

Response to "A Description of Merger Applied to the Montana State University Context"

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I have been invited to comment on Dr. Coffman's paper: *A Description of Merger Applied to the Montana State University Context*. I welcome the opportunity.

Montana's heritage of rugged individualism certainly is reflected in the historical development of the Montana University System. One hundred years after the first unit was founded, the system had evolved to 11 schools: 6 four-year units and 5 vocational-technical institutions. With nearly 30,000 students in the system, schools were largely autonomous— independent decisions were made with little regard for what other units were doing. Perhaps no example is more illustrative than the evolution of computer hardware and software decision. Performing a simple task such as sending transcripts within the system was impossible because of each school's independent purchasing decision.

In simplest terms, the university system merger was designed to accomplish greater unity and effect economies of scale while guarding against mission drift. Though cultural integrity of the four-year institutions was paramount, we no longer could afford the go-it-alone mentality. Organization follows purpose; restructuring was conceived to accomplish specifically stated objectives, and careful attention was given to guard against inflated claims and goals. The process certainly was political, as are many decisions. Documented history shows that the Board of Regents strived for decades to reorganize the university system. Every effort had been thwarted by political protectors—groups of local legislators who were committed to protecting the home turf. In 1994, a resolute Board of Regents joined with the reorganization a reality.

Technology is changing the way we organize. My concept of the reorganization is not the hierarchical structure in chart one that is used most often to illustrate the "new organization." Rather, it is the model shown in chart two. The communication patterns are situational and contingency-based. The loop on any given issue is determined by need, not by rigid organizational lines and boxes. The chart tries to capture the concept by differentiating between primary and secondary communication patterns. If the commissioner's office staff has business with MSU-Billings, communications technology permits to go directly to the source while keeping all appropriate parties informed. Organizations are fluid. We are trying to make this work, though we have a long way to go.

The paper outlines both the dark and bright sides of restructuring and notes the struggles with financing higher education in Montana. The unfortunate conclusion is that Montana is not up to it. Yet,

- We are close to finishing a collaborative process at MSU-Billings (and all other campuses, representing four union and two non-union faculties) that dramatically changes communication patterns—including those with the commissioner's office—and links faculty pay to accomplishment of mutually determined, organizational goals. Assessment is a key part of the agreement; the process rests on a new dialogue void of past adversarial practices.

- The follow-on to restructuring has been launched in a phase two initiative that will address higher education from the student perspective. Four areas are highlighted: (1) getting in, (2) getting through, (3) getting a job and (4) paying the way.
- Enrollments at MSU-Billings are projected to increase by 31.9 percent by fiscal year 2001.
- Lump-sum funding has worked well, with Billings holding ground within the system and likely to do better in the future.

Change is disruptive but also productive if effected properly. Dr. Coffman's doomsday scenario, while certainly a possibility is far from reality. During our first year as a restructured system, we have tapped the potential in some areas and have fallen short in others. We have little choice in Montana but to find new ways to do our work. We have lost touch with many constituents and are trying to reestablish communication. Ultimately, restructuring success will be measured less by an organizational chart and more on our ability to build public trust, confidence and ownership in higher education. We have a long way to go, but the recent legislative session was an encouraging sign that we are off to a good start.

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