Montana State University Community Focus Groups
January and February 2012

Overview
- Visits occurred in January and February 2012
- Locations included Kalispell, Hamilton, Great Falls, Lewistown, Sidney, Miles City
- Goal was to solicit perceptions about Montana State University

Composition of Groups
- Recruited by Extension agents
- Two groups in each city – composed of influencers and community members
- Age range: 26-67 with the majority age 50+
- 40% male/60% female

Perceptions of Higher Education in the United States
- Too expensive/too much debt
- Concern about cost/benefit of a degree
  - Not all degrees are equal
- Not a sustainable business model: cost limits access
- Four-year college is appropriate for some and not for some
- Greater emphasis is needed on two-year and workforce training/development programs
- College-bound students lack sound preparation and many life skills
Expectations of Montana Colleges and Universities

- Prepare students for jobs
- Enhance critical thinking skills and cultural awareness
- Provide access for all qualified Montanans
- Offer strong two-year, certificate and job-training programs with easy transfer of credits to four-year institutions
- Plan for future employment needs (healthcare, aging population, evolving technology, energy/natural resource)

Words to Describe MSU

- Agriculture
- Bobcats/Cats/Spirit
- Quality Education (successful/superior/elite)
- Engineering
- Land-grant university
- Bozeman/Great Community
- Nursing
- Football
- Mountains and Minds
- Extension
- For the smart kids
- Mountains and Minds
- Football
- Science and Math
- Rodeo
- Skiing
- Research
- Cowboys
- Beautiful setting/campus

Most Recognized Programs

- Agriculture
- Extension
- Engineering
- Nursing

Preparation of Students for Workforce

- Generally well prepared
  - Solid strong programs
  - Strong hands-on experience in professional fields (internships, research, practicum for engineers, nurses, teachers)
  - Depends upon field and student motivation
Ideas to Make MSU Graduates More Successful

- Focused job/career counseling/advising
- Increased hands-on learning opportunities
- More life skills training (financial, speaking/writing, resume preparation, interviewing, job and graduate school application processes)
- Early opportunities for job shadowing/internships
- Link students with potential employers

Perceived Value of MSU as a Research University

- Enhances MSU's reputation (more prestigious, more credible, higher quality)
- Provides more hands-on learning opportunities for students
- Leads to better labs and equipment for students
- Does not necessarily mean better teaching
  - good researchers are not necessarily good teachers
  - professors/researchers often not trained to teach
- Provides critically important support to the ag community and Montana economy (specifically referred to Extension and Ag Experiment Station)

Knowledge of MSU Research Activities

- Strong awareness of agriculture-related research
- Limited knowledge of specific research programs (NASA, medical, bioengineering were mentioned)
- Strong interest in knowing more about MSU Research
  - Greater public awareness would further enhance MSU's reputation and increase support for the university

Awareness of MSU Outreach

- Strong appreciation for Extension services (Master Gardener / Estate Planning /Grandparents Raising Grandkids)
- Limited knowledge of specific student outreach in communities
- Strong support for more service to Montana communities
Community Interest in Hosting MSU Student Projects

- Strong agreement that students and the community would benefit from projects with local government, non-profit organizations, and/or corporations
- Difficulty in identifying specific opportunities
- University would need to provide clear parameters for student experiences
- Increased interaction in communities would enhance each student’s education and make him/her more prepared for the real world

Value of Hands-on Experience

- Unanimous agreement that hands-on learning is critically important
- Employers are more confident in hiring MSU graduates who have had hands-on learning experiences (heard specific anecdotes)
- Every program should incorporate real-world experiences

Benefits to Students

- Confidence
- Pride
- Resume enhancement
- Ability to work in teams on the job
- Allows students to “hit the ground running”
- Makes students “well rounded”
- Early opportunities help determine interests and aptitudes

Support for Engagement Initiative

- Clear, intuitive support for the idea of students actively working throughout the state on meaningful projects
  - Concern about extending time and cost for degree
- Would provide a clear advantage to MSU graduates over other university graduates
- Great difficulty in naming this type of activity (experiential learning, internships, externships, community service, “job corps”, engagement…)
Random Gems

• Distance learning: orientation would be valuable, some physical interaction with other students is important
• Two-tier track for MSU students:
  – Entrepreneurial track with strong emphasis on interdisciplinary education, building critical thinking skills designed to prepare students to create new jobs/companies/fields/careers
  – Technical/Professional track with emphasis on preparing student for a specific career path with specific requirements
• Offer an MUS system-wide application that allows needy students to apply to all campuses for one fee

Random Gems

• Partner sophomores with seniors in an engagement project:
  – Assist sophomore in deciding whether to pursue a particular field of study
  – Provide senior with project expertise and a mentoring opportunity
• Sidney specifically requested partnerships and collaborations
• Leverage opportunities when young students visit Bozeman – Academic Olympics, Robotics competition, 4-H Congress, FFA Convention

Thank You

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