The purpose of these funds is to: purchase a Content Management System (CMS), a software system that would globally improve the look, feel and quality of the entire MSU Website; make it easier to update the more than 100,000 pages under the www.montana.edu domain and increase MSU’s Web security; a 1.0 FTE to administer, update and provide support for the system.

The Return On Investment from these expenditures will be:

University-wide saving in staff labor: A CMS could save the university $20,000 to $40,000 annually in staff time across the campus. Roughly 200 staffers campus-wide have the ability to make changes to the Web, but the vast majority of them are poorly to marginally trained. As a consequence, they are extremely inefficient when making changes to the Web. Web Communications Assistant Director Jake Dolan fields 10-15 calls per week from these staffers who, on average, have spent 2 hours trying to solve a problem before asking for help. Dolan and one other .5 FTE are the only staff available at large for such support.

A CMS would allow changes to be made to the Web without requiring any special skills on the part of staffs. Large amounts of staff time would be saved.

University crisis communications: Another advantage to a CMS system would be the ability to hand control of the MSU homepage to a crisis communications team during a large-scale disaster. Currently, because of technical and security issues, this cannot be done. On campus, there is only a small handful of people who even have access to the homepage and only one who has regular day-to-day familiarity with its complexities and operation. The current situation presents a vulnerability to university communications during a significant crisis.

University-wide improvement in ability to recruit students, faculty and staff: Because a CMS makes updates and changes to the Web easy, the university would see global improvements in the look, feel, quality and timeliness of content on the entire Web site. The Web site is one of the most important tools in presenting and promoting the university to prospective students, potential hires, business and government partners, taxpayers, alumni, donors, legislators and other university stakeholders. More than 85 percent of universities have a CMS in place. MSU’s lack of a CMS places us at a distinct disadvantage in terms of the quality we are able to exercise over the Web’s look.

Additionally, a CMS would allow global changes to be made to the Web with great ease. Currently, there is no university-wide mechanism for changing the basic template of how Web pages look and feel. To make such a change requires personal contact with the roughly 200 staffers who have some Web access and walking them through the changes. One consequence of this is the inability to put information about access for the disabled on all our pages.

The ability to view the MSU Web site on a variety of mobile devices such as cell phones and Blackberries would also increase with a CMS, as would MSU’s ranking in search engines.
Security: While a CMS is not a security tool, the benefits related to security are significant. For this reason, MSU’s Chief Security Officer Adam Edelman supports this proposal. Web vulnerabilities are one of the greatest threats to the university’s electronic infrastructure. A CMS system would greatly help to reduce those vulnerabilities. Because there is no way to exercise central oversight of what departments, colleges, etc., put on the MSU Web domain, security holes are common. A good example is the posting of electronic forms, often done by administrative staff with no knowledge of appropriate security controls. Web forms are so easy to exploit, that Googling “how to hack Web forms” yields useable how-to instructions.

A CMS would exercise central control over the posting of forms and other vulnerable applications such as blogs, calendars, bulletin boards, etc.

In the past two years, more than 20 hacker exploits of the MSU domain would not have happened if a CMS was in place. In August of 2009, the MSU Web infrastructure was hacked and used as a proxy site for the illegal sale of pharmaceuticals, such as Viagra. (Hackers do this to boost hits to their product’s standing in the results of a Google search.) The hacker gained root access to one of the university’s main Web servers through a hole introduced by a departmental page -- that was enough power to completely shut down www.montana.edu or deface any number of pages. It took weeks of effort by the university’s most skilled Web and Security personnel to shut down this hacker. Fortunately, this hacker was only interested in illegal commerce, not more malicious activities.

Both Edelman and Dolan believe that without a CMS it is only a matter of time before the university’s Web site will be shut down or defaced in a highly visible and humiliating way. The damage to the university’s credibility in the eyes of prospective and current students, legislators, donors, taxpayers, and academic and business collaborators could be enormous.

On-going Costs: To cover the on-going costs of both annual licensing/support and staff support for the CMS, the Office of Communications and Public Affairs will explore cost recovery methods such as, but not limited to, the following:

1. Per user fee for use of the CMS
2. Per website fee for use in the CMS
3. Per page fee inside the CMS

Bottom Line: A CMS would improve the quality of MSU’s Web site, make it easier to update and make it more secure.