



**GREAT FALLS
COLLEGE**
MONTANA STATE
UNIVERSITY

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For immediate release

Great Falls College, MSU-Northern prepare next crop of Great Falls educators

It's possible to get your education degree without ever leaving Electric City

GREAT FALLS, Mont. – Being a first-year teacher can be rough.

Throw in a pandemic and remote learning, and it could be a recipe for disaster.

Instead, Rilee Peterson, a sixth-grade teacher in her first year at Riverview Elementary in Great Falls, credits her education first at Great Falls College MSU and then at Montana State University-Northern on Great Falls College's campus with setting her up for success.

"It's definitely been quite the first year to be thrown into with a pandemic, but I love what I do, and I feel that I'm as prepared as anyone can be because of the professors and advisors I had while attending Northern and Great Falls because they taught us education is unpredictable and ever changing," she said. "You have to roll with the punches just like we expect our students to. It's been tough, but I look at it as a pretty great learning experience. If you can make it through a pandemic, and the kids can make it through a pandemic, I think we are going to be OK."

Emily Johnson and Annie Poole, who are both student teaching at elementary schools in Great Falls, also say the program with the first couple of years at Great Falls College and the final two years in Northern's education department has them amply prepared to succeed.

They also say it's not well enough known that a person can get an education degree from Northern without ever having to leave Great Falls. They also raved about the small class sizes, affordability and the convenience of online and night classes that make it easier to continue working as big pluses to the program.

Ruth Uecker, assistant superintendent for Great Falls Public Schools K-6, said the program is a boon for the district and students.

"If you are a young person living here in Great Falls, if you can live at home, get your education right here in the community where you live, get your face-to-face experience in our schools where you hope to work someday, it's a win all the way around," she said. "For the students and for us as a district. The need for quality people coming out of an education program is probably greater than I have ever seen in my career. When I first started, we would have a hundred-plus applicants for a position, and now we have 30 to 40 applicants for our positions."

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Great Falls College MSU provides high quality educational experiences supporting student success and meeting the needs of our community.



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Rilee Peterson

Peterson spent a semester at the University of Montana in Missoula as a speech pathology major after graduating from Great Falls' C.M. Russell High in 2016 before coming back to the Electric City.

"I decided to come home and go to a college where I was saving money and getting a better one-on-one education, and I decided I wanted to work with kids in more than one specified area, so I decided to go for education," she explained.

She has 30 in-class students and four remote students

"I'm definitely glad I came home and took classes at Great Falls College and Northern," Peterson said. "I definitely think it's an opportunity not enough people know about it. You get a great education, and you are saving a lot of money."

She said both Great Falls College and Northern emphasized the practical.

"It was a lot of real world; it wasn't just learning the content or learning how to do math or teach math but learning how to work with students," she said. "It was focusing on getting to know students and their well-being."

Emily Johnson

Johnson, who is doing her student teaching at Sacajawea Elementary in kindergarten in Great Falls, lives in Dutton, which is about 40 miles northwest of Great Falls.

The 24-year-old said both Great Falls College and Montana State-Northern made it easy to live out of town and complete the program.

Classes were in the evenings and some were online and the instructors at both schools were very accommodating, she said.

"It was easy for someone out of town to attend," she said. "Or you could have a day job and then go to classes at night, and you take them online or in-person."

Johnson, who is originally from Billings, attended Rocky Mountain College first thing out of high school before getting married and moving to Dutton.



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Eventually, she found her way to the program with Great Falls College and Northern.

“It’s pretty simple, I applied to Great Falls College, and they set you up with a four-year plan, and I did my (first) two years there,” she explained. “It was really laid back, kind of a small-school feel. You get a lot of one-on-one time with your professors, and you make really close connections because you are in a lot of the same classes. I made a lot of friends. A lot of us have gone through the program together and now we’re super close because there are 15 of us who have been together for four years.”

She said she saved a good deal of money attending Great Falls College her first two years before transferring to Northern.

“It’s definitely cheaper and convenient,” Johnson said. “It was very cost-effective.”

And the transition from Great Falls College to Northern was seamless, she said, as program coordinator Marni Napierala and Darlene Sellers, the interim dean of the college of arts, sciences and education at Northern, helped the process along.

The instructors at Northern all have experience in Great Falls Public Schools.

That experience makes a big difference, Johnson said.

“I have nothing but good things to say,” she said. “They all are teachers or were teachers themselves or are in administration at Great Falls Public Schools. They have so much experience and all they want to do is create better teachers. They are the reason I feel so passionate about teaching. They’re giving up so much of their time.”

This is the second year Napierala has been the coordinator of the program after serving as an adjunct for Northern on Great Falls College’s campus for 19 years. She is still a full-time teacher on assignment for Great Falls Public Schools helping teachers in the district with professional development.

“Because of my classwork with Great Falls Public Schools, working with new teachers that are hired and my love for children and wanting them to have the best experience they can have ... I just want to be sure we are turning out the very best teachers we can,” Napierala said. “We can do that here in Great Falls.”

She said with so many of the instructors in the program still in the classroom, they can identify the gaps they see in the education of their fellow teachers who come out of other programs, and they are able to address those gaps in the program at Northern.



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“The biggest benefit for us in Great Falls is the professors who are providing the instruction to our next crop of teachers are all practicing teachers,” said Uecker, the assistant superintendent with GFPS. “Lots of time you will go to a university system, and you will have a professor providing instruction who may or may not have been in the classroom ever. They may have a lot of book smarts, but they don’t have the practitioner side. Well, these professors (at Northern) are our current employees, the best of the best. They are master teachers.”

Annie Poole

Poole is doing her student teaching at Great Falls’ Mountainview Elementary in kindergarten after years running an in-home daycare.

“I finally decided what I wanted to do when I grew up,” she said with a laugh.

The flexibility of the schools made it possible for her to get her degree, she said, as she was able to run her daycare from 7 a.m. to 5 p.m. each day before heading off for a mixture of online and in-person classes.

“I feel that both colleges have prepared me for real-world situations,” she said.

Poole graduated high school as a home-school student in Great Falls in 1996, and she said support staff at the colleges made the transition back to school “fairly easy.”

“It is very well planned out,” she said. “My advisor did a very good job of laying out everything I needed, and the staff walked through the financial stuff with me. It was a very positive experience.”

And the classes prepared her, Poole said.

“The instructors were friendly, very knowledgeable and really prepared you well for what teaching would be,” she said.

‘Ready to go’

Uecker said the program is paying huge dividends.

“We already have seen the results of this crop of student teachers we have right now,” she said. “They are phenomenal. Our principals are raving about their skills, their knowledge. They are ready to go ... ready to be hired.”



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It is not just a plus for the students who don't have to uproot their lives and move to become teachers, but Uecker said it is a huge advantage for the district to be able to identify the next great educators while they are still in school.

"We're tickled there is an education program right here in Great Falls," she said. "It gives us the opportunity to pluck those great teachers right out of that program and hire them right here in our district as soon as they graduate."

And that next crop also will be able to learn what the district is looking for in educators as they are exposed to GFPS best practices.

"They get two years of coursework from our best teachers," Uecker said. "They get to work their practicum hours in our district with other master teachers, and then they get to have their student teaching here as well with another master teacher."

Peterson, the first-year teacher at Sacajawea, agrees.

"I would recommend (the program) to anyone," she said. "I feel that we have the best program set up from Great Falls to Northern."

To learn more about the education program with Great Falls College and Northern as well as pathways to get a business degree starting with Great Falls College and ending at Northern, there is an open house at Great Falls College on April 6 from 3 to 6 p.m. in room G45-46. Enter through door No. 6 on the backside of the campus off 23rd Street and the classroom is right there.

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