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TRUST Highlights

Did you know? Compared to non-TRUST UWSOM graduates, TRUST students (from any region) are more likely to return to WWAMI, are more likely to work in a primary care specialty, and are more likely to work in a specialty in need (primary care, general surgery, OBGYN, and psychiatry).

- Nearly 80% of all TRUST graduates are working in a specialty in need.
- Additionally, TRUST students are more likely to work rurally in any specialty compared to non-TRUST UWSOM students.

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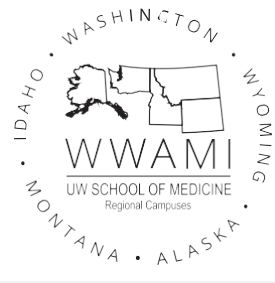
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Montana WWAMI TRUST Program – Celebrations and Transitions

It is bittersweet as we say goodbye to our long-standing Montana WWAMI TRUST Director while welcoming the team replacing her. Lisa Benzel has served as the TRUST director since November 2013. Hired for this newly created position, she has had the unique opportunity to grow and shape TRUST into what it is today. The Targeted Rural Underserved Track is a four-year medical school curriculum that provides Montana WWAMI students with a longitudinal continuity connection with rural/underserved communities over the four years of medical school training. The goal of the program is to increase Montana's physician workforce in rural locations. <https://education.uwmedicine.org/somrural/programs/trust/>

Lisa is most at home traveling the state, making connections, celebrating reunions, and providing support to anyone in any way she can. As the face of TRUST Lisa is often the first person applicants encounter during the application process. Her relationship with the TRUST scholars remains constant until graduation and beyond. During her tenure, the TRUST class was increased from an annual admittance of seven students to 12 students, starting in 2017. With the increased head count, she helped develop a half dozen new TRUST sites in the state, including Glasgow in the remote northeast corner of Montana. Annually she works with the Montana WWAMI Admissions committee to provide guidance on the qualifications of TRUST applicants. She helped establish two annual student retreat activities, one focused on leadership, and the other on cultural connections called the American Indian Medical Experience (AIME). In addition to program oversight and development, Lisa's pipeline efforts, from creating connections between clinics and undergrads interested in shadowing opportunities to recruiting physicians and fresh residency graduates to the state, have greatly benefited hospitals and clinics across Montana. For her years of commitment to rural workforce development at the secondary and undergrad levels, and relationship, recruitment, and retention efforts, she was recently recognized with an underserved scholarship to the MSU Foundation set up in her name through an anonymous benefactor.

Montana TRUST provides the educational experiences necessary for medical students to choose rural underserved focused residencies. Nearly 70% of graduating TRUST students select residency programs in specialties oriented to rural/underserved care: Family Medicine, Internal Medicine, Pediatrics, Med/Peds, Psychiatry, General Surgery and OB/Gyn. After completing residency, half of our TRUST scholars choose rural practice locations.

We welcome the two new team members: TRUST Director Sara Houston and TRUST Program Coordinator, Ashleigh Dallas. Sara grew up in North Dakota, splitting her time between a rural upbringing and the larger city of Bismarck. She previously served as a multi-department Operations Manager with Bozeman Health. In addition, she brings valuable experience from grant-funded healthcare programs serving rural and underserved populations, which deepened her passion for playing a meaningful role in expanding and strengthening healthcare access in rural communities. Ashleigh grew up in Bozeman and has a background in exercise physiology and was the supervisor for the Cardiac Pulmonary Rehab Department at Bozeman Health. She has a great passion for rural medical care access, helping to start a cardiac pulmonary rehab department in White Sulphur Springs and assisting other rehab clinics in rural Montana. Currently, all three are working together into November.

Montana WWAMI Showcases Rural Advocacy



Last May, Montana WWAMI was in the spotlight at the annual Rural Medical Educators Conference in Atlanta, Georgia. Clinical Dean Jay Erickson, MD, and third-year medical student Chelsea Koessel provided presentations on integrating advocacy into the TRUST (Targeted Rural Underserved Track) curriculum.

“Advocacy and community engagement are key to successful rural medical education programs and the outcome of returning graduates to rural practice,” said Erickson.



The presentations sparked strong interest and thoughtful questions about advocacy and leadership opportunities available to WWAMI students.

Koessel shared how TRUST has supported her advocacy work for underserved populations, highlighting her involvement in the Neighborhood Health Initiative, which included organizing clinics at a Bozeman warming shelter and a pediatric health fair. “The TRUST program offers students a rare opportunity to become deeply involved in their longitudinal communities – not only through excellent clinical training with experienced attending physicians but also through meaningful mentorship that encourages engagement beyond the clinical setting.”

Physician Feature: Kara Francis, MD



Growing up in Livingston, Kara Francis, MD, knew that when she became a physician, she wanted to do more than care for patients — she wanted to teach. After earning her bachelor’s degree from the University of Oregon in 2015, she went on to become a MT WWAMI student, graduating from the UWSOM in 2021.

Now a family medicine doctor in Browning, Dr. Francis balances

hospitalist duties with outpatient primary care, and this year she stepped into a new role as a WWAMI preceptor.

Inspired early on by caring primary care providers in small towns, Dr. Francis deepened her commitment to medicine while working in Hardin, where she saw firsthand the importance of serving tribal communities and addressing the need for comprehensive healthcare. She appreciated the knowledge and guidance her attendings shared with her, and she wanted to provide that same kind of mentorship to others.

“Now, as a newer attending, I find teaching one of the most rewarding aspects of my job,” she said. Our students bring an amazing blend of excitement, joy, questions, and knowledge that

keeps me engaged and constantly challenges me to be a better physician and person.”

In her first year as a preceptor, Dr. Francis worked with three RUOP (Rural Underserved Opportunities Program) students and two fourth-year Montana WWAMI students in the Indian Health Pathway, with more students scheduled later this year. She says Browning offers a dynamic environment for teaching.

“In the course of a day, a student and I can attend a delivery, discuss the complex conditions of an admitted elder, and then go to clinic to see individuals of all ages,” she added. “The community is made up of amazing, resilient people who welcome our students and often share life experiences that greatly affect them, and me.” ~ *story contributed by UWSOM communications team*

Faculty Recognition: Carey Downey 2025 Dept FM Clinical Excellence Award



Butte family physician, Dr. Carey Downey received the UWSOM’s Dept of FM Clinical Excellence Award. This award celebrates individuals who have made significant contributions to clinical care of patients and their communities and who have promoted teamwork with clinical staff and institutions/organizations. Congratulations Dr. Downey!

WRITE – Excellence in Teaching Award, 2025, Montana

This award recognizes and honors preceptors with a track record of excellence in teaching medical students as well as those that serve as a leader in their community. Nominations were collected from WRITE students. A selection committee reviews all nominations based on five criteria: commitment to student success, effective teaching methods, positive impact in the community, excellence as a role model for students, and commitment to continuous improvement.

In Montana in 2025, this honor was given to:



Megan Vigil, MD,
UWSOM Dept. of FM,
Clinical Assistant Professor



Kathleen Harder-Brouwer, MD,
UWSOM Dept. of FM,
Clinical Instructor

STUDENT AWARDS & FEATURES

Graduating TRUST Scholars 2025

We are happy to congratulate our recent Montana WWAMI TRUST graduates. Eleven TRUST scholars matched in 2025. Six of the students matched into primary care: (three into Family Medicine, three into Medicine); one each into Anesthesiology, Psychiatry, Orthopedic Surgery, Ophthalmology, and Emergency Medicine.

Blanket Ceremony

On the morning of the Physician's Oath & Hooding Ceremony, three Montana WWAMI TRUST graduates, Ellen Guyer, Amy Perkins (Chickasaw Nation), and Bronte Tani, were honored in a special Blanket Ceremony recognizing their completion of the Indian Health Pathway.

This meaningful tradition symbolizes respect, protection, and community, celebrating the students' dedication to serving and advocating for American Indian/Alaska Native communities as they enter their medical careers.



Trey Dschaak (Alum, E-21, TRUST site Miles City) Congratulations on receiving the **2025 George and Laurine Harris Scholarship**, awarded each year to a student who has demonstrated superior academic performance as well as motivation, character, ability and potential.



Ellen Guyer (Alum, E-21, TRUST site Anaconda) Congratulations on receiving the **2025 George Saari Memorial Scholarship**, which is given to a Montana WWAMI student who has demonstrated the professionalism and humanitarian characteristics exemplified by the late Dr. George Saari.

Montana WWAMI Students Honored with Scholarships at MMA Annual Meeting

The Montana Medical Association (MMA) recently celebrated four Montana WWAMI students at its 147th annual meeting and dinner in Helena, awarding each a \$1,000 scholarship in recognition of their dedication to medicine and service to communities across the state.

This year's recipients were medical students Barla Beaudoin of Red Lodge and Geri Cutler of Helena, and third-year students Isbah Khan of Billings and Brittney Tierney of Butte.



Montana WWAMI Students Gain Powerful Insights Through AIME

In September, first-year Montana WWAMI medical students participated in the American Indian Medical Experience (AIME), a three-day program designed to build cultural understanding and prepare future physicians to serve rural and underserved communities.

Students split into two groups: one visiting the Blackfoot Reservation in Browning, the other traveling to the Crow and Northern Cheyenne reservations near Hardin and Lodge Grass. They met with Native leaders, health professionals, and Indian Health Service staff to learn about local health priorities, resources, and challenges.

For student Grant Rickard of Billings, the Native and community leaders in Browning were inspiring.

"The most valuable part was witnessing the fortitude, determination and altruistic nature of the Indigenous women creating tangible change in Browning and within the Blackfoot Nation," he said.

Student Riley Bird of Cut Bank and Amskapi Piikani band member (of the Blackfoot Nation) said the experience in Browning strengthened her commitment to return home to practice medicine.



From Lewistown to Miles City: Montana WWAMI Student Encourages Rural High Schoolers to Dream Big

Montana WWAMI TRUST scholar, Alex Wickens knows firsthand how uncertain the path to medicine can feel, especially for students growing up in rural towns. That's why he's committed to giving back by visiting high schools across Montana, encouraging students to consider futures in medicine and educating them about the WWAMI program.

Wickens, who grew up in Lewistown and completed WRITE in Miles City, shares his own story to help students see what's possible — no matter where they come from.

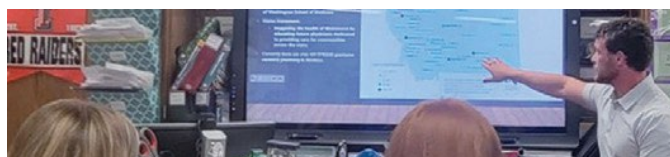
"As a high school student, I had a lot of uncertainty about going to college and all that it entailed," said Wickens. "I wish someone would have come to talk to me about what to expect. So, I figured I could be that person for someone else."

During his presentations, Wickens breaks down the path to becoming a doctor, introduces the WWAMI program, speaking openly about the challenges and rewards of pursuing a career in rural healthcare.

"One of the biggest issues in rural medicine is the shortage of providers. WWAMI is designed to help solve that problem," he explained. "I didn't even know Montana had a medical school when I was in high school."

Now Wickens is focused on rural primary care and hopes to return to Lewistown as a family or internal medicine physician after completing his education.

His message to rural students: You belong, and you're needed.
~ story contributed by UWSOM communications team



Montana WWAMI Students Explore the Future of Rural Medicine at TRUST Leadership Retreat

Montana WWAMI students joined peers from across the region in Coeur d'Alene in August for the annual WWAMI TRUST (Targeted Rural Underserved Track) Leadership Retreat, a weekend designed to challenge TRUST scholars to strengthen their skills as future rural physicians.



Montana Pre-Med Summit

Montana WWAMI, along with PreMed Advisors from Carroll College, MSU and UM organizes a pre-med summit every year for those interested in finding out more about the medical school application process. The 2025 event was held at Missoula College on October 25th. This all-day event gathered over 100, mostly undergraduate attendees and marked our highest registration and attendance to date.

The event was made possible by the following Montana Sponsors: Carroll College, Griz Med, Montana AHEC, MHA, Montana Health Research & Education Foundation, MSU, PureView Health Center, and Sidney Health Center.



MT WWAMI Clinical Education office has moved!

After 19 years in Whitefish, the clinical education office has moved to Bozeman: 251 Edelweiss Dr., Suite 3B. Stop in and see us!



UPCOMING EVENTS Save the date –

Annual TRUST/WRITE Faculty Form and Development Conference: **April 10-12, 2026** – At Fairmont Hot Springs Resort in Anaconda. We hope to see you there!

Are you interested in receiving the monthly Montana WWAMI Feature?

Go to <https://www.montana.edu/wwami/subscribe/index.html>

Calling Montana WWAMI Alum: We want to share your stories!

Highlighting the history of Montana WWAMI and its impact through the amazing stories and memories you carry. As an alum, let us know if we can feature you in Montana WWAMI social media channels and/or newsletters. Scan the QR code with your phone to submit your stories!



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