

Strengthening Decision-Making and Resource Prioritization Practices at Great Falls College

Taking Small Steps That Lead To Big Impact

Great Falls College Montana State University is a public community college serving rural areas across North Central Montana. The college serves approximately 1400 students each year. A skilled staff of competent administrators fills diverse roles. Workforce development needs and barriers to access experienced by students are significant across the rural region served; therefore, prioritizing offerings to ensure students' needs are met underpins planning and budgeting. Some technology services and support infrastructure are centralized through the Montana State University affiliation, but much is managed locally at the college.

Enhancing the Use of Data to Prioritize Student Outcomes

Great Falls College hoped to improve its use of data to support decision-making activities and ensure resource allocation practices build capacity to sustain and scale improved student outcomes. The chief business officer (CBO) wanted to better support program managers when asked to assess outcomes, plan, and prioritize time and money allocated to their respective programs.

There was also a desire to strengthen processes to guide future investments based on proven outcomes. When planning and budgeting, the CBO wanted to build a more consistent approach to determining what initiatives warranted further investment to support scalability and which should be maintained at current capacity. Also, there was a need to determine if some initiatives warranted a reduction in investment or should be phased out, allowing funds to be shifted to higher-priority initiatives.

Leveraging Components of Multiple Toolkits

Great Falls College leveraged several toolkits, taking advantage of the flexibility of the resources. The IPEDS Peer Benchmarking Dashboards provided Great Falls College with comparator data, and more broadly, it catalyzed conversations about data literacy, the value of dashboards, and ways data might be used to inform decision-making.

Improvement Project

Improving Business Office Practices
to Support Programs and Students

Toolkit Used

IPEDS Peer Benchmarking Dashboards
Budget Builder
Financial Impact Analysis

Results

- The toolkits used by Great Falls College served as catalysts, offering models of operational practice for leveraging data to support decision-making and enhance planning and budget development.
- Through creative modification and application of resources found in the toolkits, mechanisms to refine resource allocation practices, with a focus on sustaining and scaling proven programs that meet regional needs and reduce barriers, were generated.



“As the CBO, I see all these pieces that come together, but I also see how those pieces aren’t always put to best use because of changes in funding, evolving workforce development needs, and the challenges we have because we are so small. Our students have so many barriers to accessing our programs. Our job is to serve the people of the state of Montana. We will continue to get better at the work we have to do, because our students and our communities need us.”

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Carmen Roberts,

Executive Director of Operations

While the IPEDS data did not meet every need, it was a starting point for using data to provide context and underpin decision-making.

Budget Builder templates were modified to support budget request submissions. With a small administrative team that wears many different hats, developing efficient approaches to capture information about resource needs is essential. Because the templates are easily modified, Great Falls College’s CBO was able to quickly restructure them to meet their needs and share them with colleagues who contribute to budget development.

Finally, the pre-populated dashboard included in the Financial Analysis Impact toolkit served as a model for how Great Falls College might structure proprietary dashboards as it works within its state system to help shape system-wide data practices.

Building Sustainable Systems

Many small, rural colleges like Great Falls College operate with just a few business office employees who are generalists with broad expertise and a willingness to take on new responsibilities as needs arise. Because they conduct lean operations, flexibility and creativity are essential when challenges must be addressed when external factors disrupt day-to-day operations.

During a dynamic year that presented a series of unexpected challenges, Great Falls College’s CBO recognized the need for a pragmatic approach to leveraging resources available in the NACUBO Student Success Hub. With a commitment to continuous improvement, the CBO leveraged different tools to facilitate understanding of new operational practices and to accelerate refinements to processes.

Sustaining Momentum

To sustain improvements and institutionalize ongoing refinements to processes, Great Falls College will focus on providing professional development opportunities to help employees leverage data and dashboards to improve student outcomes, meet accreditation expectations, and inform resource priorities. The use of the institution’s learning management system is being explored to support professional development, especially for programs offered solely in remote locations by fully remote faculty. The NACUBO Student Success Hub will continue as a resource for ongoing improvements.