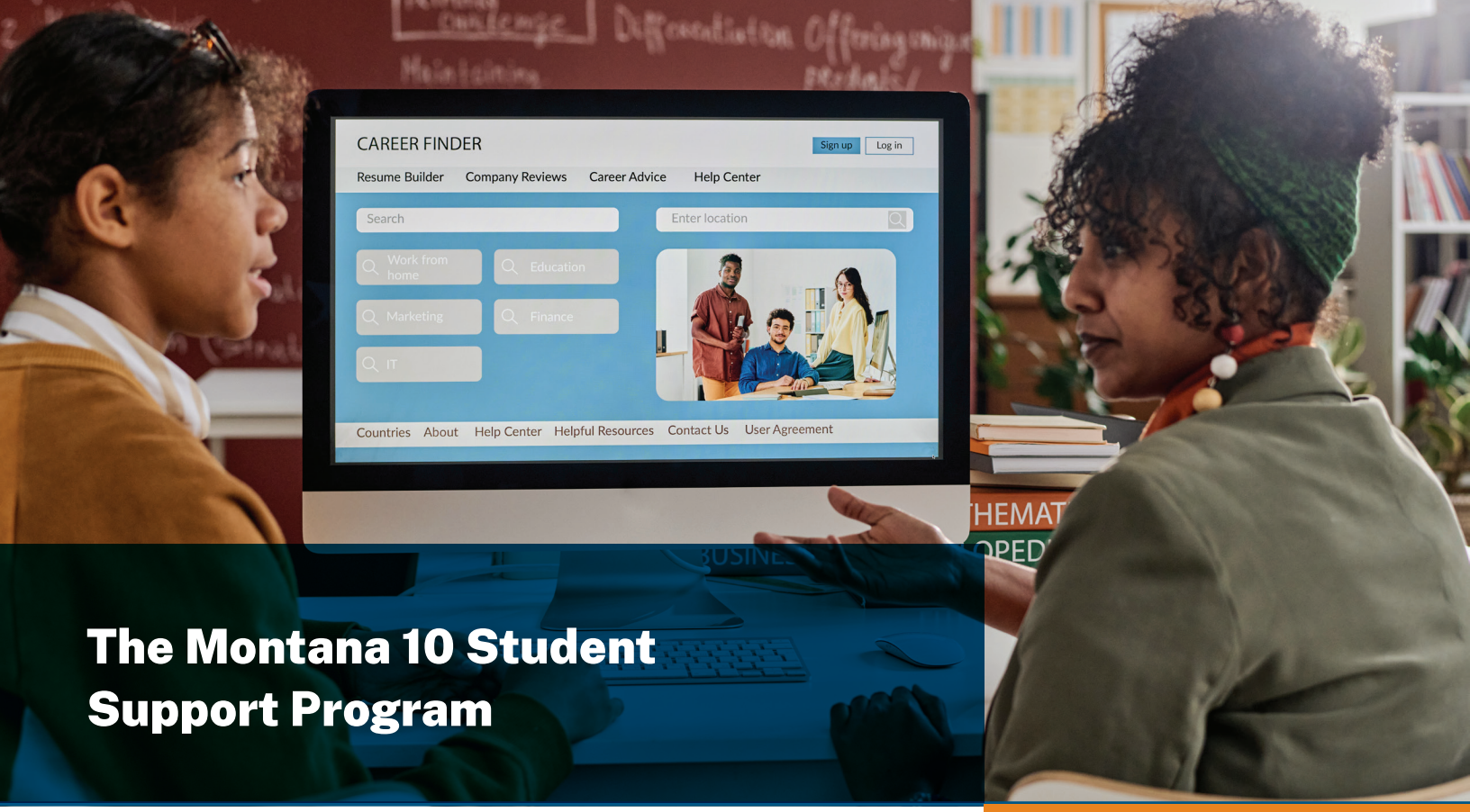

The Montana 10 Student Support Program

Early Findings from an Experimental Evaluation

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Open- and broad-access public colleges serve the majority of American undergraduates, especially those who come from low-income backgrounds or are the first in their families to attend college.[1] In Montana, more than 90 percent of undergraduates attend the 16 public institutions within the Montana University System; the remainder attend one of the state's three private universities or seven tribal colleges.[2] Despite the geographic spread of the institutions in the Montana University System, large swaths of Montana's rural population live very far from any college. These "education deserts" force college aspirants to make difficult decisions about moving away from home, spending hours commuting, seeking out online options (if they have reliable internet service at home, which is not a given in rural places), or simply not pursuing postsecondary education at all.[3] The difficulty of gaining access to higher education in rural places has significant implications for individuals' earnings, health, and welfare, as well as for the economies of entire communities.

In Montana, people with postsecondary degrees or training — whether a traditional bachelor's degree, associate's degree, or workforce certification — earn significantly more than those who do not have such degrees. Workforce shortages in industries such as education, healthcare, mental health counseling, construction, and transportation hamper economic

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growth as critical positions remain unfilled.[4] Despite this, the share of Montanans earning postsecondary degrees remains low. Fifty of Montana's 56 counties have lower rates of bachelor's degree attainment than the national average of 35 percent. In some rural counties, just 16 percent of residents hold a four-year postsecondary credential.[5]

The goal of Montana 10 is to meet the needs of Montana's college students to ensure they enroll in and graduate from public colleges and universities in the state.

In response to the great need to improve college access and college completion rates in the state and based on rigorous research evidence on what works to improve graduation rates for students from low-income backgrounds, Montana's Office of the Commissioner of Higher Education has developed and implemented a statewide initiative called Montana 10. The goal of Montana 10 is to meet the needs of Montana's college students to ensure they enroll in and graduate from public colleges and universities in the state. In particular, Montana 10 seeks to support students who live in rural areas, are from low-income families, are first-generation college students, or are Native American. This multifaceted program combines financial assistance, specialized advising and career services, and academic support, all in a one-stop shop for students. Montana 10 offers students two to four full years of services, depending on the length of their program of study, and operates in all types of institutions in the state, from small, rural community colleges to the large, four-year flagship university.

MDRC is evaluating Montana 10 through a randomized controlled trial, in which students are randomly assigned to either the program (Montana 10) or a control group ("business as usual" at the college). In the first year of the program, there have been no detectable effects on student outcomes. Students in both the program group and the control group are performing at similar levels in their first academic year. Researchers found that in the first year of the program there was varied implementation of program components across colleges. Some components were well implemented while others were not. Some colleges reported challenges such as staffing turnover and difficulty using program data. Researchers will continue to track the study's participants to see whether positive effects emerge over time. Given the long-term nature of the intervention, it is too early to make a final determination about the effectiveness of the program.

This brief summarizes the Montana 10 intervention, the research study, the study sample, and early qualitative and quantitative findings for a subset of the full sample. Future reports will include findings for all study participants as well as a student survey and a cost study.

The Montana 10 Intervention

Montana 10 is a multifaceted student support program that aims to improve enrollment, persistence, and graduation rates for students in Montana. The program is especially intended for rural, first-generation, low-income, and Native American students in the state, for whom postsecondary completion remains lower than the state average. The program was designed by Montana's Office of the Commissioner of Higher Education. To date, the Montana University System has self-funded the

program. The Office of the Commissioner of Higher Education is providing technical assistance to participating colleges to scale and refine the Montana 10 program, with extensive assistance given to new colleges that launch the program. The office also monitors program implementation, hosts a monthly Montana 10 directors' meeting, provides guidance on the implementation of program components, and maintains standardized program recruitment materials and data-reporting tools.

To be eligible for Montana 10, students have to be Montana residents; come from low-income backgrounds as defined by Pell Grant receipt or similar financial aid status via federal financial aid eligibility; be degree-seeking at one of the participating institutions in the Montana University System; and be either a first-time undergraduate student or a transfer student with fewer than 24 credits.

As a part of the program, Montana 10 scholars are expected to enroll full time, complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) every year, maintain good academic standing, and meet with their Montana 10 success advisers at least once a month. Advisers are expected to use data to track students' academic progress, participation in program services, and the completion of milestones such as registering for courses and completing their FAFSA forms.

The program contains ten components in three categories, similar to other multifaceted support programs that have been proven effective in other colleges. Some components are tailored to the unique needs of rural students, such as career services designed to inform students about employment options across the many labor markets in the state. Figure 1 presents the program model.

Financial Assistance

The first category comprises financial assistance in the form of a Montana 10 scholarship, textbook stipends, and a monthly financial incentive that is contingent on program participation. Montana 10 scholars receive a last-dollar scholarship that is applicable to tuition and mandatory fees for fall and spring semesters after Pell Grants and other aid or scholarships have been applied to their bill. The scholarship does not cover room and board, student health insurance, meal plans, parking permits, or course and material fees. Students who take courses over the summer are also able to request tuition scholarships through their Montana 10 advisers. All Montana 10 students receive textbook stipends each semester. Students who participate in the program can also receive a monthly financial incentive of $50 by attending advising meetings once per month and fulfilling a second requirement, such as attending a tutoring session or workshop, or completing a task like course registration for the following semester.

Specialized Advising and Career Development Services

Specialized advising and career development services are provided to help students with academic and non-academic problems, improve their knowledge of college processes, and foster a sense of belonging on campus. These services include case management advising, career development, orientation, and a first-year seminar. The Montana 10 program model recommends an advising caseload of one adviser per 100 students and requires students to meet with their adviser at least once a month.

Figure 1. Montana 10 Program Model

SOURCE: The Montana University System (2023).

NOTE: This figure is a reproduction of the original created by the Montana University System for use by the Montana 10 program.

Each advising session is typically held in person; lasts 30 minutes to one hour; and takes a holistic approach to student needs, from traditional advising topics like major selection, class schedules, and FAFSA completion, to more personal topics such as mental health and integration into campus life, family or work challenges, career interests, and overall fulfillment in college. Advisers also provide or refer students to career services and workshops to, for example, get help with creating résumés or to develop other career-readiness skills. The program includes an orientation and a first-year seminar course to help students acclimate to college and build connections with other students.

Academic Support Services

The third category aims to help Montana 10 scholars maintain academic momentum through academic coaching and tutoring services, including helping students take a full-time schedule of 30 credits per year to ensure on-time graduation. Students who need extra help in math or writing are simultaneously enrolled in remedial and college-level courses — known as corequisite courses — so that they can receive extra assistance to complete those required courses.

The Montana 10 Study

In 2023, MDRC launched a randomized controlled trial to experimentally evaluate Montana 10. In a randomized controlled trial, individuals are randomly assigned either to a program group that is eligible to participate in the intervention, in this case Montana 10, or to a control group that is not eligible to participate in the intervention, experiencing "business as usual" at the college. Randomizing participants produces a research study in which the two groups are very similar, so that any differences in their outcomes may be attributed to the intervention being tested, not other characteristics that correlate with college success, such as motivation or ease of getting to campus.

The evaluation consists of three components: an implementation analysis to explore how Montana 10 was implemented at the five colleges in the study and how program services differed from "business as usual," an impact analysis to understand the effects of Montana 10 on students' academic outcomes, and a cost analysis to determine the operational costs of the initiative.

The Montana 10 evaluation relies on several data sources, including a baseline survey, student-level transcript data from the Office of the Commissioner of Higher Education covering all public institutions in Montana, cost data from the five colleges, program participation data collected by the five colleges' program staff members, field research from staff member interviews and student focus groups, and a student experience survey.

Over the course of the 2023-2024 and 2024-2025 academic years, the study enrolled four groups of participants (known as cohorts) — fall 2023, spring 2024, fall 2024, and spring 2025 — across eight campuses of the five participating colleges. Table 1 shows more information on each of the colleges in the study.

The study enrolled a total of 1,459 students, with 996 program group students and 463 control group students. This brief includes first-year findings from the fall 2023 and spring 2024 cohorts, and early outcomes for the fall 2024 cohort. The cohorts are pooled in the results. Outcomes for all cohorts will be published in a future report.

Table 1. Participating Institutions in the Montana 10 Study

Institution	College Type	City	Campus Setting	Undergraduate Enrollment	Percentage of Full-Time Undergraduate Students	Percentage of Undergraduate Students Receiving Pell Grants
Helena College	2-year community college	Helena	City: Small	641	54	42
Montana State University Billings and City College	4-year university with a colocated 2-year community college	Billings	City: Midsize	2,710	69	35
Montana Technological University and Highlands College	4-year university with a colocated 2-year community college	Butte	Town: Remote	1,428	94	22
University of Montana and Missoula College	4-year university with a colocated 2-year community college	Missoula	City: Small	7,079	86	29
University of Montana Western	Comprehensive 2-year and 4-year college	Dillon	Town: Remote	1,271	82	40

SOURCE: Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), National Center for Education Statistics.

NOTE: In the Montana University System, some two-year colleges are located on university campuses, while other two-year colleges operate independently. These colocated institutions share buildings, staff members, faculty, and resources. Colocated campuses in this study include City College, Highlands College, and Missoula College. In these locations, Montana 10 is available to students in both two-year and four-year programs.

Table 2 shows student baseline characteristics for all cohorts. About two-thirds of students are in four-year programs, and about one-third are in two-year programs. Mirroring statewide enrollment trends, the sample is mostly made up of female students and traditional college-aged students. One-fifth of the population consists of students aged 24 or older. The sample is mostly made up of White students, with 16 percent of students reporting that they are Native American; to the authors' knowledge, this is the largest proportion of Native American students in higher education studies of this type to date. As requested by program staff members, the baseline intake form asked students whether they had special accommodations, such as an Individualized Education Program or a 504 Plan, in their K-12 education.[6] Nearly 20 percent of students answered affirmatively, higher than seen in similar studies (though many studies do not ask this question).

Table 2. Baseline Characteristics of Sample Members

Outcome	Full Sample (%)
Gender	
Female	61.5
Male	35.4
Nonbinary	3.1
Race/ethnicity	
Hispanic/Latino	2.6
Native American[a]	15.7
White	73.0
Black	1.1
Asian	0.6
Other	0.1
Multiracial	6.9
Age	
19 years old or younger	68.4
20 to 23 years old	11.4
24 years old or older	20.2
Living with parents before starting college	58.0
Has a child	15.5
Student's location before starting college	
Billings, Bozeman, Butte, Great Falls, Helena, Kalispell, or Missoula	58.0
Another town in Montana	19.8
Rural area/reservation	20.4
Outside of Montana	1.7
Student's location growing up	
Billings, Bozeman, Butte, Great Falls, Helena, Kalispell, or Missoula	45.0
Another town in Montana	18.6
Rural area/reservation	22.2
Outside of Montana	14.2

(continued)

Table 2 (continued)

Outcome	Full Sample (%)
Currently employed	62.9
Previous degrees earned	
GED	8.8
High school diploma	83.6
Associate's degree	7.0
Highest degree student plans to attain	
Occupational or technical certificate	1.9
Associate's degree	19.4
Bachelor's degree or higher	51.5
Master's degree	15.8
Professional or doctorate	11.4
Highest degree/diploma earned by parents	
Not a high school graduate	5.1
High school graduate or GED	28.1
Some college but did not complete a degree	17.3
Completed a college degree	43.6
Don't know	5.9
Credits planning to take	
1-11	7.6
12-14	37.5
15 or more	43.4
Had special accommodations in K-12 education	18.4
Degree path enrolled in	
2-year	33.6
4-year	66.4
Sample size	1,459

SOURCE: MDRC calculations using data from the baseline information form.

NOTES: Rounding may cause small discrepancies in sums and differences.
[a]Students who reported any Native American heritage were coded as Native American, following local preference.

Implementation Findings

Early findings show that the program's components were implemented differently across the five colleges in the first two years of the study. The program's most important components, advising and financial assistance, were in place at all colleges. Financial assistance was implemented consistently across all colleges, as were components like orientation sessions and career services. While advising was named by students and staff as the most important part of Montana 10, advising case-

loads and the advising services provided varied by college and by semester. Other components varied across colleges, often due to how the campus outside of the program implemented its freshman seminar courses, tutoring services, and the like.

All colleges in the study faced staffing challenges and difficulty tracking and using real-time data, which changed how program services were offered from semester to semester. As a result, while advising services were consistently offered, not all students accessed these services. The findings below come from qualitative research with program staff members and students, and participation data.

Montana 10 Program Components

Financial Assistance

Montana 10 scholarships, textbook stipends, and incentives were disbursed every semester to Montana 10 scholars and were logistically well implemented, with only occasional lags due to external financial aid issues.

To earn incentives, students needed to attend an advising appointment and complete another specified activity. Variability in incentive receipt by college and by semester is partially caused by variability in rates of advising meetings (discussed below), as students who did not participate in advising services could lose their incentive that month. At the same time, staff members had flexibility about which non-advising activities were incentivized at each college, which also led to variability in incentive receipt rates. Indeed, the main driver of variable incentive receipt by college appears to be the non-advising activity that qualified for the incentive. When staff members strictly enforced the advising-plus-specified-activity rule, rates were much lower than at colleges where staff members were flexible about giving students the incentive whether or not they completed a specified activity. Rates were also higher at colleges where staff members let multiple activities meet the requirement.

Specialized Advising and Career Development Services

The Montana 10 program specified a caseload of one adviser to 100 students, but due to staffing challenges, advising implementation varied across the colleges and by semester, sometimes leaving advisers unable to meet with all students. Four of the five participating colleges had at least one staff member with a higher caseload every semester, sometimes with more than double the ideal caseload. High caseloads resulted from staff member turnover, staff members going on leave, or experienced advisers taking on larger caseloads while onboarding new staff members. Some program staff members dealt with higher caseloads by shortening advising meeting time allotments or relying more heavily on referrals to services outside of the program. Other program staff members focused on students with the highest needs instead of trying to reach all students during busy seasons.

Often, participation in advising sessions during the first month of a semester was high and then dropped over the course of the semester. In some colleges, low initial participation in advising ses-

sions increased later in the semester following the hiring and onboarding of new advisers. Across the five colleges, approximately half of the students participating in Montana 10 met with their adviser at least once a month in the 2023-2024 academic year, though staffing disruptions led to fewer meetings. Unfortunately, in some colleges, large numbers of students attended few or no advising sessions for the semester.

Orientation sessions were consistently implemented, with all colleges offering a half- or full-day session specifically for Montana 10 students. Implementation of the first-year experience course to help students acclimate to college varied across campuses, ranging from a full-semester freshman seminar class to workshops on academic and career topics. Staff members reported promoting career services and tutoring and building career-oriented programming into their orientation sessions, seminars, and workshops, although attending these activities was not required. Program staff members directed students who were struggling academically to tutoring services, ranging from faculty and peer tutoring to online services to in-person study sessions for specific courses. At one institution, Montana 10 students were granted priority when requesting tutoring services.

Academic Support Services

Students in the Montana 10 program received consistent messages regarding the value of full-time enrollment, which was highly encouraged. That said, students did not lose program services or eligibility if they dropped below full-time enrollment. Referrals to academic coaching and tutoring services were offered, though staff members mentioned that the students most in need of tutoring were the least likely to take it up. Taking up referrals was encouraged but not required — students did not lose program services or financial assistance if they declined to participate in tutoring. Staff members did not systematically track whether students completed tutoring sessions or other suggested activities. Notably, the corequisite math and writing course component was not implemented at most colleges because, by the time of the study, most colleges had already revised their developmental (remedial) course pathways to avoid having students take developmental courses in the first place.

Additionally, colleges made improvements to program components over time to better address student needs, which may have been in response to the variations in program implementation. For instance, when Montana 10 staff members at one college learned that the textbook stipend didn't cover materials for short-term trade programs, they worked to ensure the stipend could apply for tools and other trade program materials for subsequent semesters.

Implementation Challenges

The most significant implementation challenge, which affected the way that many components were put into practice, was staffing. Over the course of the study, four of the five participating colleges experienced significant staffing disruptions or turnover that staff members and students believed affected students' experiences. Additionally, three of the five colleges reported that staff members were not hired in a timely manner or replaced quickly at their institution in more than one semester. Barriers to hiring and replacing staff members included smaller candidate pools at rural

colleges, being unable to offer higher pay to attract candidates, and administrative and bureaucratic lags in hiring processes. While smaller colleges tended to report fewer staffing issues, they relied on a small number of staff members to implement Montana 10, so that it was more disruptive when a staff member left the program. As mentioned earlier, these staffing disruptions stymied the implementation of the program through higher adviser caseloads, fewer meetings during semesters when advisers had higher caseloads, fewer incentive requirements fulfilled, and disruptions to the building of student-adviser relationships.

Another significant implementation challenge was data tracking and use. Data tracking methods for the Montana 10 program varied by college. In small colleges, staff members track student participation in services such as advising and incentive receipt manually, using Excel spreadsheets. For colleges with smaller student cohorts, staff members felt this method was sufficient for tracking; additionally, the cost of more sophisticated tracking software would be prohibitive for their institutions. Other colleges had Montana 10 staff members track student participation in existing student information software. This method built on platforms that were already in use in those colleges, which was popular and allowed for better integration of Montana 10 data into other institutional data streams. However, some staff members reported that using existing software made real-time data tracking and reporting to the state agency for monitoring very challenging, and reporting only occurred at the end of the semester, which was too late to intervene if students needed assistance.

Not having access to real-time data can impact implementation quality, particularly with regard to advising services. Montana 10 staff members had difficulties identifying nonparticipating students in their data, individualizing outreach based on level of participation, or communicating advising need when staff members turned over. As a result, advising services did not reach all students. See Tables 3 through 6 for student participation rates. In these tables, participation in Montana 10 advising services is measured as the percentage of students who met with an adviser at least once each month. Incentive receipt is measured by the total percentage of students who earned at least one incentive during the semester.

Participation varied widely from semester to semester and from college to college. While this occurred for a variety of reasons, low advising participation was often related to the staffing issues described above — in semesters where caseloads remained close to one adviser per 100 students, as designed, participation rates were higher than in semesters where caseloads were higher. There appears to be room for improvement in advising participation and incentive receipt across the colleges.

The campus context outside of Montana 10 also varies by institution. Of particular note to the service contrast in the study, or how different the experiences are for students in the program and control groups, some colleges have robust student support services in place, including programs that are similar to Montana 10. Twenty-three percent of Montana 10 control group students are also in TRIO, a federally funded program serving students who are first generation college-goers, have disabilities, or are from low-income backgrounds, compared with 19 percent of program group students. At some colleges, more than one-third of control group students are in TRIO.

Table 3. Montana 10 Advising Participation Rates, by Month, 2023-2024 Academic Year

College	Term	Month 1 (%)	Month 2 (%)	Month 3 (%)	Month 4 (%)	Month 5 (%)
2023 Cohort						
Helena College	Fall 2023	100	49	63	47	22
Helena College	Spring 2024	64	45	73	64	NA
Montana State University Billings	Fall 2023	NA	43	83	60	30
Montana State University Billings	Spring 2024	54	70	72	53	NA
Montana Technological University/Highlands College	Fall 2023	NA	94	91	86	NA
Montana Technological University/Highlands College	Spring 2024	NA	87	87	87	NA
University of Montana/Missoula College	Fall 2023	NA	49	58	58	NA
University of Montana/Missoula College	Spring 2024	NA	48	52	46	NA
University of Montana Western	Fall 2023	88	79	51	60	NA
University of Montana Western	Spring 2024	No data available				

SOURCE: MDRC calculations from Montana 10 program data.

Table 4. Montana 10 Incentive Participation Rates, by Semester, 2023-2024 Academic Year

College	Term	Percentage of Participating Students
2023 Cohort		
Helena College	Fall 2023	53
Helena College	Spring 2024	68
Montana State University Billings/City College	Fall 2023	96
Montana State University Billings/City College	Spring 2024	81
Montana Technological University/Highlands College	Fall 2023	86
Montana Technological University/Highlands College	Spring 2024	87
University of Montana/Missoula College	Fall 2023	57
University of Montana/Missoula College	Spring 2024	47
University of Montana Western	Fall 2023	72
University of Montana Western	Spring 2024	Not available

SOURCE: MDRC calculations from Montana 10 program data.

This may lead to a reduced service contrast. In the smaller, more rural Montana 10 colleges, the same staff members work with both programs. These staff members report that the programs are closely intertwined, offering similar advising services, workshops, and referrals, and some are even located in the same office space. (A student survey, currently being fielded and to be reported on in a future publication, will assess service contrast on program components such as advising frequency and financial aid receipt.) Colleges also offer other programs, such as those serving Native American students, veterans, or vocational rehabilitation clients, which provide advising, financial assistance, and course materials that are similar to Montana 10. Students can participate in more than one program, so in this study, both program group students and control group students may be enrolled in multiple programs.

Student Experience

Overall, students and staff members speak highly of the Montana 10 program and recognize the effect it has on participants. Students and staff members shared that advising services are the heart of the program, and that advisers build trusting relationships with students, act as liaisons between students and campus services, and serve as a "home base" in the words of more than one Montana 10 student. As one adviser explained of the role, "[M]y title is being an adviser. I'm a social worker, I'm a case manager, I am an advocate, I go to bat for my students, and I use my education and social work [experience] in that holistic approach and that really human-centered and student-centered approach in my practice."

Table 5. Montana 10 Advising Participation Rates, by Month, 2024-2025 Academic Year

College	Term	Month 1 (%)	Month 2 (%)	Month 3 (%)	Month 4 (%)	Month 5 (%)
2023 Cohort						
Helena College	Fall 2024	NA	69	100	88	31
Helena College	Spring 2025	40	47	33	40	NA
Montana Technological University/Highlands College	Fall 2024	NA	96	96	100	20
Montana Technological University/Highlands College	Spring 2025	56	85	71	75	NA
Montana State University Billings	Fall 2024	NA	97	65	81	17
Montana State University Billings	Spring 2025	30	59	49	41	15
University of Montana/Missoula College	Fall 2024	NA	73	72	66	55
University of Montana/Missoula College	Spring 2025	46	56	56	64	19
University of Montana Western	Fall 2024	NA	71	53	61	39
University of Montana Western	Spring 2025	41	59	53	44	NA
2024 Cohort						
Helena College	Fall 2024	NA	71	98	69	29
Helena College	Spring 2025	45	20	52	43	NA
Montana Technological University/Highlands College	Fall 2024	NA	89	86	92	16
Montana Technological University/Highlands College	Spring 2025	40	85	87	79	NA
Montana State University Billings	Fall 2024	NA	100	83	87	33
Montana State University Billings	Spring 2025	47	74	59	50	12
University of Montana/Missoula College	Fall 2024	NA	82	77	68	55
University of Montana/Missoula College	Spring 2025	53	69	68	62	13
University of Montana Western	Fall 2024	NA	79	65	68	62
University of Montana Western	Spring 2025	56	58	69	49	NA

SOURCE: MDRC calculations from Montana 10 program data.

Table 6. Montana 10 Incentive Participation Rates, by Semester, 2024-2025 Academic Year

College	Term	Percentage of Participating Students
2023 Cohort		
Helena College	Fall 2024	25
Helena College	Spring 2025	36
Montana Technological University/Highlands College	Fall 2024	98
Montana Technological University/Highlands College	Spring 2025	90
Montana State University Billings	Fall 2024	79
Montana State University Billings	Spring 2025	87
University of Montana/Missoula College	Fall 2024	82
University of Montana/Missoula College	Spring 2025	80
University of Montana Western	Fall 2024	58
University of Montana Western	Spring 2025	76
2024 Cohort		
Helena College	Fall 2024	52
Helena College	Spring 2025	29
Montana Technological University/Highlands College	Fall 2024	92
Montana Technological University/Highlands College	Spring 2025	91
Montana State University Billings	Fall 2024	72
Montana State University Billings	Spring 2025	75
University of Montana/Missoula College	Fall 2024	86
University of Montana/Missoula College	Spring 2025	74
University of Montana Western	Fall 2024	76
University of Montana Western	Spring 2025	67

SOURCE: MDRC calculations from Montana 10 program data.

One student reflected on the value of having support from Montana 10, "I have amazing people in there that honestly are great with getting me tutors.... Learning is super complex for me. It brings in all of my senses. I have a lot of my own medical issues that come into play with that as well. So, just having a home base to touch to where I can sit down and be like, 'I'm really struggling. Where do I go?' Especially because I'm not on campus hardly at all."

Another student said about the financial assistance and emotional support that Montana 10 provided during the process of leaving a small town, "[B]efore college, I wasn't sure if I could ... leave my hometown. I thought I would have to go to college there and just live at home. But through the help of Montana 10, I could actually afford [to come] to college, which I really wanted to do. I wanted to go somewhere else for college."

Quantitative Findings: Effects on Academic Outcomes

MDRC evaluated Montana 10 using a randomized controlled trial. As explained above, eligible students were randomly assigned to either a program group, eligible to participate in Montana 10, or a control group, which could not participate in the program and experienced "business as usual" on campus. Random assignment allows for an unbiased estimation of the program's impacts. Because the two groups are approximately equal at baseline, differences in outcomes can be attributed to the program being tested. To estimate the program's effects, the outcomes of all students in the study are collected for all Montana institutions, not just those in which they initially enrolled. This allows for the tracking of students who may transfer to another public college in the state. (In later years of the project, MDRC will add National Student Clearinghouse data to track students who may have transferred out of state or to Montana's private or tribal colleges, which are not represented in data from the Montana University System.)

As discussed above, the study enrolled a total of 1,459 students across four cohorts, from the fall 2023 through spring 2025 semesters. This brief presents enrollment outcomes for the first three of the four cohorts and credits earned for the first two cohorts; the fourth cohort, added through new federal funding to expand the study, has not been enrolled in college long enough to appear in the state's postsecondary data.

Table 7 presents students' academic outcomes from statewide transcript data. At this early stage, the first year of a two- to four-year program, there are no impacts on student outcomes. All effects shown in the table are statistically indistinguishable from zero and should be interpreted as there being no difference between the student groups.

Outcomes for both program group students and control group students are higher in this study than in typical MDRC postsecondary education studies. For example, in the first semester, 95 percent of each group was enrolled. When 95 percent of a control group achieves an outcome, there is little room for an intervention to improve that outcome. Similarly, across both semesters, students are attempting and earning higher numbers of credits in this study compared with other MDRC studies.

Table 7. Montana 10 Academic Outcomes

Outcome	Program Group Students	Control Group Students	Difference	P-Value	Sample Size
Enrolled (%)					
Semester 1	94.7	95.6	-0.88	0.487	1,217
Semester 2	82.1	82.2	-0.13	0.955	1,217
Enrolled full time (%)					
Semester 1	87.5	86.8	0.71	0.714	1,217
Semester 2	72.9	74.0	-1.12	0.665	1,217
Total credits attempted (marginal)					
Semester 1	13.65	13.58	0.07	0.772	1,217
Semester 2	11.90	11.88	0.02	0.952	1,217
Total credits earned (marginal)					
Semester 1	10.69	11.08	-0.39	0.238	1,217
Semester 2	9.43	10.06	-0.63	0.238	721
Total credits earned (cumulative)					
Semester 1	10.68	11.07	-0.39	0.232	1,217
Semester 2	20.19	21.00	-0.81	0.369	721

SOURCE: MDRC calculations using data from Montana's Office of the Commissioner of Higher Education. Data include outcomes from study colleges (Helena College, University of Montana/Missoula College, Montana Technological University/Highlands College, Montana State University Billings/City College, and University of Montana Western) and all other public Montana University System Institutions.

NOTES: Estimates are adjusted by random assignment block, gender, race and ethnicity, age, parental status, employment, whether students live with their parents, high school diploma receipt, first-generation status, rural status, and advising need.

Weights are calculated to make the effective (weighted) random assignment ratio the same in all random assignment blocks. The effective random assignment ratio is equal to the full sample's random assignment ratio.

Rounding may cause small discrepancies in sums and differences.

Enrollment and credits attempted outcomes include cohorts 1, 2, and 3, or students entering in fall 2023, spring 2024, and fall 2024. Credits earned for semester two outcomes include cohorts 1 and 2, or students entering in fall 2023 and spring 2024.

Both program group and control group students attempted 13.6 credits in the first semester and 11.9 credits in the second semester. This may be because about two-thirds of the participants in the study are in four-year college programs.

It appears from the data that students are doing well across the board. This perception may reflect statewide trends, as all Montana University System institutions have reported improvements in outcomes in recent years. The data may also reflect that the program is reaching a group of students who may not need it or may not be benefiting from it.

Given the variation in implementation described above — for instance, the variations in advising caseloads due to staff turnover and the different implementation of academic support components from college to college — the study included an exploratory analysis of impacts by college and by subgroup, such as two-year or four-year enrollment, fall or spring entry cohort, race, age, and gender. Currently no statistically significant patterns have emerged among these subgroups. (These findings are not tabled in this report given the small sample sizes.)

Implications

Montana 10 is a multifaceted program that combines financial assistance, specialized advising and career development services, and academic support with the goal of boosting college persistence and graduation rates for Montana's low-income students. Montana 10 falls into the category of comprehensive approaches to student success, or CASS programs, that have been shown in past research studies to effectively improve student outcomes. Despite strong endorsements from program staff members and participating students, the randomized controlled trial does not show positive impacts on enrollment or credit accumulation in the first year of the program.

It is possible that impacts may emerge over time. Many open- and broad-access colleges see drops in enrollment between a student's first and second year, and this program offers students services for between two and four years, depending on the length of their program of study. The program also supports two-year to four-year transfer students, with clear communication between college staff members across campuses and automatic enrollment into Montana 10 on the new campus. These design features have been shown in other studies to support students' long-term positive outcomes. The next report will include another cohort, bringing up the sample size and therefore statistical precision, as well as tracking students' outcomes for a longer period.

It is also possible that the program is not producing a positive impact on student outcomes. For instance, the program may not be meeting students' needs during semesters of staffing challenges, may not produce meaningful service contrast given other services on campus, or may not be serving the students with the greatest needs. Additional qualitative research and the upcoming student survey will help illuminate the answers to these questions.

Along the way, Montana 10 program staff members are looking for ways to improve program offerings in the hopes of improving students' outcomes. The colleges and Montana's Office of the Commissioner of Higher Education are working to identify ways to improve data collection and use, ensure program services are reaching more students, and adapt financial assistance to better meet students' needs. For example, programs at colleges serving students in trade programs have begun covering the costs of tools and materials, in addition to textbooks. Programs at small, rural colleges with few staff members have sought to maximize the benefits of having a small team, such as providing quicker referrals and cross-training advisers, to reduce disruptions to students caused by adviser turnover. The programs that share staff members with TRIO and other federal programs

currently face an uncertain funding future and are also developing creative ways to staff Montana 10 for small student populations.

MDRC looks forward to following the Montana 10 study sample in the coming years to assess the program's efficacy and identify lessons for other colleges nationwide.

Notes and References

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6. Public school students with unique academic, physical, or psychiatric needs may seek out formal accommodations or assistance to ensure that their K-12 education adapts to those needs. The two most common types of formal accommodations are an Individualized Education Program (IEP, arising out of the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act) or a 504 Plan (referring to Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, a federal civil rights law supporting individuals with disabilities as they access public education).

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