

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

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PROFESSOR Coffman's analysis paints a very dismal picture both of the present and future state of higher education in Montana and, in particular, of the beginnings of consolidation in the Montana State University half of the state's university system. I do not quarrel especially with the former thrust of his argument, but I do with the latter.

He is quite correct in arguing that Montana is last in the nation in its support of higher education and that it shows little interest in improving that deplorable situation. Of course, this lack of commitment leads to many of the other problems addressed here—underfunded salaries and facilities, higher workloads, poor morale, etc.

Similarly, my experience would suggest that the author is correct in stating that, while the two traditional universities and their faculty have remained largely unthreatened and unconcerned as the merger progress, those at the four former state colleges responded with more trepidation. These fears, as indicated, have focused upon the potential pitfalls of mission downgrading, raiding budgets through lump-sum funding, the loss of baccalaureate or graduate majors, and so forth.

My problem with Professor Coffman's essay is that it paints a very one-sided picture of a merger in which little has happened, in which dire threats to the Billings campus loom over the horizon, and a long-suffering faculty dreads the coming Armageddon. It seems seriously to consider the possibility, even the likelihood of an institutional downgrading to community college status or a ravaging of the MSU-Billings budget by MSU-Bozeman, even though the actual experience of year one has gone exactly in the opposite direction. On the other hand, the essay concedes no accomplishment to the merger, even though there several that are obvious: the legislative assistance afforded to the Billings campus by the Bozeman campus, joint efforts in promotion and articulation, the soon-to-come extension of the International Education program at Bozeman to other campuses, and the telecommunications task force among them.

I have other disagreements with Professor Coffman. There is an implication here that somehow all the problems the campus faces, from administrative vacancies to the "demise of the Arts and Sciences"—which is news to me—are somehow tied to the merger. His argument that all public funding of athletics should be removed runs exactly counter to the correct recommendation of the Knight Commission.

In the final analysis, there is valid reason for pessimism about higher education in Montana, even perhaps about the consolidation. But the effort to make the merger positive and productive only succeed if our faculty and staff give it at least a fair chance and recognize its accomplishments, as well as its real, perceived or potential pitfalls. We have many long-term problems that consolidation alone cannot rectify. But the merger can be part of the solution, if given a chance.

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