

My vision for the role of the chief academic officer of the  
University of Montana over the next five years

David J. Pittenger

Montana University “has maintained a liberal arts tradition as the foundation for undergraduate, professional and graduate education.”<sup>1</sup> The next provost’s vision should be to support that tradition as this will set the occasion for the future administrative decisions.

The provost’s *raison d’être* is to avoid complacency and to provide students, staff, and faculty the resources to realize the institution’s mission. This is to say that the next provost’s vision is the vision of the University of Montana.

Complacency is pernicious as it prevents an institution’s consistent accommodation to changes in economic, social, and intellectual environments. While the academic mission of a school remains constant, the methods used to achieve those goals evolve. Current college students are different from previous generations. Their preparation for college-level work, their academic objectives, their financial constraints, and their life’s goals are essential qualities to understand and address. Schools held as national models have maintained their core academic values while adapting to change. Consequently, it is the duty of the provost to collaborate with students, staff, and faculty to ensure the university provides a contemporary education based on the foundations its intellectual traditions.

Several forces will focus the next provost’s attention, namely the University’s Mission and Strategic Plan, the school’s most recent accreditation report, and the many indicators of the school’s well-being. For example, the 2011-2012 *Common Data Set* reports that first-year retention was 71.8%, an improvement over previous years. Nevertheless, the six-year graduation rate is comparatively low. As student success is central to Montana’s mission, the provost will need to ensure students enjoy an education that enhances their aptitudes and allows them to earn a degree. Increasing graduation rates is a collective responsibility and the provost should be central to facilitating that collaboration.

While enhancing student success, attention must be given to supporting faculty development. According to recent data, the median salary of Montana faculty at all ranks is much below national averages. If the University wishes to have its faculty “to engage in leading-edge research and creative scholarship”<sup>2</sup> the school will need to provide the financial resources to attract and retain the faculty responsible for achieving this goal. The discussion of resources must also include teaching loads, laboratories and libraries, promotion and tenure policies, and administrative support that are essential to kindle the flame that produces creative work of all forms.

Supporting student success and faculty development are complementary processes. Faculty continually discover and invent thus leading to curriculum revision. Indeed, some of the most innovative advancements in higher education emerge from interdisciplinary study of common

---

<sup>1</sup> *Strategic Plan 2012-2020*, p. 3.

<sup>2</sup> *Strategic Plan 2012-2020*, p. 10.

phenomena. Students' education and faculty development is often enhanced when there are opportunities to use different disciplinary perspective to examine a particular topic. The role of the next Provost is to enhance what the school has already begun with its interdisciplinary programs and encourage development of new programs.

The next provost must demonstrate to students, employers, legislative groups, accreditors, and the community that a Montana degree prepares its graduates to assume responsibilities in the economic, social, and civic spheres of their lives. Among other things, the provost should work closely with the deans to ensure programs of study accomplish general and discipline specific academic goals. Similarly, the provost should collaborate with other groups to ensure the students' social life of complements their academic life.

Those outside the academy should see the university as theirs and feel welcomed to participate in open scholarly, artistic, and sporting activities on campus. They should continue to see the university engaged in the community through service learning projects, internships, and other collaborations that enhances the education of students and enriches the community. Finally, employers and opinion leaders should recognize that a Montana degree, regardless of major, is a notable achievement that benefits the student and the state. As the University receives a state subsidy, the school will need to document how these financial actions helped students earn their degree.

In summary, the authority of a provost is defined through administrative structure and delegated responsibilities. The success of the provost depends on sharing the vision of the University.