Dear VISTA Applicant:

First, thank you for your interest in the VISTA Leader position with the Teachers of Promise Pathways (TOPP) initiative. The project is a result of a successful grant awarded to three higher education institutions in Northern Montana. TOPP supports high school students in rural and tribal communities to consider becoming a teacher in their local communities. The VISTA role is exciting and provides ample opportunity to learn and grow professionally.

I have attached the original grant application and the TOPP flyer that gives you an outline of the project. We are planning and implementing at the same time. It will be a challenging second year for the TOPP grant, with many opportunities to pursue.

Our first year was very successful, and I know that we can build on those successes to inspire stakeholders to engage in the process. I will provide guidance, and you will be involved and consulted throughout the VISTA experience. As you enter a year of service as my VISTA member, you will play an instrumental role in keeping our TOPP initiative running smoothly to benefit our state’s high school partners and districts.

You will be immersed in the TOPP initiative and instrumental as we recruit and develop participants. You will have a say in the priorities of our TOPP VISTA program as we look to the future and develop upcoming initiatives.

As a unique benefit of this position, you will be able to enjoy much of the scenery of beautiful Northcentral Montana, as well as out-of-the-way nooks and crannies, as you accompany me on trips to visit members and service sites all across the state.

I am confident that you will have an incredible experience and that it will open up valuable pathways for you in the public sector.

Sincerely,

Curtis Smeby
MSU Northern
TOPP Project Director

Education that Works
P.O. Box 7751 Havre, MT 59501-7751
Phone: 406-265-3751 • Fax: 406-265-3721
www.msun.edu
Why become a teacher?

There are many great reasons to become a teacher! Here are a few to consider:

- You will make a difference!
- You will transform lives!
- You will inspire young people!
- You will have a secure profession that provides lifelong benefits!
- You will do work that matters!
- You can make everyone feel like someone!

Learn More about the TOPP Program at: https://www.msun.edu/academics/coeasn/TOPP.aspx

MSU-Northern is accredited by Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (www.nwccu.org) accreditation standards. MSU-Northern does not discriminate on the basis of race, color, national origin, sex, or disability.

Get in touch with us!

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Rural Montana
Contact your school counselor, principal, or superintendent.

TEACHERS OF PROMISE PATHWAYS

MONTANA STATE UNIVERSITY
NORTHERN

GREAT FALLS COLLEGE
MONTANA STATE UNIVERSITY
**What is Teachers of Promise Pathways (TOPP)?**

MSU-Northern’s Education Department received a Grow Your Own Educator grant from the Commissioner of Higher Education that supports MSUN’s Educator Preparation Program (EPP) to establish a pathway for high-school juniors and seniors to become teachers for Montana’s schools.

Teachers of Promise Pathway (TOPP) creates an academic pathway for students to consider teaching as their career path and inspire them to complete their Education degree in their home communities. MSU-Northern is partnering with two-year colleges (Great Falls College–MSU and Fort Peck Community College) in the region to help deliver the TOPP program.

**Participating High-Schools**

- Havre High
- Harlem High
- Great Falls Public Schools

...And More!

**Which TOPP courses will I be taking?**

- **EDU 201 (EDU 200*) - INTRO TO EDUCATION**
  This course will focus on the history, purpose, role, and scope of education in the U.S.

- **EDU 225 (EDU 221*) - EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY**
  This course will focus on educational psychology concepts with an emphasis on learning theories.

- **PSYX 230 - DEVELOPMENTAL PSYCHOLOGY**
  This course will provide an overview of what is empirically known about all the periods of life from conception to death of our physical vehicles.

- **HTH 110 (HTH 201*) - PERSONAL HEALTH & WELLNESS**
  This course is an introduction to the basic and new concepts of health.

- **M 130 - MATH FOR ELEMENTARY TEACHERS 1**
  The topics included in this course are directly related to elementary mathematics education.

*GFC-MSU Course numbers

**Where is the program offered?**

- **Havre & Area:** Courses are offered at MSU-Northern and/or Havre High School.

- **Great Falls & Area:** Courses are offered at Great Falls College-MSU and/or Great Falls Public Schools.

- **Rural Hi-Line:** Courses will be offered online. Opportunities to connect virtually will be utilized to support the teaching and learning process.

**Why these courses?**

TOPP courses were selected to provide insights into an education career path. The Teachers of Promise Pathway offers financial, academic, and personal support for identified TOPP college and dual-enrollment courses that align with educator preparation in Montana. Students will also engage in work-based experiences that support Education majors. Students will be supported by teacher leaders, professors, and mentors as they complete their dual-enrollment at their high schools and transfer them to their local two-year college and Montana State University-Northern.
Montana State University-Northern: Teachers of Promise Pathway (TOPP)

Program Synopsis

Teachers of Promise Pathway (TOPP) is strategically designed for success based on best practices: cohorts¹ and individualized learning plans². TOPP develops individualized learning plans mapping students’ pathway to a teaching bachelor degree. Student cohorts will join as a community of learners with teacher leaders. TOPP will establish a taskforce with key stakeholders representing each community partnering school. A tribal college and a community college plus 10 school districts will participate the first year; Fort Peck Community College and 15 rural districts will be served in year two. Forty high school students are the target over two years.

Plan Development, Best Practices, Implementation, Timeline & Budget

The focus of the proposal is to enhance MSUN Educator Preparation Program (EPP) presence in school districts to build a sustainable Grow Your Own teacher pathway for districts in our service region. The goal is to increase numbers of high school students choosing teaching as their career path and inspire them to teach in their communities. This project is designed to provide the opportunity for all TOPP students to complete their bachelor’s degree at home. Each of the schools participating in the first year of the project are residents in communities with access to higher education at home that leads to a bachelor’s degree in Education.

It is important to consider the long-term impact of this proposal to nurture our finest high school students into a career as a teacher in Montana. This project focuses on the delivery of 40 high school completers into the hands of higher education. Once these students articulate into the Educator Preparation Program (EPP) at MSUN, these teacher education candidates enter into a program that supports and monitors progress of each individual student through each semester of their program. Faculty are assigned as advisor/mentors for each student; faculty and staff on campus are actively engaged in submitting I Care reports and/or Early Warning reports to a student retention committee. MSUN has developed a safety-net program that emphasizes faculty student connections and wrap-around services for students who need assistance to be successful. In addition, faculty and advisors with Aaniiih Nakoda College (ANC), Great Falls College MSU (GFC MSU) communicate often about the progress of transferring students in Education.

Development and Collaboration

MSUN has existing articulation agreements with ANC, located on the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation, and GFC MSU at Great Falls, Montana, for 2+2 transfers from their two-year programs to our bachelor’s degree in Education. The TOPP project is planned to provide the impetus for strengthening collaboration as partners in the recruitment and retention of Education

¹ A cohort is defined by the students attending the schools participating in each year of the project.
² Individualized Learning Plan (ILP) is a collaboratively written document that outlines plans to meet related college and/or career goals.
majors beginning with juniors and seniors in local high schools. In addition, Education faculty and advisors at MSUN and corresponding entities at ANC and GFC MSU will benefit through partnering efforts to inspire and sustain high school students’ dreams of becoming a teacher through the Teachers of Promise Pathway (TOPP).

Our two biggest school districts are Great Falls Public Schools (GFPS), Great Falls, Montana, and Havre School District (HSD), Havre, Montana. Administration at each district was contacted and a Letter of Support was crafted to represent our collaboration and project expectations. GFPS offered to engage Montana Advanced Opportunities Act to fund dual credit and related costs for TOPP students. HSD’s foundation is an available source for supporting tuition and related costs for students. Both school districts committed to engage in recommending, recruiting, and identifying juniors and seniors for TOPP. In addition, teacher leaders at each high school will be supported by MSUN EPP faculty to facilitate work-based learning opportunities for the TOPP students.

Especially hit by teacher shortages are small, rural schools along Montana’s Hi-Line. For the first year of the project, we invited 10 schools in our local area; in the second year, we plan to reach out further to 15 small schools and Fort Peck Community College (FPCC) to join the project. Many of these small schools have graduation classes of less than 10 and limited access to remote technologies. During the first year, while not participating in the first year, these 15 schools will be working with MSUN to plan effective, efficient delivery systems for dual credit in general education and Education pre-requisites. Our first year in delivering this project will provide us with insight into promising practices to inspire high school students to begin their pathway to become teachers with dual credit courses and engaging in the Educators Rising program.

The first-year of the MSUN TOPP project will serve 15 to 20 high school students from districts within the service region of ANC, local school districts for MSUN, and the two highs schools in the Great Falls School District. Efforts will be immediate to identify potential students (juniors and seniors) who have self-identified or have been identified by teachers, staff and school community. We will reach out to school counselors (many who are MSUN graduates) to help us identify these potential TOPP students. In year two, the program would double in size based upon more time to recruit and develop outreach models for the program. We anticipate a total of 30 to 40 participants, within the two years of the program, to experience seamless admission to MSUN and application to the EPP as they complete program pre-requisites. The program is designed to make effective use of cohorts and implement strategies through the grant period to engage and enhances TOPP students’ opportunities for successful completion of their bachelor’s degrees in Education.

MSUN will work with each of the 7 high schools in the 6 school districts to identify teacher leaders, educators, and community elders (preference for retired educators) to participate as the TOPP task force. Other stakeholders who will be invited to be part of the task force are Diane Fladmo, State Coordinator for Educators Rising; representatives from ANC and GFC MSU Todd Hanson, President of Havre School District Foundation; Erica McKeon-Hanson, MSUN Little
River Institute Director and major advisor; president of Hi-Line Region Montana Association of School Superintendents; and, Dr. Margarett Campbell, former Hays Lodge Pole school superintendent and currently chief tribal liaison and advisor to the Chancellor at MSUN. There will be two task force meetings each semester. The first meeting will be an orientation/planning meeting with all task force members, partnering schools and colleges. The second through third meetings will review progress in meeting the TOPP goals and identify areas for continuous improvement.

While each school will provide a teacher leader, TOPP will provide an external community mentor who is a retired teacher. In those communities serving a population of Native American students, retired Native American teachers will be recruited to provide mentoring to our Native American high school students in the program. Education faculty and advisors from ANC, GFC MSU and MSUN will engage regularly with the teacher leaders and mentors with TOPP students. This professional group of educators will participate with each school in developing and monitoring progress with the ILPs for participating students.

**Best Practices**

From the literature on best practices for college success, establishing program cohorts increases retention and recruitment, as peers influence their friends to join the cohort. In several studies (see Wheelan, S. & Lisk, A. [2000]; Wakelam et al. [2020]; Martin, K., Goldwasser, M. & Galentino, R. [2017]), significant positive correlations were noted for cohorts of students who were part of a peer group in group development, satisfaction, and retention.

With academic and career planning essential for TOPP, we will support Individualized Learning Plans (ILP) for each student. The purpose of the ILP is to engage students in appreciating the real-life relevance to their coursework, school experiences to the future. Modeled after individualize education plans (IEPs) for students with disabilities, these plans are collaboratively developed with the student, the student’s family, the school, the transferring institution of higher education to identify specific, meaningful curriculum and goals for future attainment. According to many recent studies, for example, Hackman et al (2019); Solberg et al (2018); Solberg, V. (2019); Britton & Spencer (2020); the National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability for Youth (2014); and Solberg et al (2012), ILPs are increasingly being used to support high school students to be college and career ready. Schools, in partnership with MSUN and/or the community or tribal college will meet with individual students and their families to develop ILPs leading to a bachelor’s degree in Education.

As a Native American-Serving Nontribal Institution (NSANTI), MSUN is funded by the U.S. Department of Education to provide assistance to improve and expand our capacity to serve Native Americans and low-income individuals. An important resource for student success available for TOPP students will be tutoring provided by Little River Institute (LRI). This tutoring/mentoring program focuses on student success for all with emphasis in supporting Native American students and low-income individuals. LRI uses a research-based programs, such as Path Finders, that provide peer to peer mentoring and two academic specialists: one in math and the other in college writing.
Implementation

Upon the grant award, early in September 2021, a partnership/collaboration meeting will be convened with the identified task force members and with representation from schools, MSUN, ANC, and GFC MSU. The task force and partners will plan and begin to execute strategies for outreach and marketing of TOPP to juniors and their families. A priority will be encouraging students to enroll in dual credit courses fall 2021 semester. By spring semester 2022, the cohort of junior TOPP students will have ILPs developed, registered for dual credits in general education and Education pre-requisites and college readiness skills. With their teacher leaders’ and mentors’ guidance and support, TOPP juniors will have work-based experiences opportunities for the next three semesters (spring, fall of 2022 and spring 2023).

In addition, early fall 2021, seniors interested in teacher education will be assisted in developing an ILP from graduation from high school to completing their bachelor’s degree in Education. TOPP will provide opportunities to work closely with academic advisors for admission to their “at home” higher education institutions: ANC, GFC MSU or MSUN (second year, Fort Peck Community College (FPCC) will engaged). Seniors will be work with teacher leaders and mentors, engage in work-base experiences, complete dual credit courses and be prepared with advising to enter MSUN as pre-education majors in fall semester 2023.

Each of the schools (see Table 1 below), in addition to ANC, GFC MSU, and FPCC, will work with MSUN in good faith to investigate supporting Educator Rising chapters. With only two high schools in our proposal with more than 10 graduating seniors, their experiences have been challenging to recruit students to participate in Educators Rising. Therefore, there are barriers for all the partnering schools to support Educator Rising chapters; we will begin spring 2021 in consulting with the State Coordinator for Educators Rising, Diane Fladmo, for guidance.

Table 1: Expansion Plan for Schools Served

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<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>2-year colleges</th>
<th>Schools/Districts</th>
<th>High Schools</th>
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<tr>
<td>2021-2022</td>
<td>GFC MSU</td>
<td>Havre</td>
<td>Havre (2 high schools)</td>
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<td>ANC</td>
<td>Great Falls</td>
<td>Harlem</td>
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<td>Harlem</td>
<td>Hays/Lodgepole</td>
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<tr>
<td>2022-2023</td>
<td>GFC MSU</td>
<td>Havre</td>
<td>Harlem (2)</td>
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<td>ANC</td>
<td>Great Falls</td>
<td>Sun River</td>
<td>Sun River</td>
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<td>Harlem</td>
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<td>2022-2023</td>
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