



Strategic Plan Narrative

01.07.2020

Montana College Access Network

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Executive Summary

In August 2019, Montana College Access Network (MCAN) leaders and members created a new strategic plan for the organization to guide its growth, development and activities for 2020-2023.

MCAN's revised mission statement is:

MCAN empowers members to collectively close postsecondary education attainment gaps across Montana.

MCAN's Core Values

1. Collaboration
2. Inclusion
3. Integrity
4. Respect

MCAN's Three-Year Priorities

1. Programming
2. Marketing
3. Staffing
4. Funding

Several strategies were identified to support each priority for the next three years, and those strategies appear in the left-hand column of the accompanying Excel spreadsheet.

Background and History

Established in 2008, MCAN is a 501(c)3 non-profit that helps advance the goal of [all Montanans achieving their career and lifestyle aspirations through higher education](#).

In 2008, several college access professionals got together and recognized the isolated work that each region of Montana does to increase Montana's rates of post-secondary attendance. The work that each entity did often overlapped and could be more effective if the individual programs worked together to share their experiences and ideas. MCAN became [the only table for representation from K-12, Higher Education, and Industry professionals](#) with a passion for working to realize the educational and economic potential of our students and state respectively.

As of 2019, MCAN's membership is comprised of [27 non-profits, agencies, and organizations](#) that seek to improve Montanans' lives.

As a stand-alone organization, MCAN matched the Goal 2025 objective set by the Lumina Foundation. Goal 2025 seeks to [raise college degree attainment to 60%](#) to better the future of American employees. MCAN recognizes the value of including all post-secondary

credentials (including certificates and both 2 and 4 year degrees) in equipping individuals for the future.

MCAN affiliate members [serve Montana students throughout the academic pipelines](#). This includes low-income, first-generation, non-traditional, Native American/American Indian, veteran students, and students with disabilities.

As a 501(c)3, MCAN is governed by its [Board of Directors](#). The [Leadership Council](#) is comprised of representatives of each member organization. This body has evolved over time from a loosely organized group of volunteers (the Steering Committee) to an active group meeting monthly to share organizational goals and updates, serve on committees to move MCAN forward, and participate heavily in strategic planning of the organization after achieving non-profit status. MCAN leadership recognizes that, as a growing organization, the role of the Leadership Council and broader membership will continue to change.

MCAN's most visible program to date has been the [annual MCAN Conference](#), which in 2019 brought together professionals from around the state to take part in breakout sessions, keynote speeches, networking socials, and a visit to the Montana State Capitol.

Key Points in the Environment

National Trends

National trends in college access, according to the National College Access Network (NCAN), include affordability and talent development. NCAN's specific state policy priorities for each include:

- Affordability
 - Focus on need-based aid
 - Establish a higher education funding strategy
- Talent development
 - Preparation
 - Access
 - Success

Statewide Trends

Governor Steve Bullock's administration has demonstrated commitment to keeping college affordable. The administration's proposed budget for the 2019-2021 biennium included \$10 million in proposed need-based aid, of which \$2 million was funded. A MUS Tuition Freeze took effect with an associated \$24 million to account for institutional costs not being absorbed by students. Finally, the administration pushed for a Dual-Enrollment initiative called 1-2-FREE.

Still, the environment presents ongoing challenges for MCAN and its members including:

- Need-based aid that more accurately represents/covers the needs of students and makes education truly equitable.
- Quality training/support is needed for low-income, first-generation students, students with disabilities, and students of diverse backgrounds, including American Indian students.
- Quality/targeted professional development for college access and success service providers is necessary.
- Distributing college access and success services across the vast geographic area of Montana including the state's education deserts
- A decreasing number of traditional-aged students entering the higher education pipeline due to changing statewide demographics.

Planning Process

In August 2019, Montana College Access Network leaders and members created a new strategic plan for the organization.

At a day-long retreat in Bozeman and a series of follow-up sessions, MCAN leaders and members (1) honed the organization's identity and (2) established a strategic plan to guide decision-making by the Board of Directors, the Leadership Council, and the Network Manager for the next three years. Janna Lundquist facilitated the strategic planning process. The Leadership Team (not to be confused with the Leadership Council): Amy Verlanic, Board President; Peter Donaldson, Board Vice-President; Erin Shaw, Network Manager; Anna-Margaret Goldman, Leadership Council Chair; and Steven Coop, Leadership Council Vice-Chair, took the input and recommendations from the workgroup to further develop the organization's strategic plan to thoughtfully design a plan that captures the shared vision of its members.

I. Mission Statement

MCAN empowers members to collectively close postsecondary attainment gaps across Montana.

II. Core Values

These are the fundamental beliefs that guide everyone in the organization, they are non-negotiable behaviors expected of leaders and members.

Collaboration

- MCAN members believe in working together as a unified team. Our culture of mutual support maximizes the effectiveness of each member's work.
- MCAN knows that our strong connections across the state give us a unique collective voice to support equity in educational attainment.

Inclusion

- MCAN recognizes the importance of being a platform for all voices and opportunities to be heard and realized.
- MCAN creates an empowering space for its members to elevate all students in reaching their fullest potential.

Integrity

- MCAN relies on a cohesive network of strong partnerships and trusted professional relationships.
- MCAN members hold each other accountable in creating a better future for students in our state.

Respect

- MCAN values supporting individual experiences, ideas, cultures, and traditions that enhance opportunities in education.
- MCAN embraces the expertise of our members in upholding and developing the unique strengths of Montana students.

III. Overarching Themes

MCAN's overarching priorities for the next three years are: *Programming*, *Marketing*, *Staffing*, and *Funding*.

Programming

The importance of service and ever-expanding value to our membership is represented in the strategic planning priority of "Programming." This priority encompasses the work currently done by MCAN, the work we hope to build on in the coming three years, and the work we want to set a foundation for beyond this strategic plan's timeframe.

This area of focus includes [stronger professional development and networking opportunities](#) as we connect more partners and stakeholders. It also demonstrates our commitment to ensuring that professionals in the college access/success field are well-equipped to serve students into and through post-secondary education.

Thoughtfully [developing offerings at our annual conference, connecting members to state and national training opportunities, and expanding the voice of professionals and students in the policy and advocacy space](#) will all help to fulfill this priority.

Marketing

MCAN has grown thoughtfully over the past 12 years, and continues to emerge as the best and only space for all those with a stake in post-secondary completion in Montana. We facilitate the gathering, sharing of resources and information, and ensuring clear pathways to post-secondary education (PSE) attainment.

Without strategic marketing of our organization's work - as well as that of our affiliates - we cannot maximize the expertise, resources and efforts of all Montana stakeholders in closing student educational attainment gaps. This priority is vital to the next three years of our development because it encourages [ongoing data collection and dissemination, thoughtful storytelling of students' lived experiences, membership expansion, and a stronger online presence](#).

Awareness of MCAN and its mission will drive better understanding of education attainment, inequality, and opportunity for stronger PSE pipelines across the state.

Staffing

MCAN has relied for years on the work of volunteer college access/success professionals to ensure the organization's work and development is carried out. In keeping with our prior strategic plan, we continue to set an ambitious vision of expansion and effectiveness. [A dedicated staff of two or three full-time personnel is vital](#) to our next steps.

We will continue to rely on member participation and engagement as well as contract staff in the form of VISTAs, accounting support, grant writers and other volunteers. The passion shown by our current half-time Network Manager allows us to function and to grow incrementally. That individual's work is never able to be fully realized because the work of managing membership growth and organizational programming potential are beyond the scope of 15-20 hours per week.

Being a non-profit that values integrity and respect includes being a responsible employer. This requires having the [staff capacity to carry out our vision](#) without over-burdening any one person, setting ambitious but achievable goals for the staff, and ensuring that professionals are compensated appropriately for the contribution of their expertise.

Relying heavily on [a volunteer model is no longer appropriate for MCAN](#) by the end of this strategic plan. This priority demonstrates our commitment to realizing the untapped potential of our work through reasonable staff structures.

Funding

Directly tied to all other priorities, and a necessary component of organizational growth, the ambitious pursuit of new and expanded funding streams is a core theme for this strategic plan.

Through a variety of approaches including [grant-writing, fundraising, and donor development](#), we will work to significantly increase our income. Additionally, through review of membership structure and membership drives and more intentional conference funding, we will [expand existing income streams](#).

Programming (including marketing) requires staffing.

All future growth and activities will only be possible if we, as an organization, set goals for budgets that carry out the strategic plan's vision.

IV. Three-Year Strategic Plan

The Operating Plan summarizes the three-year 2020-2023 Strategic Plan, with specific strategies outlined for each year. The operating plan is a living document updated routinely over the life of the strategic plan. The MCAN Board of Directors and Leadership Council is collectively responsible to achieve the goals outlined over the four overarching priorities.