As a professor of literature, I know that the opening of a chapter can reveal much about a book. And, as the president of Montana State University, I believe the early weeks of the 2016-2017 academic year indicate that this will be one of the most dynamic years in our university’s history.

If you have driven by MSU recently, you know that there is a great deal of activity happening on our campus. Perhaps nothing symbolizes that excitement as much as the recent opening of Yellowstone Hall, which is the first MSU freshman residence hall built in nearly 50 years. Yellowstone Hall will house 400 students in a building that is both beautiful and innovative. We are very proud that this $35 million project was funded by MSU Auxiliary Services revenues. No state funds or tax dollars were used. We thank Langlas & Associates, the general contractor, SMA Architects of Helena and other countless local craftspeople and suppliers who helped us bring in the project early and under budget.

On Sept. 22 we will break ground on another beautiful and ambitious project, the Norm Asbjornson Hall, to be built on the corner of South Seventh and Grant. The 110,000 square-foot building is funded by private donations with a lead $50 million pledge by Norm Asbjornson, the MSU engineering graduate and Winifred native. The Norm Asbjornson Hall will house parts of the MSU College of Engineering, the Honors College and it will feature classrooms, laboratories and a 300-seat presentation hall.

Located next to the Norm Asbjornson Hall site, the 550-space MSU parking garage—the first at MSU—is now under construction and scheduled to be completed in January. We also plan to break ground in October on a new dining facility north of the Chemistry and Biochemistry Building that will serve the residence halls on the north edge of campus.

We are keenly aware that the true mark of growth of any university does not lie in the number of new buildings, but the quality of its faculty and the education provided to its students. And, in this area, we have much news to report as well.

The hallmark of our emphasis on student attainment is the Hilleman Scholars, a program launched this summer. Fifty-one worthy high school graduates from Montana will receive financial and academic support, to allow them to achieve academically and actively contribute to their communities. While this scholarship provides financial assistance, it is not a full ride or a free ride. To be accepted as a Hilleman Scholar, students must commit to work at their education beyond ordinary expectations and help future scholars that come after them.

For programs like the Hilleman Scholars, and other similar initiatives, MSU was recently recognized as one of five national finalists for the 2016 Association of Public Land-grant Universities Project Degree Completion Award honoring universities that are improving the retention and graduation of students.
The incoming freshman class – the graduating class of 2020 – is certain to be the largest in our university’s 123-year history. MSU continues to be the university of choice for Montana students, as well as academically gifted students from throughout the region and the country. MSU also works hard to attract and retain stellar faculty and dedicated staff who build and support this reputation. For their loyal and hard work, we are thankful.

Every day, in everything we do, we demonstrate our commitment to our land-grant mission of promoting excellence in teaching, research, service and Extension. This year MSU will also devote special attention to diversity and inclusion. I have heard from many of our faculty, students and staff that this is a priority for them and should be a priority for all of us. MSU will be working on a series of events, seminars, lectures and meetings that will provoke conversations that will strengthen our sense of community and will enable us to produce the first Diversity and Inclusion Plan for MSU.

As we look at the start of the academic year with anticipation, the opening of this new chapter at MSU promises to be full of excitement and success. We thank you for your support in helping us build a better future for our students and for all Montanans. Please join us for the many artistic, cultural, scientific and athletic activities planned this year at your university.

Let’s wear our Blue and Gold proudly. Go, ‘Cats, Go!

Waded Cruzado, president
Montana State University