

Susan Wolff, dean and CEO, Great Falls College

M: Today we welcome Susan Wolff, dean of Great Falls MSU, a community college that is part of the Montana State University system. Great Falls is one of more than 700 community colleges that have received federal grants known as TAACCCT --The US Department of Labor's Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College and Career Training Grant Program.

TAACCCT helps community colleges and other eligible institutions of higher education expand and improve their ability to deliver education and career training programs that can be completed in two years or less, and prepare program participants for employment in high-wage, high-skill occupations.

Great Falls is the lead college in Revup Montana, a statewide consortium involving all the public and community colleges in Montana, plus two tribal colleges. Their project focused on both programmatic reform and some systemic level issues.

Programmatically it looked at nine different occupational areas and within those occupations looked to integrate industry recognized credentials into traditional academic programs.

At the systems level, RevUp worked on what they call "zippering" Department of Labor and two year systems together. The state Department of Labor, colleges, and other entities worked together to plan strategically together in terms of priority occupations and to put workforce navigators on the ground. The navigators connect one stop centers at job service with the two- year college in their community.

Susan, can you tell us how you felt when you found out that that you'd received the TAACCCT grant for the RevUp Montana

Consortium? What were your hopes for the project, and what were your concerns?

SUSAN WOLFF: I would say that when we found out that we had the grant there was great excitement. Having working on a TAACCCT grant in the state of Oregon before I came back to Montana, I knew the level of work that was going to be required, so intermingled with that excitement was also, "Okay, now the tough work, the real hard work." But the kind of work that we wanted to do where we can make those systemic changes that you just spoke about. We were going to have that opportunity.

So, and it has really played out to be very, very true. I knew personally as the lead, the CEO of the lead institution of our 13 college consortium that my hope when it was all said and done was that we not only served the students, the participants, our business partners in our state, that we would make those systemic changes, because we can get too insular at our institutions, we certainly are insular between departments and agencies in a state where we're all wanting to make changes for students and our communities but we all have our own view of how that is going to happen. And often then it can either be at cross purposes or it requires so much duplicated effort on the part of our students, and the part of our business partners.

So, I was most excited about that piece of it.

I was also very excited to know that our Montana university system was going to start collecting data differently to include certificates that were less than one year long, so we now have the CTS or Certificate of Technical Studies, and again that goes back to knowing that our two year college students often don't come to us wanting a one or a two year degree, they want to come get a specific skillset, and they were never included in the data and they are just as important to us as our people who are

gaining those other degrees and transferring on to get Bachelor's and beyond.

M: How did you foster a culture of innovation and openness both within the consortium and at Great Falls College? What were some of the ways that you championed innovation?

SUSAN WOLFF: Our Deputy Commissioner of Higher Education in the state of Montana has been very supportive. He makes sure that this is a topic on the bimonthly phone calls that we have with the CEOs across the state, very eager to work with any of the institutions who may be having issues internally or with others to try to work those out. And we just reminded people, I think, in every written communique that we did in our meetings that this really was about systemic change. And when we started seeing some of those things, when we started having that zippering effect and we could see that visualization and we achieved a much higher degree of interest from our Montana Department of Labor and Industries and the Montana Department of Commerce the Governor's office, his Main Street Montana work, also the Workforce Innovations Board, State Workforce Investment Board etc. they were starting to see these results, once they got on then that increased that synergy.

So, it certainly was a challenge. It has taken a lot of time and energy while we have been doing this work, but it has certainly paid off, and we want to make sure that that is going to be sustained. I think that was also in the back of my mind from day one is whatever we do with this grant or any of our grants, how do we sustain the good work.

M: What was the effect of all of that government interest on your partner colleges? Did it help the colleges gain the confidence to adopt some of those changes?

SUSAN WOLFF: Right. And I think it wasn't just the confidence either but it's like a research project of wanting that curiosity or being inquisitive to say, "If we do something differently will we get different results in a beneficial way?" And I think each institution has its culture, we have had to work through that all the way through the grant of the leadership styles, their policies and practices. We have to be very, very respectful of those, because it's hard work on their part to establish who they are and with the three community colleges they have their own boards of education that they have to work with. And so there has been such a varied, I'm just going to call it almost like a quilt, of governance structures in this consortium. We have had to learn how to navigate that.

M: What are some of the lessons you have learned from implementing the TAACCCT grant, and what do you think you might have done differently?

SUSAN WOLFF: I think one of the lessons, was how do we get those other entities involved, recognizing that they perhaps at times are more important partners than our educational partners, but I also know that we needed to have product or results to show them enough that they were willing to put their time and energy towards this. So, that was a little bit of that little bit of a push/pull on that.

I think one of the lessons learned was we gave people too much information early on. It was more than they could take in, take back to their institutions, faculty had to have the time to digest that perhaps they're going to be delivering their curriculum differently or they might be revising their curriculum in partnership with another institution.

So I would say I would want to go back and rethink how could we get the information out in a manner that people could digest and

then begin to move forward, almost like chunking the curriculum. I think we could have chunked how we did that part. So I think that is the lesson we have learned.

M: Can you describe the impact the TAACCCT grant has had on your students?

SUSAN WOLFF: We just had, it was just a wonderful message that we received and a conversation I had yesterday with one of our new students. He is 56 years old. He hasn't been in school since the 1970s, wanting to do something different with his life, and he is going to be in. The industrial technician program, and he wouldn't have been starting this fall if it hadn't been for Kelsey Koteen, our Workforce Navigator who met him at job service, and he felt it was going to take several months to, number one, get the courage, number two, get through all the paperwork and the processes, and she just said, "No, we're going to get you all ready for fall term."

And he came to this campus. He has gone through our essential start process, sent the most wonderful email yesterday to our Admissions Director and talked about what a difference Kelsey has made for him, how everybody here has made him feel welcome and that his age doesn't make a difference.

So we see that on a student level and I think we're going to continue to see that, especially as we figure out how to continue bridging that work between the colleges and job service.

M: How do you anticipate sustaining the programs you've developed under the TAACCCT grant?

SUSAN WOLFF: For sustainability I think we will be wise if we choose the institutions who already have a real good working relationship with job service, Montana Department of Labor,

Industries, etc. and focus on the institutions that are willing to look outside of the box and to see how we can sustain these and put our energies to where we can make a difference because those institutions will get more attention from the Governor's Office, from these other entities, from the Board of Regents. And I think then sometimes you have to do it that way and others say, "Well I want to do that too."

M: Do you see opportunities for scaling the programs you've put in place, or are there challenges associated with that?

SUSAN WOLFF: Well, I think I see both the opportunities and challenges, and our prime example right now is with the Montana Department of Corrections, and taking the welding training to prison populations when they have limited resources to pay for that training. But I think that is one audience. Montana has such a low unemployment rate right now that it's very difficult for employers for any kind of a business to find employees. In fact, we just heard this morning with the TAACCCT Four grant Healthcare Montana that some of our healthcare providers are interested in having conversations with pre-release people who have made different decisions in their lives and have had to spend time incarcerated, but we want to help those people learn, come out with skills, and be able to get back in and be contributing citizens, and we're going to need that for the workforce.

M: What advice do you have for how to leverage grants to impact change at that statewide level?

SUSAN WOLFF: When I think of our grant, the TAACCCT Three RevUp Montana grant, again I think our success is going to be through our business partners, and we have to keep them engaged and we have to keep figuring out how we can meet their needs in a very timely way,

I think as educators we need to be really, really smart and know that we don't have all the answers, because we don't know all the problems. We don't work those every day like our business partners do. We don't deal with it every day, because we're not the student who has work responsibilities, family responsibilities, they might have a loved one who is active duty and deployed. We know about those things, but we don't live it every day like they do and that's what we have to do is really attune ourselves to other people's needs and be smart on how we can make things happen for them.

M: One last question. Do you think you would sign up for a project like this again?

SUSAN WOLFF: Well, absolutely. I think any time that our higher education system and especially the two-year institutions can go out and make a difference in workforce development, economic development, and community development that's what we're here for and that's what excites me about my job. And I might want to take a month away from not being the lead institution for a grant this size, but I would jump right back in again with both feet, because I am very proud of the work that we have done. And I would be just as excited to do it again.

M: Thank you to Susan Wolff, dean and CEO of Great Falls College MSU in Montana. Stay tuned to additional conversations about the impact of TAACCCT with community college presidents in this podcast series. The Labor Department implements the TAACCCT program in partnership with the Department of Education. One point nine billion dollars (\$1.9 Billion) in grants were awarded under the TAACCCT program. For more information visit TAACCCT.org.