At a meeting a few weeks ago for key supporters of The University of Montana, we discussed an important question: “How can UM better serve its students and the state?” The answer was nearly unanimous: provide more students with clearly definable skills—skills that equip them to do jobs vital to the state. Participants specifically mentioned the need for skilled service jobs: welders, medical secretaries, accountants, and so on.

I certainly can’t argue with this response. Particularly in these times, when families are hurting and education costs are climbing, it’s important to provide education that results in immediate employment for more students.

But I was puzzled that an educational mission many of us deem vital was not raised by our distinguished guests: that is, the obligation to provide our kids—especially our rural kids—not just with real life skills but with the ambition to use them to full effect: the need to instill in them the sense that they can be anything they want, anywhere they want—even if they’re not sure where they’re headed at the moment.

I feel strongly about this because, long ago, I was a lot like many of the sons and daughters in this state. I came from a struggling blue collar family that wanted me to do better. That meant going to college. But to do what? Without a clue, I picked curtain A: I headed off to the local state university to study “pre-law.” What kind of law? Small town law, probably, something with a nice office. I had no idea.
Long story short, I found boatloads of my brethren at that college—fairly smart kids from hard working families who wanted to be successful, but didn’t know exactly what that meant. And only the few, the proud, had a broader vision that including leaving small town New York. For most of us, Syracuse seemed intimidating; New York City was like Vegas, a mirage.

Then—though it didn’t see so at the time—a good thing happened: Not exactly inspired by intro courses, some of which actually met on Saturday, and above all tired of the same place and the same nice people I’d know all my life, I transferred to a school I couldn’t afford. I knew I’d be paying for decades, but I didn’t care. I was finally leaving Geneseo, New York, going to... Canton, New York, twenty miles from the Canadian border. I was finally to know the meaning of “tundra.”

Worse, to my surprise, neither the professors nor the courses there were significantly better or more challenging than what I had left. But something was different: my fellow students had expectations. Some, like me, wanted to be lawyers, but others wanted to be surgeons, diplomats, geologists, neuroscientists. More significantly, their oyster was global, not local: many simply assumed they would do what they did in Europe or Latin American. When I had thought of going abroad, it had been to a jungle in Vietnam. Mmmn. New ideas started to percolate in my brain.

My final slide into higher expectations began when, influenced by my tonier friends, I decided to bum around Europe for a summer—something else I could not afford. But three months and a huge poverty-induced weight loss later, I returned to school with a much better sense of the world and—surprising to me at the time—of my own country and myself. I now knew what I wanted: to keep going to cool places, preferably when I could actually afford to live indoors. I also knew conclusively (and inconveniently, as I was entering my senior year) that I really didn’t want to be a lawyer. Instead,
stupefying my mother, I decided to study . . . Chinese history and language. (I’ll explain that when I have more time).

I can’t sugar coat it: Learning Chinese when my neurons were already starting to misfire was one of the horrors of my life. But I had learned to think, write, and do analysis as an undergrad, so I survived and eventually prospered. I’ve since been a professor, a government analyst, worked at the U.S. Embassy in Beijing, and in fact been able to go to many other very cool places around the world for my work. I now have an incredibly interesting job that allows me to live in Montana, occasionally bore people on the radio, and to teach kids I really like at UM.

My message to them: work hard and, whatever you think you’re going to end up doing, prepare yourself by learning to think, read and write. But above all aim high, assume you’re going to do interesting stuff, and consider doing it somewhere else. You can always come back, I say, and when you do, you’ll have a lot more to contribute.

Of course, there is a much better exemplar when I preach to students about the importance of expectations. Mike Mansfield rose from borderline delinquency and tough work in the mines to be one of the most powerful and respected figures in America—all because someone who believed in him pushed him to do more. You all know the story, but unfortunately, many of your kids and grandkids may not. You might want to ask them about that.

I’ve already gone on too long, but I’ll close by noting that, despite the economic recession, there may never have been a better time for Montana kids to try to “be like Mike.” UM is now launching a new Global Leadership Initiative with the goal of helping our students gain the leadership traits, ethical values, language and disciplinary skills and broader vision it takes to compete not just locally, but
globally. I think Mike Mansfield, the small town boy who left such a huge legacy himself, would be very pleased about that.

This is Terry Weidner, Director of the Maureen and Mike Mansfield Center at The University of Montana