

UM Big Sky Poll Receives \$114,000 Grant

UM News Service

MISSOULA – The Headwaters Foundation recently awarded the University of Montana’s Big Sky Poll a \$114,000 research grant for an investigation of the barriers to civic engagement in the state.

The foundation, a nonprofit dedicated to improving the health of Montana communities, serves 15 western counties and the Flathead Indian Reservation. The Big Sky Poll is an applied interdisciplinary learning experience for UM students. It was founded by UM Alexander Blewett III School of Law faculty member and Department of Public Administration and Policy director Sara Rinfret and UM College of Business faculty member Justin Angle.

Research on community engagement consistently points toward the positive impact it has among individuals and their communities. However, understanding what affects engagement is an ongoing question. The grant will help the Big Sky Poll discover what barriers are in place, particularly in rural Montana, that keep people from engaging in their communities.

Angle said the partnership between the Headwaters Foundation and the Big Sky Poll is a perfect fit.

“[The Headwaters Foundation] has an interest in understanding civic engagement in the state, and we have some mechanisms and expertise in engaging public opinion here in Montana,” he said.

The yearlong grant begins immediately, with the Big Sky Poll hoping to conclude its research by the end of next summer. The research will be conducted in two phases.

Phase one will begin with interviews among community leaders throughout the state to determine reasons why people engage or not with public policy-making processes. Phase two will take the information gathered from these interviews and formulate a mixed-methods approach to access those targeted publics.

In its third year, the Big Sky Poll is an example of the experiential learning opportunities available at UM. The poll is an elective course for the Master of Public Administration and Master of Business Analytics degree programs. More information on the Big Sky Poll is online at <http://www.umt.edu/bigskypoll/>.

The Headwaters Foundation is a philanthropic organization invested in western Montana. With more than \$100 million in assets, its mission is to work side-by-side with Montanans to improve the health of their communities and create a place where all people, especially the most vulnerable, are healthy and thriving. Information on the Headwaters Foundation is online at <https://www.headwatersmt.org/>.

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