the past, by wealth and privilege. The author concedes that today's Ivy League students, rather than belonging to a WASP aristocracy as they used to, are diverse in terms of geography, ethnicity, religion and gender. But he insists they almost all share one thing in common: just like the old WASP aristocracy, most of them are rich. Deresiewicz argues that the Ivy League's financial aid policies are skewed toward the undeserving: "Since SAT scores closely correlate with family wealth, that means more money to kids who don't need it and less to those who do" (68). As for the Ivy League's alleged "diversity," Deresiewicz claims that "diversity of sex and race has become a cover, even an alibi, for increasing economic resegregation. ...Kids at schools like Stanford think that their environment is diverse if one comes from Missouri, another one from Pakistan, or one plays the cello and the other lacrosse—never mind that all of them have parents who are bankers and doctors. They aren't meeting 'all kinds of people,' as they like to say. They're meeting the same kind of people; they just happen to come from all kinds of places" (209 & 210). Thus, Deresiewicz sees the Ivy Leagues as contributing, deliberately or not, to the class stratification and economic inequality that increasingly plague American society, as many liberal pundits and politicians (including President Obama) have lamented.



Deresiewicz notes the dramatic shift in student majors from the 1960s to the present. "The dreaded English major is now the choice of all of 3 percent," he reports. "Business, at 21 percent, accounts for more than half again as many majors as all of the arts and humanities combined." He sees this change in majors as reflecting a shift in students' core beliefs: "In 1971, 73 percent of incoming freshmen said that it was essential or very important to 'develop a meaningful philosophy of life,' 37 percent to be 'very well-off financially' (not well-off, note, but very well-off). By 2011, the numbers were almost reversed, 47 percent and 80 percent, respectively. For well over thirty years, we've been loudly announcing that happiness is money, with a side order of fame. No wonder students have come to believe that college is all about getting a job" (79).

The author views academia's current craze for on-line education, which, in its most drastic form, has produced MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses), whereby thousands of students are taught by a "master teacher" through their

**"KIDS AT SCHOOLS LIKE STANFORD THINK THAT THEIR ENVIRONMENT IS DIVERSE IF ONE COMES FROM MISSOURI, ANOTHER ONE FROM PAKISTAN, OR ONE PLAYS THE CELLO AND THE OTHER LACROSSE—NEVER MIND THAT ALL OF THEM HAVE PARENTS WHO ARE BANKERS AND DOCTORS."**

– William Deresiewicz

**“FOR WELL OVER THIRTY YEARS, WE’VE BEEN LOUDLY ANNOUNCING THAT HAPPINESS IS MONEY, WITH A SIDE ORDER OF FAME. NO WONDER STUDENTS HAVE COME TO BELIEVE THAT COLLEGE IS ALL ABOUT GETTING A JOB.”**

– William Deresiewicz

computers, as another example of how our educational system worsens economic and class divisions: “Students complain that their professors are remote, so we’re going to make them more remote (literally so, in fact). ... They need challenging assignments and detailed, individualized feedback, so we’re going to give them multiple-choice quizzes that we grade by machine. ... [MOOCs] promote a range of practices and behaviors that higher education ought to fight against: passive learning, diminished attention, the displacing of reading by watching, teaching as showmanship, and the professorial star system. ... MOOCs are not about democratizing education. That is just their cover story. They’re about reinforcing existing hierarchies...as the higher education market lurches and heaves. The kids at Harvard get to interact with their professors. The kids at San Jose State get to watch the kids at Harvard interact with their professors” (185-186). He also notes, “Only about 4 percent of students who start [a MOOC] actually finish it, but most of these are adult learners who already have degrees and are looking for enrichment or new skills—people, that is, who are capable of directing their own education. Yet that is exactly what kids go to college to learn how to do” (187).

Moreover, since the Ivy Leagues largely produce America’s leadership class, the shift to more vocationally-oriented study that satisfies students’ rabid career goals has produced leaders who are really “followers,” obsessed with climbing the social ladder, an endeavor that demands social conformity, rather than working for the public good, or becoming gadflies who provide much-needed critiques of our culture. Deresiewicz quotes the academic and public intellectual Mark Edmundson: “What people usually mean by a leader now is someone who, in a very energetic, upbeat way, shares all the values of the people who are in charge. Leaders tend to be ... little grown-ups who don’t challenge the big grown-ups who run the place” (135). Clearly, this state of affairs is bad news for American democracy.

What are Deresiewicz’s solutions to these dismal circumstances? Basically, he advocates adopting an educational system that is the polar opposite of the one currently in place. Primarily, he supports a curriculum focused on the liberal arts, rather than on career-oriented fields like business and economics. *Excellent Sheep* devotes many pages to touting the virtues of a humanis-

tic education. Deresiewicz quotes the poet John Keats, who said the world is a “vale of Soul-making,” in order to argue that this vital transformation is facilitated by the liberal arts (83). Humanistic education, the author insists, inculcates in students a “habit of skepticism. ... It means learning not to take things for granted, so you can reach your own conclusions” (79). By studying, say, literature, we are forced to transcend our narrow selves in order to empathize with characters with whom we may have nothing superficial in common, but who nonetheless enthrall us. In this way, we expand as human beings, turning into individuals rather than mere products of our background. Deresiewicz endorses Great Books curricula such as that offered at Saint John’s University, not because the “classics” are the only books worth reading, but because an understanding of our civilization’s past is required for fathoming the present.

Contrary to received wisdom, Deresiewicz insists that a B.A. in English or philosophy isn’t a “wasted” degree that can’t possibly get you a decent job. He refers to a *Wall Street Journal* poll that surveyed 318 companies and found that “93 percent cite ‘critical thinking, communication and problem-solving skills as more important than a candidate’s undergraduate major,’ in part because they are filling positions with ‘broader responsibilities’ and ‘more complex challenges’ than in the past” (151). Of course, “critical-thinking, communication and problem-solving” are precisely the sort of “soft” skills engendered by the liberal arts.

Disdaining huge lecture classes, Deresiewicz insists that small seminars are the ideal venue in which to teach the liberal arts, because they force students to become actively engaged through class discussions, rather than passively letting their heads be filled with information from lectures. As for teachers, Deresiewicz sees them serving as mentors, guiding their students in the process of “Soul-making,” even functioning as surrogates for parents who may be aghast at their children’s choice of an “impractical” major. Turning to his own experiences in class, the author writes, “I myself became a decent teacher only when I started to relinquish some control over the classroom—stopped worrying so much about ‘getting my points across’ and recognized that those moments of disorder that would sometimes occur, those spontaneous outbreaks of intelligence, were the most interesting parts of the class, for both my students and myself”

(176). He concludes, “My years in the classroom, as well as my conversations with young people about their college experiences, have convinced me there are two things, above all, that students want from their professors. Not, as people commonly believe, to entertain them in class and hand out easy A’s. That’s what they retreat to, once they see that nothing better is on offer. What they really want is that their teachers challenge them and that they care about them. They don’t want fun and games; they want the real thing” (177).

At the end of *Excellent Sheep*, Deresiewicz offers some practical recommendations. He advises parents and high school seniors looking to enter college to disabuse themselves of the delusion that a quality education can only be had at an Ivy League school. On the contrary, the author insists that a fine education can be found at public universities, for a fraction of the cost, especially since public schools often boast Honors Colleges, where the liberal arts are studied in small seminars. In particular, Deresiewicz urges students to choose small, so-called “second tier” liberal arts schools, such as Reed, Kenyon, Wesleyan, Sewanee and Mount Holyoke—schools that, in his estimation, “instead of trying to compete with Harvard and Yale, have retained their allegiance to real educational values” (195). Deresiewicz points out that, given the current glut of Ph.D.’s in the humanities, churned out by the hundreds from irresponsible graduate programs into a depleted job market, great teachers can be found virtually anywhere, even at the most obscure institutions—teachers happy to have a tenure-track position at *any* school. The author also recommends that college affirmative action policies be based on class rather than race, which would reverse the current trend whereby a middle- or upper-class African-American student is given preferential treatment over an impoverished white student from Appalachia. But most of all, Deresiewicz wants to upend the current *raison d’être* of a college education, transforming the system from a factory that produces status-seeking students bent on ritzy careers, to an environment that nurtures independent, introspective, cultured human beings.

But there is a contradiction in Deresiewicz’s argument. He seems to want to have it both ways. On the one hand, he maintains that students who major in the liberal arts should, after graduation, ignore status-seeking and

embrace a non-materialistic life. Yet he also argues that liberal arts majors can find financially lucrative, prestigious careers.

As Deresiewicz demonstrates throughout *Excellent Sheep*, most Ivy League students, who are both careerist and convinced that majoring in the liberal arts is a sure path to the poor house, will dismiss either argument. Students who attend schools other than the Ivy Leagues share this attitude to an even greater degree. At Montana Tech where I teach English, the majority of the student body, most coming from middle- or lower-class backgrounds, are convinced that, though the liberal arts may be entertaining and even enlightening to study, majoring in the discipline is a luxury they simply can’t afford. Our administration abets this perspective by “informing” prospective students that they can make big bucks with a “practical” major like engineering or business. Meanwhile, our entire society reinforces this viewpoint through its deeply entrenched careerism and materialism. Clearly, for Deresiewicz’s prescriptions to be taken seriously, a societal upheaval is required. Such an upheaval is especially unlikely if American students continue to suffer from the economic anxiety that plagues them today.

Like my panicked students, I am not as optimistic as Deresiewicz that students can succeed in the corporate world with a major in English or philosophy. Nonetheless, the central argument of *Excellent Sheep* is an important one. It is possible to lead a happy life while rejecting American materialism. If anything, materialism seems to lead to perpetual unhappiness, because there is always a new object to want and another rung on the social ladder to be scaled.

As well, the job market in technical fields invariably fluctuates. In contrast, a liberal arts degree is less affected by economic shifts. Such a major provides transferable skills, which can prove advantageous to those working in a wide range of professions. After all, nearly every well-paying job requires employees to write and communicate well. Indeed, as literacy rates in America continue to decline, such skills may well become even more prized.

In short, I highly doubt higher education will follow Deresiewicz’s proposals any time soon. But it would be a boon to the American university, and to American society as a whole, if it did. 🍷

**HE ADVISES PARENTS AND HIGH SCHOOL SENIORS LOOKING TO ENTER COLLEGE TO DISABUSE THEMSELVES OF THE DELUSION THAT A QUALITY EDUCATION CAN ONLY BE HAD AT AN IVY LEAGUE SCHOOL. ON THE CONTRARY, THE AUTHOR INSISTS THAT A FINE EDUCATION CAN BE FOUND AT PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES, FOR A FRACTION OF THE COST, ESPECIALLY SINCE PUBLIC SCHOOLS OFTEN BOAST HONORS COLLEGES, WHERE THE LIBERAL ARTS ARE STUDIED IN SMALL SEMINARS.**

## IN DEFENSE OF A LIBERAL EDUCATION

Fareed Zakaria

WW Norton, March 2015

Reviewed by Marvin Lansverk, PhD

Professor of English Literature, Montana State University



Marvin Lansverk

*“I understand that we need a certain number of philosophers, and I understand that it’s important to have a certain number of people who study history. But we’re not currently creating a lot of jobs in those areas. So we have to look at what curriculums we really need . . . People who are getting degrees in philosophy and history, God bless them, it’s wonderful that they’re critical thinkers. But now they’re going back to a college of technology to get a life skill to get a job.”*

– Brian Schweitzer, Governor of Montana, 2005-2013.  
(*Hechinger Report*, June 27, 2012)

Perhaps I should start with a bias warning: I went to a liberal arts university. I teach English literature. I like the liberal arts, whether as a major or part of a broad-based undergraduate education. And I’m dismayed by the recent rhetorical turn in the media, along with legislative and policy initiatives, away from the liberal arts—as if they are suddenly passé or something to be feared your kid will become interested in, like drugs, especially when such expressions are accompanied by statements implying that the liberal arts don’t lead to employable skills. As an antidote, I like to read defenses of liberal education, whether John Henry Newman’s nineteenth century classic *The Idea of a University*, or articles from current CEOs explaining why they actually prefer to hire liberal arts majors, or statistics that show that the salaries of liberal arts majors stack up favorably against other majors, or books like this latest one by Fareed Zakaria, someone with a real job—if being a public intellectual, editor of *Foreign Affairs* and of *Newsweek* and *Time*, a TV host and commentator, a Washington Post columnist, a college professor, and an influential writer count as having a real job. Thus even before I picked it up, I expected I would like Zakaria’s recent *In Defense of a Liberal Education*, and I do: but not just because it validates my own views. Actually I disagree with a number of his views and am bothered by some of his analysis, which seems overly glib. But what I especially like about Zakaria’s modest book is that it isn’t simply another jeremiad about the ills of American higher education, nor an uninformed call for radical changes which too often tend to

throw the proverbial baby out with the bathwater, nor an ideological rant with more ideology than information. Instead, it’s a welcome call for balance, written with balance: balancing data, personal stories, social policy, and an understanding of the history of liberal education in America and the multiple purposes of higher education, all accomplished in the context of Zakaria’s deep knowledge of the present social and political global landscape.

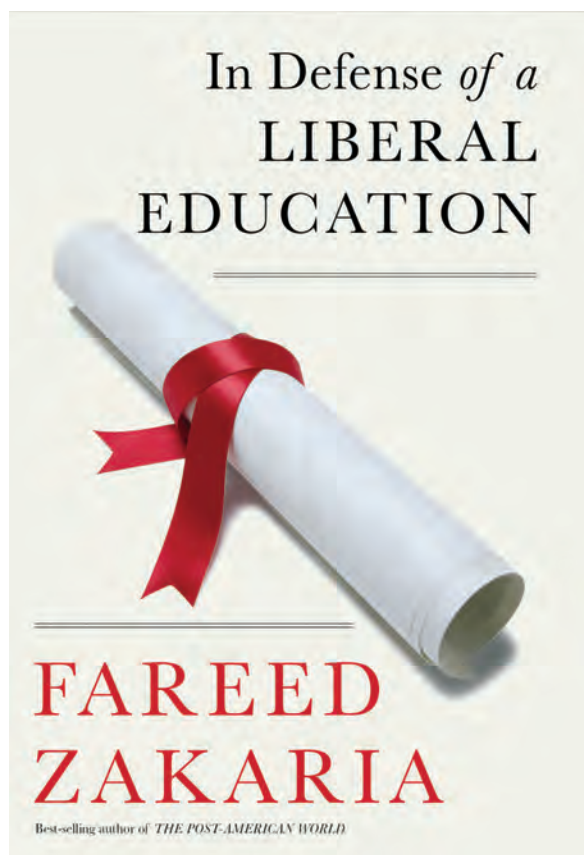
The book started as a commencement address defending liberal education to the 2014 graduating class of Sarah Lawrence College—certainly preaching to the choir. Ten months later, the well-received address was expanded into this book, the best audience for which now might be said to be the skeptics, or cold-cruel-world realists who wonder if our students still have time for Chaucer when our global competitiveness is at stake. To them, Zakaria says yes, the liberal arts matter, using his own life story as an important perspective on the material, making the book partly a personal memoir, partly a history of higher education, and partly a call for more informed and data-driven education policies, especially by our leaders who should know better, whether President Obama’s “I promise you, folks can make a lot more potentially, with skilled manufacturing or the trades than they might with an art history degree,” or the governors from Texas, Florida, North Carolina, and Wisconsin with their recent attempts to de-fund the liberal arts at their state universities, with Rick Scott of Florida’s: “Is it a vital interest of the state to have more anthropologists? I don’t think so.”



Zakaria's response is this book. It is actually a collection of six essays (the six chapters of the book) with a fairly broad focus. But what ties the chapters together is Zakaria's personal story and his ongoing ethical authority on the subject: as someone who draws daily on his liberal education and the life skills it imparted.

Chapter One, "Coming to America," tells Zakaria's personal story, of being raised in India in its education system focused on memorization, content, and tests (steering children, boys especially, almost exclusively into science and business), then almost on a lark finding himself applying to and getting into Yale in the 1980's (when liberal arts institutions in the U.S. were barely on the radar of Indians). Zakaria then tells how at Yale he discovered the power of a liberal education and through it also discovered his future path in international politics and economics, majoring in history (subsequently earning a PhD in Government from Harvard). What makes the story powerful and contemporary is that it's a version of the classic "American" story, in its Global 2.0 incarnation, of an individual making good through hard work, determination, and exposure to the American system of higher education. And the story itself is a necessary reminder to policymakers now, appropriately worried about American global competitiveness and statistics showing us falling behind in the educational attainment of our population. And the moral of the story is that our education system, with all its problems, is still the envy of the world. And still producing remarkable results.

Chapter Two, "A Brief History of Liberal Education," though brief, covers a two thousand year history, starting with the Greeks, dashing through the establishment of medieval universities, with a glance at Britain, to an examination of the American system, with a focus on Harvard's curricular innovations, the rise of electives, and the emergence of our standard liberal arts curricula—with a core curriculum, a major, and a healthy dose of exploration and free choice. Zakaria's theme throughout is that societies have always struggled with balancing competing needs in their education systems, that curricula in this country have always been undergoing changes, that they aren't frozen in the medieval past (which some critics continue to claim). Nevertheless, Zakaria recognizes that improvements still need to be made: especially in increasing the scientific literacy of all students.



Zakaria again offers a personal example of change, of Yale's recent joint venture (where Zakaria had become a trustee) with the National University of Singapore to establish a new liberal arts institution in Asia, Yale-NUS College, which opened its doors Fall 2013. Recognizing Singapore's own need to develop more of the kinds of creativity and critical thinking and entrepreneurship characteristic of American higher education—and even more of the self discovery—it has made a recent bet on more liberal education, not less.

The value of this Chapter 2 actually lies in its brevity. It isn't that the history Zakaria tells here is new, and it is developed in far less detail than in the sources that Zakaria draws upon (carefully citing the sources in this first book since his own citation scandal in 2012 that we have seen affect other public intellectuals similarly writing at speed with research staffs, and therefore sometimes not as careful about citations as the standards of academic research require). But overviews have their role as well. And many current skeptics or other busy people paying only occasional attention to higher education debates

**... WHAT TIES THE CHAPTERS TOGETHER IS ZAKARIA'S PERSONAL STORY AND HIS ONGOING ETHICAL AUTHORITY ON THE SUBJECT: AS SOMEONE WHO DRAWS DAILY ON HIS LIBERAL EDUCATION AND THE LIFE SKILLS IT IMPARTED.**

### **IN BRIEF, WHAT LIBERAL EDUCATION IMPARTS, AND WHAT IT DID FOR HIM PERSONALLY, IS THREE THINGS: 1) IT TEACHES YOU TO WRITE, 2) TO THINK, AND 3) TO LEARN.**

aren't going to take the time to read the comprehensive histories of the liberal arts (such as Wesleyan's president, Michael Roth's 2014 erudite *Beyond the University: Why Liberal Education Matters*, which Zakaria also cites). So there is value in quickly retelling the story, reminding us of how we got here, and reminding us what the *liberal* in *liberal education* means, which seems especially important for those made queasy by having *any* association with a term that also serves as a political label as well (Zakaria's own political views have been variously characterized as centrist, moderate, liberal, and/or conservative). In this case, Zakaria reminds readers that the *liberal* in *liberal education* has its roots in a two thousand year history of liberation and freedom—and not in 21st century American politics.

Chapter Three, "Learning to Think," finally gets down to the business of defending liberal education. And the lead-in is the question: but what about jobs? Thus, the arguments Zakaria makes become both philosophical and practical at the same time, matching the balance that characterizes the book. His specific arguments why liberal education must continue to be valued aren't new, but the examples and topical asides are. In brief, what liberal education imparts, and what it did for him personally, is three things: 1) it teaches you to write, 2) to think, and 3) to learn. This bald summary isn't that interesting but the balance of examples, anecdotes, quotes from CEOs and data that Zakaria compiles makes for compelling reading. And one of the more interesting threads Zakaria pulls on is the paradox of international test scores—such as the, the Program for International Assessment (PISA), on which the U.S. and other nations with educational systems more like ours tend to do poorly on, revealing an increasing lack of preparation and competence in a variety of subjects by our students, yet whose results don't track with actual global competitiveness and success. While a highly complex issue, one lesson—relevant in an age of increasing testing regimes—is that not everything that matters can be measured. Quoting Singapore's former minister of education comparing our system to theirs, Zakaria reports Tharman Shanmugaratnam's comparative comments: "Yours is a talent meritocracy, ours is an exam meritocracy. There are some parts of the intellect that we are not able to test well—like creativity, curiosity, a sense of adventure, ambition. Most of

all, America has a culture of learning that challenges conventional wisdom, even if it means challenging authority. These are areas where Singapore must learn from America."

Chapter 4, "The Natural Aristocracy," is an eclectic chapter continuing Zakaria's theme of meritocracy and capitalism as effective and necessary backdrops for our education system (he takes the term natural aristocracy from Thomas Jefferson, indicating a meritocratic system based on talent rather than birth, wealth and privilege). And he starts with a meditation on the founding fathers and especially on Ben Franklin as the poster child for the American system. Interestingly, this is also the chapter where Zakaria addresses some of the problems bedeviling higher education, including costs that continue to outpace inflation and the continued cost shifting from public sources to individuals, leading to increased individual debt. Zakaria doesn't have a single solution to offer, but—experienced in the power of mass media to reach all parts of the globe as he is—he, like many others, is fascinated by the promises of technology and distance delivery of courses, especially MOOCs (still new enough to require an identification of the acronym: Massive Open Online Courses). Still in their infancy, they already are expanding access to information, to great teachers, and to American liberal education. One thing Zakaria finds interesting about MOOCs is that students worldwide aren't just seeking out engineering and technical courses in this online environment; they are also interested in the liberal arts.

Chapters 5 and 6, "Knowledge and Power," and "In Defense of Today's Youth," turn to even broader subjects, though are each short chapters. Chapter 5 addresses the power of knowledge to change the world, and Chapter 6 is Zakaria's attempt to address the value of a liberal education in developing the individual life of the mind and ourselves as human beings. Though worthy subjects, both read a bit more like newspaper columns than book chapters at this point—and it's not surprising that the most frequently referenced source in these latter chapters is *New York Times* columnist David Brooks, whom Zakaria sees himself in dialogue with here. Ultimately, it is dialogue that Zakaria wants to promote with this book—informed dialogue. And his method of provoking it is to provide a "zoomed out" Google Earth view of American higher education, which—to keep the map

metaphor going a bit—functions as a kind of Mercator projection with the importance of liberal education at the center. And as such, it is successful, bearing the strengths and weaknesses of such an intent. It makes effective use of Zakaria’s compelling success story, making *his* story emblematic of our times; it provides a good overview of issues in higher education; it provides a useful survey of many recent good books on the same subject (from Andrew Delbanco’s *College: What It Was, Is, and Should Be* (2012), to *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses* (2010), and *Excellent Sheep* (2014)—all previously reviewed in Montana Professor—the latter in this issue); it’s written in a breezy, quick-reading journalistic prose, and it provides much concrete data to counter the recent public narrative that we’ve outgrown or can no longer afford our childish preoccupation with liberal education. As for its weaknesses, like an unfocused essay, perhaps, the book tries to do too much, thereby having to

cover territory too quickly, occasionally relying on too many generalizations in the meantime. As such, it’s not always possible to tell what the generalizations mean (e.g. “Bill Gates was one of the first larger-than-life private figures in contemporary America”). Also, like many books on higher education, there’s a tendency to focus on and continue our culture’s obsession with our so called “elite” or “best schools” when much of the information is actually relevant to the whole education infrastructure—including the Montana University System. And sometimes Zakaria wraps up a survey of complex issues with a simple question as a conclusion, such as “Is this so bad?” That method, however, is a good indication of the purpose of the book. Its focus is on common sense, from someone with an uncommon biography, who is criticizing what is becoming too common: taking for granted the importance of a liberal education in this country that not only *can* we afford, but that we *can’t* afford to do without. 🖋️

**ITS FOCUS IS ON COMMON SENSE, FROM SOMEONE WITH AN UNCOMMON BIOGRAPHY, WHO IS CRITICIZING WHAT IS BECOMING TOO COMMON: TAKING FOR GRANTED THE IMPORTANCE OF A LIBERAL EDUCATION IN THIS COUNTRY THAT NOT ONLY CAN WE AFFORD, BUT THAT WE CAN'T AFFORD TO DO WITHOUT.**

**MONTANA PROFESSOR, INC.**

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH  
MONTANA STATE UNIVERSITY  
BOZEMAN, MONTANA 59717

NONPROFIT ORG.

U.S. POSTAGE

**PAID**

BOZEMAN, MT 59718

PERMIT NO. 69



**MTPROF.MSUN.EDU**