

December 2025

## Collaborative Partner News

*The Work-based Learning Collaborative includes 30 partner organizations that cover the gamut of work-based learning from the student, employer, and educator perspectives, as well as direct-service, capacity, and policy levels. We are proud to share highlights of our WBLC partners - state agencies, industry associations, colleges, high schools, and nonprofit organizations. Find the list of the WBLC members [here!](#)*



## Learn more about WBLC



## WBLC Members Attend Aspen Institute Convening

When youth and young adults experience Belonging, Meaning, Wellbeing, and Purpose (BMWP), they thrive in school, the workplace, and life. By centering BMWP, employers improve recruitment, retention, employee mental health, and innovation.

[The Aspen Institute Forum for Community Solutions](#) developed the [BMWP Framework](#), and hosted an Opportunity Youth Forum convening in October. Anna Smith, one of five WBLC members that attended the convening, wrote:

“This event offered an energizing immersion into community, creativity, and shared purpose, brought to life by an extraordinary lineup of speakers and artists who reminded us what becomes possible when people work together to solve social challenges. From Toshi Reagon’s call to break free from inherited systems and uplift those alongside us, to powerful performance poetry that illuminated lived experience, to healing-centered insights from facilitators on culture, agency, and relationship, every voice underscored the strength found in collective action. Storytelling emerged as a unifying thread—an essential tool for witnessing truth, honoring diverse experiences, and shaping new narratives that move communities toward justice. Reflections on grief and love added depth, reminding us that we grieve because we value, and that our stories can transform loss into possibility. The shared impact of the forum was unmistakable: When individuals bring their talents, histories, and hopes together, they create a vibrant community capable of imagining—and building—a better future. I am grateful to have had the opportunity to participate and continue to be inspired by its messaging.”

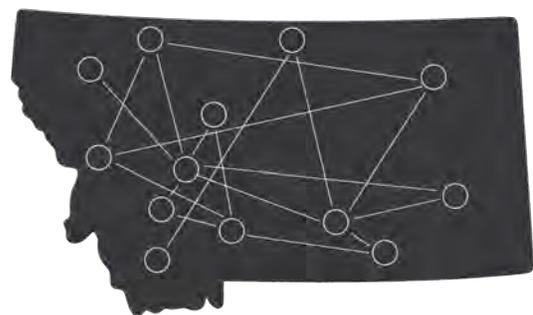


L to R: Kate Chapin, Anna Smith, Courtney George, Elizabeth Smith, Gabrielle Eklund Rowley

## **Building Montana's Credential Registry: Collaboration and Timing**

*Elizabeth Dove, Accelerate Montana*

*Quincie Jones, Executive Director of Career and Technical Education*



For years, Great Falls College has been doing important work with non-credit Validated Skills Trainings - from Basic Floor Installing to CNA to CDL courses that serve Montana's workforce needs. But like many institutions, they faced a challenge: how do you make this work visible, comparable, and connected to the larger educational system?

So in January 2025, Great Falls College joined a pilot project led by Accelerate Montana to start building a solution. As a nonprofit and recent recipient of a SkillsFWD grant, AccelerateMT recognized that Montana lacked the critical data systems other states were using to power their shift to skills-based learning and employment ecosystems. Five institutions - Great Falls College, Bitterroot College, Helena College, Missoula College, and UM Western - accepted AccelerateMT's invitation to establish the Montana Credential Registry, the 30th statewide registry in the nation. Later joined by Flathead Valley Community College, Salish Kootenai College, Montana State University's Academic Technology Office, and City College at MSU Billings, these partners formed a forward-looking collaboration that bet on the value of open data before any mandate existed.

Read the full story on the Montana Credential Registry [here](#).

## Youth Apprenticeships in Rural America

*Reach Higher Montana* was recently mentioned in a [New America](#) blog:

Youth apprenticeships provide a viable solution nationwide for offering high school students meaningful work, particularly in rural settings. These programs are more than just a job. Youth apprenticeship fosters a cooperative relationship among the apprentice, their school, their business, and the intermediary, all working together to build the apprentice into the best they can be. All of this is even more important in rural communities where opportunities can be slim. Young people in rural areas deserve the same opportunities to explore and promote themselves as those in cities and suburbs. They deserve to dream big.

Reach Higher Montana is an intermediary for youth apprenticeships. This two- or three-year program enables Montana high school students to gain professional experience while still in school, often earning college credit at no additional cost. While it is a relatively small program, Butcher and his team are working to expand the industry pathways and build new partnerships, increasing the program's reach to more students.

Read the full story [here](#).

## Montanans for Hire? Exploring Montana's Non-working Population

The Montana economy achieved record high levels of employment in 2024. Despite this, the demand for workers still outstrips the supply - with 1.6 job openings for every one unemployed person. Tight labor markets have increased competition for workers and driven up wages, yet there are over 300,000 Montanans who are not working. Understanding why many Montanans are not working is critical to addressing the state's persistently tight labor market.

Read the [Montana Department of Labor and Industry "Montanans for Hire?"](#) report.

## New Statewide Digital Toolkit for College & Career Readiness

The [Montana Office of Public Instruction](#) (OPI), in partnership with [Level All](#), announced a statewide initiative to expand postsecondary and career readiness opportunities for Montana students. Through this collaboration, all Montana schools, educators, and families will have free access to Level All's digital learning platform, equipping students with tools and guidance for

college, career, and life success. Level All supports OPI's Personalized Career Plan and Financial Literacy Standards by offering more than 15,000 short-form, expert-developed resources.

"Our mission at OPI is to ensure every Montana student is prepared for college, a career, and life after graduation," said Susie Hedalen, Montana Superintendent of Public Instruction. "Partnering with Level All provides an innovative, no-cost way to extend that mission, giving educators and students access to engaging, real-world tools that strengthen readiness and opportunity across our state."

[Read more.](#)

## Montana Chamber Foundation Hosts Market Days

Market Days give students the chance to turn their classroom ideas into real businesses. With support from the [Empowered program](#) and the Montana Chamber Foundation, students learn the ins and outs of running and marketing a small business, then showcase their products to the community through pop-up markets. The program even provides start-up funding to help students purchase supplies and equipment. "These markets encourage an entrepreneurial mindset and help students build the skills they'll need in any career," says James Easton. "There's no better way to learn about business than by actually starting one." **Market Days are being held Dec 5-17.**

## Knowledge Nugget

### Career-Connected Learning

Career connected learning is a term used nationally to describe the full spectrum of career exploration, career awareness, and work-based learning activities. Work-based learning is experiential education where a participant learns about work, at work. Career awareness and exploration can begin in early elementary school and continue throughout high school and adulthood.



#### Career Awareness

- Interest Inventories
- Guest Speakers
- Career Fairs
- Workplace Tours
- Community Involvement

#### Career Exploration

- Informational Interviews
- Job Shadows/Externships
- Industry Design Challenge
- Project-based Learning
- Career-focused Summer Camps
- Career and Technical Student Organizations

- Internships
- Student-run Enterprise
- Service Learning
- Supported Employment
- Pre-Apprenticeship
- Assistantships
- Clinicals
- Practicum
- Youth Apprenticeship
- Apprenticeship
- Industry Recognized Credentials
- On-the-job Training



### News You Can Use

#### [The American Job Quality Study: 2025 State of the U.S. Labor Force](#)

Among the key findings:

Most U.S workers (60%) don't have quality jobs.

More than half of employees (62%) lack control over their work schedules.

More than half of employees (55%) have limited input on workplace decisions that affect them.

#### [Federal Policies Risk Worsening an Already Dire Rural Teacher](#)

#### [Shortage](#)

#### [Undergrad Enrollment Ticks Up 2.4% in Fall 2025](#)

Undergraduate enrollment rose, driven by significant growth at community colleges (+4%) & in undergraduate certificate programs (+6.6%).

#### [Wyoming's RIDE \(Reimagining and Innovating the Delivery of Education\) Initiative: Evaluation Report](#)

This report examines early-stage implementation of Wyoming RIDE (Reimagining and Innovating the Delivery of Education), the inaugural program of Wyoming's Future of Learning Partnership.

#### [Does Direct Admissions to College Work? What the Research Says](#)



#### Questions? Contact:

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or visit [wblmt.org](http://wblmt.org).

### Work That Matters

**Work-based learning** Work-based learning (WBL) is learning about work, at work and is a key component of career-connected learning.

In addition to building employability skills, WBL experiences help students develop **meaning** from their classroom learning and explore **purposeful** career opportunities. Employers who intentionally cultivate **belonging** in the workplace for young workers can gain access to future workforce talent.

The Montana Work-Based Learning Collaborative works to promote belonging, meaning, well-being, and purpose for all young Montanans by building capacity for high-quality WBL experiences.

There are components of work-based learning in the K-12 education system, the postsecondary education system, and the public workforce system – but no single entry point for students or employers to access them. Our work to improve coordination among agencies and WBL partners benefits Montana’s emerging workforce and Montana’s businesses.



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