Date: December 2, 2014

To: Faculty Senate

From: Academic Programs Working Group members Steve Cherry, Doug Downs, Bill Brown, Kirsten DeMoss, Robin Gerlach, and Randy Babbitt (chair).

Re: Level II Proposal for a RN-MN Degree in Nursing program

The RN to MN program addresses a critical need for Nurses trained as clinical leaders in Montana. There is significant interest in the program by current registered nurses. The RN to MN in Nursing program proposal would provisionally admit registered nurses with significant and meritorious work experience and an Associates degree in Nursing to MSU’s graduate Master’s degree program in Nursing. Full admission to the graduate program would be granted after successful completion of transitional courses. Successful students would then parallel the currently established MN program.

The University Graduate Council UGC unanimously approved the proposal for a RN-MN in Nursing program and sent the proposal and their review documents (see Nursing Responses to Graduate Council Questions) on to APWG for review on 10/15/14. The proposal and related documents are posted on the Faculty Senate web page. Seven comments were received via website (3 in favor and 4 opposed). The APWG chair met with Nursing on 11/3/14 to discuss the proposal. APWG reviewed the proposal and drafted initial review and sent this to Nursing on 11/7/14. APWG chair met with Nursing Dean to discuss initial review on 11/13/14. The Nursing Dean responded to the initial review on 11/18/14 and met with full APWG on 11/25/14 to discuss the proposal. APWG then drafted this recommendation. All of the documents from the above meetings and responses are posted on the Faculty Senate web site.

From the review and reflected in the comments received, these main concerns about the program were identified: 1) allowing admission to MSU’s graduate school without a baccalaureate degree; 2) use of work experience to overcome a lack of the credits typically associated with entrance into the graduate school; 3) sustainability of the program given the discontinuation of similar programs in adjoining states; 4) potential program overlap with or detraction from the traditional BN to MN program at MSU or the 3 RN to BS programs in MUS system. These concerns and mitigating factors are discussed here:

1) This RN to MN Nursing program will not be the first MSU program that allows admission to a graduate program without a baccalaureate degree; however, in the precedent case, the graduate program is at Washington State University (WSU). The WIMU program admits students who have completed at least 64 credits of specific coursework. While a BS is not required to enter
the WIMU program, it is strongly recommended. Admitted students attend MSU for one more year before continuing on to get a Doctorate in Veterinary Medicine from WSU. Thus, the RN to MN Nursing program would be the first MSU program to allow admission without a baccalaureate degree to a MSU graduate program that results in a MSU graduate degree without a baccalaureate degree awarded on the way.

Industrial and Management Systems Engineering (IMSE) allows admission to a 4+1 program prior to a student obtaining a BS, but the BS must be earned along the way to the master’s degree.

However, the proposed MSU RN to MN program is similar to programs at the University of North Carolina – Chapel Hill (one of the top Nursing schools in the country) and University of San Francisco, where an RN can earn an MN without a BN.

2) The RN to MN program would admit students into our graduate school with only 96 college credits. An RN with an Associate’s degree has completed at least 72 credits. With the 24 transitional courses (12 Core and 12 Nursing) at MSU, a student in the program will therefore have completed 96 credits upon full entry into the MSU graduate program in Nursing. However, admission requirements for the program include over 2 years of meritorious work experience in Nursing. This work experience might be equated to the clinical and lab credit hours required for a BN (above the credit hours required for a AA in Nursing). A typical BN in Nursing earns 14 credits of clinical and 1 credit of lab above an associate degree in Nursing (see Nursing Responses to the Academic Programs Working Group Questions). If this prior work experience is taken into account as “credits”, RN to MN students would have the equivalent of 111 “credits” towards a BS before entering the Nursing graduate program. (It should be pointed out that it has not been proposed to actually award college credit for this work experience.) The remaining 9 credits short of 120 credits will be covered concurrently with courses taken at the master’s level. This is similar to the current IMSE 4+1 BS/MS program at MSU, where there is 6 credits of overlap between MS and BS degree credits. It should be pointed out that the IE BS program is a 128 credit degree and students are required to have 120 credits before entering the graduate program. Thus, the proposed Nursing program would be the first MSU program that allows a student with less than 120 credits to enter an MSU graduate program that leads to an MSU graduate degree. A student in the program will be required to earn a total of 130 – 132 undergraduate and graduate credits before being awarded a MN degree.

To overcome this deficiency in credits for graduate admission in the proposed RN to MN program, the admission standards to the RN to MN require significantly more than just 2 years’ experience as a registered nurse (see “Metric for Review of Applicant for Admission” on FS website). Admission to the RN to MN program requires of an applicant extensive and meritorious achievement in leadership roles, extra certification, awards, and presentations. An additional argument for not requiring the BS clinical and lab credits earned at MSU is that the registered nurses in the RN to MN program are already trained in clinical and lab practices well beyond this level, so that taking them back to basic training would be a waste of time. It is noted that the successful RN to MN graduate will not get a BS from MSU as a result of the deficiency in credits.
Despite this deficiency in earned credits, the road from college entry to an MN in Nursing via the RN to MN program is a long one. Typically 3 years to earn a AA, 2+ years of work experience, 1 year of transitional courses in RN to MN program, and 2.5 years in MN program adds up to 8.5 years full time work and training to earn a Master’s degree, much longer than most programs.

3) The proposal, supporting reference material, and letters of support document a strong need for Nurses trained at the Master’s level, especially in Montana, and document a high demand from prospective students. Thus, the proposed program would help to significantly serve the needs of Montana. However, two programs in nearby states (Idaho and North Dakota) started and discontinued similar RN to MN programs, due to lack of qualified applicants. Thus, sustainability of the program may be at issue. The immediate need and public good may justify starting the program regardless, but if sustainability of the program does become an issue, it is imperative, given the arguments above, that the admission standards are not lowered to sustain enrollment. Lower standards would defeat the purpose of producing educated nurses (not just degreed nurses) and would instead reduce the quality of the MSU MN graduates and be a disservice to Montana’s healthcare system.

4) There are three RN to BN programs in the MUS system (MSU-Northern, Salish, and MT-Tech). Some reviewers have been concerned that a RN to MN program would diminish the enrollment in these programs. Advocates of the proposal argue that there is a different demographic in the RN to BN programs compared to the proposed RN to MN program, and the new program will not drain enrollment from other MUS programs. Letters of support from the RN to BN programs in question and from health industry employers (see Faculty Senate website) back up this argument.

The APWG weighed the pros and cons of these and other concerns and ultimately voted unanimously in favor of recommending approval by the full Senate. The particular benefits of the RN to BN program to the state of Montana carried significant weight. APWG’s recommendation is conditioned on assurances that the standards for admission to the program will not be relaxed now or in the future. Also, approval of this program by Faculty Senate should not constitute any implied precedence of standards for future proposals in the areas of credit for work experience and admission without a baccalaureate degree into other graduate programs, in particular non-professional graduate programs; APWG’s recommendation is premised in part on the uniqueness of the Nursing profession and the specific proposal in question. Finally, documents intended for incorporation into the proposal produced since the last version of the proposal must be incorporated into the Level II proposal prior to submission for approval by the Board of Regents.