



MEDIA RELEASE

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College Presidents, Legislators Gather to Discuss Community College Concerns

MILES CITY, MONTANA: Miles Community College (MCC) and Montana Senator Ken Bogner (District 19) hosted a Legislative Luncheon earlier this week on the MCC Campus. MCC President Dr. Ron Slinger, as well as Dawson Community College (DCC) President Justin Villmer, were both on hand to discuss concerns and current needs for Montana community colleges as both a whole and as individual campuses.

Guests for the luncheon included Montana Representatives Bob Phalen and Jerry Schillinger; Representative elects Greg Kmetz and Gary Parry; Custer County Commissioners Jason Strouf, Keith Holmlund, and Kevin Krausz; recently elected Custer County Commissioner Jeff Faycosh; City of Glendive Mayor Teresea Olson; DCC Trustees and staff; MCC Trustees, Executive Team, and staff.

Bogner spoke about the importance of the value of community college education. He reminded the legislators in attendance that community colleges are not funded in the same capacity as other colleges and universities within Montana, and they are provided with less state funding. The senator also highlighted the higher percentage of Montana residents that attend community colleges, as well as the higher percentage of community college students that remain in Montana upon graduating.

“We need to shift our focus to community colleges,” Bogner stated, after adding that four-year universities continue to drive higher education policy and receive funds for capital improvements.

During the luncheon, both President Slinger and President Villmer spoke about the importance of “community”. “Community in the name of our college means we are here to support our community,” commented Villmer. He attributed community colleges to being nimble and designed to react and respond to the needs of the

region. Villmer highlighted the welding program at DCC, which is currently running at maximum capacity and meeting a workforce need in an industry lacking laborers and skilled tradespeople. He also mentioned the need to create trade programs in Eastern Montana for careers such as plumbers and electricians, alleviating current long-distance travel for students looking to complete similar programs.

President Slinger reiterated the importance of community. "As President Villmer said, community is our middle name," stated Slinger. "You could not invest more in Montana citizens than with community colleges."

Slinger also spoke about the difficulties of finding employees for local and regional businesses. "We hear it every day," he stated. "They can't find help." During his presentation, Slinger highlighted opportunities MCC gives students upon graduation. The MCC Nursing Program was accredited through the Accreditation Commission for Education in Nursing (ACEN), which provides an extra level of professional accreditation for nursing students, on top of the standard Montana State Board of Nursing accreditation, and helps expand their pool when job hunting. "This makes employment for our nursing students limitless," stated Slinger.

Slinger also focused on new opportunities through MCC including a partnership with Sidney High School in Sidney, Montana, allowing for the instruction of the Commercial Driver's License (CDL) program to be taught to high school seniors via distance learning. "This helps feed the need for CDL drivers," said Slinger.

MCC is also filling workforce needs through the Elementary Education Pathway in partnership with Dickinson State University (DSU). The void of certified teachers continues to grow in Montana, especially within rural communities. "We are trying to bring opportunities to Eastern Montana to help meet those needs," commented Slinger. This partnership allows students to complete the four-year degree through MCC, without having to leave the Miles City campus.

The new Workforce Solutions Program at MCC is also filling the need for properly skilled employees and overall employee retention within Montana businesses. Personalized guided pathways are available within partnering companies where new and current employees can receive education specific to their industry. The businesses are able to customize a certificate available to their employees, training them in the areas they need. This allows for overall employee retention, as well as provides resources and education needed to further their careers within those companies. Stockman Bank of Montana was MCC's first partner in this program and has begun its second cohort of students this fall semester.

After listening to both presidents speak, Bogner returned to the podium to ask what legislators can do to help alleviate the struggles that the colleges are facing

on campus. Slinger spoke first about the issues revolving around salary compressions and staffing retention within the college itself, noting that wage gaps are now being viewed as a high priority.

He also mentioned the need for capital improvements and how the current funding formulas do not allow for keeping enough funds in reserves, in the event of major campus projects such as roofing. Slinger added that MCC, DCC, and Flathead Valley Community College are not part of the Capital Improvement fund through the state, and asking for one-time funding is incredibly challenging. "We have a heavy equipment program that we would like to bring back but frankly (the college) needs \$1.9 million dollars if we are going to run that program," said Slinger. "I have no way of building a reserve fund that would be able to replace that equipment (when needed) with these current mechanisms."

Villmer also spoke about the need to be able to retain employees and that seeking skilled employees in Eastern Montana has its struggles, due to not being able to match competitive wages. He did inform the legislators that the employee benefits received through the Montana University System (MUS) are extremely helpful when recruiting new faculty and staff.

Slinger reminded the legislators at the end of the presentations of what exactly MCC and community colleges are all about. "Two simple words," he stated. "Hope and opportunity. The hope for a better life and the opportunity to make it a reality."

Following both presidents' presentations, the legislators and other guests enjoyed lunch, while Bogner encouraged more questions during the social time.

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