



ACADEMIC AFFAIRS PLAYBOOK

2025–2026

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INTRODUCTION

The year ahead brings significant shifts beyond our campus borders. Federally, the *One Big Beautiful Bill* places new limits on how much graduate students can borrow and links financial aid eligibility to post-graduation earnings. The *Rescissions Act* further reduces available research funding by cutting allocations to agencies like NIH and NSF and could roll back several student-support programs. Closer to home, the University's FY26 Playbook identifies two forces that now shape every corner of our academic work: a fast-moving policy landscape and the rapid evolution of generative artificial intelligence. Together, these dynamics demand that all of us—faculty, staff, and administration—strive to be nimble, collaborative, and clear-eyed as we plan for the year.

Academic units across the university have already taken meaningful steps to clarify academic pathways. At the center of this work is the **Academic Portfolio Review**, launched as a campus-wide initiative to strengthen how we evaluate and sustain our academic programs and now formalized in policy. Since Spring 2024, this process has led to faculty initiating twenty-one undergraduate and three master's degree program consolidations to reduce unnecessary complexity, improve student outcomes, and ensure coherence and responsiveness across our offerings. Notable examples include revised programs in Biological Sciences, Chemistry and Biochemistry, Environmental Science and Sustainability, Integrative Physiology and Athletic Training, Music, Philosophy, and Public Health. We also phased out programs with persistently low enrollment or limited completion. Others are being monitored for improvement.

A new **Academic Unit Operating Policy** was approved by the Cabinet and President to establish baseline expectations for workload, enrollment thresholds, and academic units. **Faculty Activity Reporting (FAR)** in Interfolio will serve as a key tool in operationalizing this policy, allowing departments, colleges, and the Office of the Provost to more effectively track and plan faculty contributions in teaching, research, and service. In response to feedback from the Faculty Senate, the academic officers will collaborate on a **set of procedures under this policy** that will help inform transparent, equitable, and adaptable **operating procedures** at the college level.

Our work this year will be grounded in a shared commitment to the following values:

- We will lead with a **mission-first, people-always** mindset, articulating how projects help students thrive and support the work of faculty and staff.
- We will prioritize **value to students and relevance to society**, focusing on career-aligned, efficient curricula in response to growing federal accountability and shifting student demographics.
- We will remain **data-informed and agile**, using tools like Faculty Activity Reporting, Navigate analytics, and Tableau dashboards to guide timely, evidence-based decisions. And we will practice **shared stewardship**, recognizing that the infrastructure supporting our work connects all seven University objectives and requires close coordination across roles and units.

NWCCU Accreditation

The FY25 Academic Affairs Playbook served as an important starting point for responding to our NWCCU Evaluation of Institutional Effectiveness (EIE). In Summer 2025, we submitted progress updates on the following recommendations, which the Commission identified as “Substantially in Compliance but in Need of Improvement”:

- **Recommendation 1:** *Fully integrate Academic Affairs into the Strategic Operating Rhythm planning and evaluation process to inform and refine the institution’s effectiveness, assign resources, and improve student learning and achievement.*¹
 - In FY25, the University of Montana advanced multiple initiatives to integrate Academic Affairs more fully into the institution’s Strategic Operating Rhythm and decision-making cycles. The Provost’s Office and OSPI collaborated to clarify the relationship between the University Playbook, Academic Affairs Playbook, and Research Playbook, including visual mapping of how Academic Affairs projects support each university objective. Faculty and academic officers participated directly in this alignment effort and were invited to help shape FY26 priorities.
 - To improve planning coherence and follow-through, the Strategic Outlook process was revised to begin earlier in the year, encouraging greater participation by faculty and department chairs. Submitted Outlooks are now synthesized and shared with deans and the provost to inform sector-wide decision-making, and each dean engages in a one-on-one review meeting with the Provost. These Outlooks are also directly aligned with the annual performance review process. Additionally, a new “college call-out” structure and “critical conversation” topics were added to University Leadership Council Academic Officer, and deans’ agendas to better connect unit-level planning with institutional priorities.
 - To enhance transparency and shared responsibility in resource allocation, the Provost’s Office is meeting mid-fall with each dean and their financial manager to review three-year expenditure forecasts. The University Budget Committee’s charge and membership are being refined to support clearer governance, and the budgeting process is now part of regular dialogue within ULC and strategic planning sessions. These changes, along with the development of new deans’ dashboards and improved access to planning data, represent meaningful steps toward embedding Academic Affairs in the institution’s core planning, evaluation, and resource processes.
- **Recommendation 2:** *Develop an inclusive and integrated University-wide framework to assess student learning outcomes at the program and degree level*

¹ NWCCU Standard 1.B.1. “The institution demonstrates a continuous process to assess institutional effectiveness, including student learning and achievement and support services. The institution uses an ongoing and systematic evaluation and planning process to inform and refine its effectiveness, assign resources, and improve student learning and achievement.”

that is distinct from the use of student achievement data and metrics.²

- In FY25, Academic Affairs initiated a process to define Institutional Learning Outcomes (ILOs) that articulate core learning goals for all undergraduate students. Draft ILOs were developed by the Office of the Provost and the Assessment Advisory Committee using existing Program Outcomes, General Education Outcomes, AAC&U Value rubrics, and campus input. The ILOs and a proposed assessment plan, which is anchored in the General Education curriculum, will be shared broadly in Fall 2025 for campus feedback and refinement.
- Revised General Education assessment will begin with gateway writing and math. In AY25–26, Academic Affairs and the Office for Student Success will work with faculty to draft assessment frameworks for these courses, with implementation planned for FY27. The Writing Committee will also pilot Writing in the Disciplines (WID) assessment in FY27 to support future writing instruction and professional development. Lessons learned from these pilots will help guide how academic units assess ILOs through their General Education courses as part of Program Assessment.
- At the same time, all academic programs will submit draft Program Learning Outcomes (PLOs) in Fall 2025. These outcomes will form the basis of a revised Program Review and Assessment Framework, launching in Spring 2026. Programs will receive feedback and revise their PLOs for entry into CourseLeaf. The updated framework includes clear expectations, procedural guidance, and professional development to support sustainable, faculty-led assessment. Programs will submit initial assessment plans by January 2027.
- **Recommendation 3:** Implement an effective identity verification process for students enrolled in distance education courses and programs, ensuring that the student completing the course is the same person whose work is evaluated, while maintaining privacy protections.
 - The University of Montana is implementing a multi-phase identity verification strategy designed to meet accreditation standards, support instructional integrity, and protect student privacy. These new protocols represent a strengthened institutional commitment to secure identity practices, address known vulnerabilities, and reinforce the integrity of student access and participation in university systems.
 - Beginning in Fall 2025, an interim identity verification assignment will be available in Canvas Commons. Faculty teaching asynchronous online courses are encouraged to incorporate this assignment, which prompts students to record a brief video introducing themselves and displaying a photo ID. The assignment is designed with clear instructions to support accessibility, privacy, and inclusive student participation.

² NWCCU Standard 1.C.7. “The institution uses the results of its assessment efforts to inform academic and learning-support planning and practices to continuously improve student learning outcomes.”

- In Spring 2026, the identity verification assignment will be embedded directly into the standard Canvas course template used during course provisioning, ensuring consistency across asynchronous online offerings. The University is also developing processes to track usage and effectiveness, including collecting data on adoption rates and faculty feedback.
- In parallel, a cross-functional team is exploring long-term technology solutions, such as secure ID verification and proctoring tools, in collaboration with Legal Counsel, IT Security, Financial Aid, Enrollment Management, and the Registrar’s Office. This work is aimed at ensuring compliance with federal requirements while supporting a student-centered, privacy-respecting approach to online learning.
- Additionally, the University has implemented enhanced identity verification protocols at the IT Service Desk, which apply to all students, including those enrolled at a distance. As of Summer 2025 Government-issued photo IDs are required for any identity verification request; Griz Cards are no longer accepted. Over-the-phone identity verification is no longer authorized. Students requesting support for password resets or account access must verify their identity in one of two ways; in-person, using knowledge-based questions drawn from Banner; or remotely, via Zoom with a functioning webcam and microphone. Help Desk staff will provide a secure Zoom link for this process.

We will submit a full update on our progress through an **ad hoc report and site visit in Spring 2026**, with continued work across Academic Affairs and collaborating units throughout the coming year.

FY25 PROJECT UPDATES

The FY 25 Academic Affairs Playbook projects responded directly to NWCCU recommendations and emerging campus priorities drawn from the [FY25 UM Annual Playbook](#). Over the year, faculty, staff, and academic leaders across the institution contributed their time and expertise to move this work forward. What follows is a summary of progress made on each project that was unique to the Academic Affairs Playbook—highlighting areas of completion, ongoing work, and next steps as we carry this momentum into FY26.

Adapt our academic portfolio

Project	Status	Key Milestones	Next Steps
Curricular Complexity	Continuing	Data and curriculum review guidelines provided to academic units.	Units tasked with undertaking Program Outcome development and curriculum review in AY 25–26 within this context.
Teacher Preparation	Continuing	Project was paused during the past academic year given	Scan the national landscape to understand what other

Portfolio Review		necessary attention focused on the legislative session, federal policy impacts, and the Humanities, Social Sciences and Education Task Force	programs are doing. Consult with OPI and OCHE on meaningful and realistic adjustments.
Academic Portfolio Review Policy	Complete	Policy passed Faculty Senate and Cabinet approval (Apr 2025); Approved by the President.	Integrate with upcoming revisions to Program Assessment and Program Review Frameworks.

Increase retention and persistence

Project	Status	Key Milestones	Next Steps
Faculty Mentor Framework	Continuing	Language distinguishing the role of advising from mentorship was added to the “Advising Expectations” section of the Catalog.	An Advising Strategic plan is under development as part of the FY26 University Playbook with the goal of strengthening professional advising on campus as the foundation to support a successful mentorship framework

Integrated curricular & co-curricular journey

Project	Status	Key Milestones	Next Steps
Career Competency Course Attributes	Continuing	The General Education committee developed and launched the mechanism to add career competencies to all courses via the rolling review procedure.	Groups II: Mathematics, Group V: Literary and Artistic Studies, and Group XI: Natural Sciences will all undergo rolling review this year.

Serve a wider range of learners

Project	Status	Key Milestones	Next Steps
Program Outcomes in Catalog	Continuing	Resources were distributed to departments and a framework for submission designed in CourseLeaf.	All programs will submit draft outcomes by September 26, 2025 for review by the Accreditation Advisory Committee and final drafts by January 30 for inclusion in next year’s catalog.
Advising Tracks to Concentrations	On Track	All undergraduate advising tracks have been removed or converted to official concentrations.	Remaining graduate programs with advising tracks are in process and expected to be complete by the end of the academic year.
Certificate Design &	Continuing	16-credit financial aid	Monitor new proposals.

Compliance		minimum added to CourseLeaf approval process.	
Interdisciplinary Community of Practice	Continuing	Launched December 2025	Report forthcoming, next meeting to be announced.
AY25–26 Two-Year Course Schedule	On track	Registrar’s Office created a phased implementation schedule; guidelines published.	AY 2026–2027 Design Mode Opens: mid-Fall 2025. Fiscal Year 2028 (Summer 2027, Fall 2027, and Spring 2028) Design mode opens: mid-March 2026

Research & creative scholarship missions

No Academic Affairs-led project was assigned under this objective in FY25. However, given the shifting national funding landscape and recent federal cuts, closer coordination between Academic Affairs and Research and Creative Scholarship will be a priority in FY26 to ensure academic programs and research missions remain aligned and resilient.

Fair & transparent workloads

Project	Status	Key Milestones	Next Steps
Faculty Activity Reporting (FAR) Implementation	Continuing	Interfolio live for pilot groups; training webinars held.	Scale to remaining colleges; integrate with evaluation cycle.
Teaching Faculty	Bargaining	TBA	TBA

Unified marketing & recruitment strategies

Project	Status	Key Milestones	Next Steps
Integrated Marketing & Recruitment Strategy	Continuing	Initial conversations with MarComm and Provost took place in Spring 2025.	Coordination with deans and Colleges will begin this academic year, particularly in new colleges.

Strengthen core infrastructure & processes

Project	Status	Key Accomplishments	Next Steps / Info Needed
Academic Operations Policy	Continuing	Policy and Procedure debated in Faculty Senate. Procedure tabled and policy approved by President’s Cabinet.	Collaborate on revised procedural guidelines with academic deans and shared governance in Fall 2025. Develop College-level procedures in Spring 2026.
Budget Model Revision	Continuing	Preliminary allocation model and budget principles developed. SCH allocation revised	Share updated SCH model for FY26; transition from headcount to degrees awarded for FY27. Use the revised

from instructor index to course rubric for FY26.

model to inform budgeting in both years, while recognizing that fixed costs and structural constraints will continue to limit full implementation in the near term.

TWO PLAYBOOKS, SEVEN SHARED OBJECTIVES

Starting in FY26, Academic Affairs will intentionally align with the University's long-term strategic objectives. This shift strengthens institutional coherence and reinforces our shared purpose. We recognize that this change requires more coordination to ensure that academic priorities are clearly visible within institution-wide planning. To address this, we have taken care to identify where Academic Affairs projects align directly with the University Playbook, and where additional explanation is needed to show the relevance of institutionally sponsored efforts to the academic mission.

The section that follows uses the exact language of the [FY26 University Playbook](#) to show how projects directly support the goals of Academic Affairs. Projects are categorized in three ways:

- UM Playbook Projects that are led or sponsored by members of Academic Affairs are **bolded**.
- Projects unique to this Academic Affairs playbook are **bolded in Griz Maroon**.
- UM Playbook Projects that are not directly under the leadership or sponsorship of Academic Affairs but are deeply connected to our work are noted and contextualized.

Objective 1: Improve student recruitment, access, retention, persistence, and completion

- Drive the design and implementation of an undergraduate advising model that responds to current and future student needs and expectations.
 - *Purpose:* To streamline advising processes for the advising community so that we increase efficiency and effectiveness for students.
 - *Academic Affairs Context:* Academic Affairs is working with the Office for Student Success to centralize the management of professional advising services across campus, in coordination with the colleges. This approach ensures that students are placed with trained advisors familiar with the best practices of the disciplinary cohorts they support. The next phase of this work will focus on developing a Faculty Mentorship Framework that connects students with faculty in their fields to deepen academic engagement, clarify pathways, and support career exploration. This effort is designed to ensure that professional advising and faculty mentorship reflect the distinct mission and advising culture of each unit.
- **Cultivate excellence in teaching, learning, and assessment through evidence-based practices in foundational math and writing courses.**
 - *Purpose:* To equip faculty with adaptable, evidence-based teaching

strategies for gateway courses so that we strengthen student success, boost academic confidence, and improve degree completion.

- Refine the strategic approach to graduate enrollment.
 - *Purpose:* To enhance outreach and experiences for graduate students so that we optimize their support and sustain UM's R1 status.
 - *Academic Affairs Context:* Academic Portfolio Review of graduate programs and the Graduate Assistantship (GA) Reallocation Process will be launched to evaluate program health and reallocate GA funding per Faculty Senate procedure and recent changes in Financial Aid eligibility reporting requirements related new federal accountability measures based on student outcomes.

Objective 2: Increase students' career readiness through intentionally designed curricular and co-curricular experiences

- **Expand and deepen alumni, faculty, staff, and community co-curricular partnerships in support of students' access to networks and mentorships.**
 - *Purpose:* To develop and strengthen alumni partnerships so that we support students' career readiness through mentorship and industry connections.
- **Continue to work with faculty across disciplines to integrate career readiness into the curriculum and co-curriculum.**
 - *Purpose:* To embed career readiness in academic curricula so that students connect learning to future opportunities and departments can measure and enhance impact.
- **Adapt the academic program portfolio review process with a lens on curricular relevance.**
 - *Purpose:* To align academic programs with evolving student and societal needs so that programs remain forward-facing, mission-aligned, and strategically sustainable.
- **Align program assessment and review frameworks.**
 - *Purpose:* To integrate recently revised program learning outcomes, assessment practices, and program review so that departments can clearly articulate the purpose and value of each academic offering, demonstrate its relevance to students' future opportunities, and support continuous improvement through transparent, faculty-led assessment.

Objective 3: Prioritize wellbeing, leadership, service, and civic engagement as critical components of the UM student journey

- **Project: Build capacity to establish and sustain a cross-campus effort to model civil dialogue, practice civic and democratic engagement, and promote leadership development.**
 - *Purpose:* To secure funding for student leadership development and civic engagement so that we elevate UM's role in developing active, community-driven citizens.
- Develop and test an explanatory framework that describes our holistic approach to undergraduate education.

- *Purpose:* To develop an explanatory framework so that we clearly articulate the value of a UM undergraduate education and intentionally design the student experience.
- *Academic Affairs Context:* Academic Affairs is leading the development of Institutional Learning Outcomes (ILOs) that will integrate with this framework. These outcomes will clarify what every UM undergraduate should be able to do—regardless of major—and will guide revisions to program review, and assessment practices. This work is also linked to our proposed Integrated Marketing & Recruitment Strategy, which will better articulate the value and distinctiveness of a UM education to prospective students, families, and community partners.

Objective 4: Establish UM as a platform for learning to serve the needs of a wider range of learners

- **Establish UM as the regional leader in online education, including the development of a structure to maintain academic integrity in a digital age.**
 - *Purpose:* To establish UM as a regional leader in online education for current and future students so that we broaden access to flexible, high-quality academic programs.
- **Develop a comprehensive and financially sustainable noncredit training portfolio.**
 - *Purpose:* To develop a sustainable noncredit training portfolio for diverse learners so that we expand access, meet workforce needs, increase revenue, and strengthen community engagement.
- **Improve access to academic pathways and strengthen partnerships and industry collaborations.**
 - *Purpose:* To increase access to academic pathways and strengthen industry partnerships so that we support students' career success and build a strong talent pipeline.
- **Adapt our systems and processes to support a wider range of learners.**
 - *Purpose:* To adapt UM systems for diverse learners so that all students experience a streamlined and supportive educational journey.

Objective 5: Build partnerships and leverage research and economic development initiatives in response to community, state, and global needs

- **Collaborate with partners to address health needs across Montana, with a particular focus on mental and behavioral health.**
 - *Purpose:* To apply UM's expertise and educational programs in mental and behavioral health so that we support coalition building across the State's mental and behavioral health workforce.
- **Develop an engagement strategy with state, federal, and private partners to enhance UM excellence in key research areas: AI/machine learning, human performance, cyber, biotech, health outcomes, forest and fire management, water prediction and management, and autonomous systems.**

- *Purpose:* To match UM strengths with immediate funding opportunities and urgent needs so that we support collaboration between researchers and external partners to positively impact local, regional, and global communities.
- *Academic Affairs Context:* We must ensure academic programs are aligned with emerging research areas. Through the Academic Portfolio Review process, we assess the capacity, strategic fit, and enduring value of all programs to be responsive to societal and student needs. These efforts are designed to ensure that teaching, learning, and scholarship remain mutually reinforced.
- **Leverage the UM Impact and Interfolio platforms to support faculty collaboration and showcase faculty scholarly and creative activities.**
 - *Purpose:* To capture and showcase research and creative scholarship activities so that we facilitate faculty connections across disciplines and amplify our impact in Montana and across the globe.
- Improve research support systems, processes, and services.
 - *Project:* To optimize research administration for principal investigators and research support staff so that we effectively and efficiently support research on campus.
 - *Academic Affairs Context:* In FY26, we will partner with ORCS and college deans to better align research expectations with faculty roles, support pre-award proposal development, and ensure that graduate research programs are well-integrated into broader research planning. This is especially important as federal funding rules shift, and as UM continues to build on its R1 designation.
- **Co-create immersive, culturally centered XR learning experiences with Blackfeet Eco Knowledge.**
 - *Purpose:* To collaboratively develop immersive, Indigenous-led learning environments that amplify Blackfoot cultural knowledge, expand interdisciplinary research capacity, and embed culturally rich XR experiences into UM curricula—enhancing educational access and visibility for all learners (Native and non-Native) while strengthening UM’s position as a partner in community-driven innovation.

Objective 6: Broaden UM’s engagement with alumni, donors, and community members

- Shape the UM narrative and empower external partners to promote UM’s brand, accomplishments, and impact through community engagement in Montana.
 - *Purpose:* To expand UM’s network of storytellers and brand champions so that we deepen affinity and confidence in UM’s impact across Montana.
 - *Academic Affairs Context:* In FY 26, deans will work with MarCom and Enrollment to develop accessible, compelling narratives about how academic programs prepare students for meaningful careers and civic engagement. These stories will draw from student outcomes data, community partnerships, and faculty scholarships to demonstrate the public value of UM education and help alumni, donors, and community members become authentic advocates for the institution.
- Build Griz pride in UM as a hub for community and statewide arts and athletics

engagement.

- *Purpose:* To expand, coordinate, and maximize UM's arts and athletics offerings and facilities so that we strengthen community engagement and vitality, foster economic growth, grow revenue, and enhance UM's reputation.
- *Academic Affairs Context:* Programs in the performing and visual arts, media arts, creative writing, and entertainment and sport management are key contributors to UM's cultural and athletic presence across the state.

Objective 7: Enhance the employee experience and improve employee retention

- Identify, prioritize, and begin to address internal processes that need improvement and that most impact the employee experience.
 - *Purpose:* To improve cumbersome processes for campus employees so that we reduce bureaucracy and focus on meaningful, value-added work.
 - *Academic Affairs Context:* The Academic Unit Operating Policy aligned with the implementation of Faculty Activity Reporting (FAR), is intended to make faculty contributions more visible and planning more efficient across the institution.
- **Implement sector-wide Academic Unit Operating procedures.**
 - *Purpose:* To develop and adopt clear, consistent procedures that operationalize the Academic Unit Operations Policy so that departments and colleges can plan workloads, manage enrollments, and make academic decisions with transparency, fairness, and alignment to institutional standards.
- **Complete full implementation of Faculty Activity Reporting in Interfolio.**
 - *Purpose:* To support the campus-wide adoption of Faculty Activity Reporting (FAR) in Interfolio so that faculty can more easily document their teaching, research, and service contributions in their IPRs, and academic leadership can use consistent data to support workload equity, resource planning, and institutional reporting.