Lunch and Presentation:
Herding Cats in Big Sky Country

Monday, May 21, 2007 – 12.15 - 1.30 pm
Glacier
Lunch and Presentation

Herding Cats in Big Sky Country

The Montana Board of Regents made an unprecedented agreement with the governor in September: if he would support funding the Montana University System at a strong level, then they would not raise tuition for two years. He pushed down on costs; they pushed up for realistic inflation and pay-plan funding. The handshake was well publicized statewide. Then came the hard part. Will the legislature fund it? Will the units of the university system and the research agencies, with their many constituents, buy into the deal? What a dilemma if a local legislator proposes a special appropriation for a particular unit! The board’s priority is “access and affordability” for students, but will that trump much-needed buildings or programs well-known to local legislators? Montana has a $1 billion surplus. Especially in Montana, that amounts to real money. Skeptics have good reason to look askance. As with any deal, have we settled too soon for too little? Do we have the organizational discipline to pull it off? In Big Sky Country it is a case study of harnessing energy toward a single-minded goal: the college affordability plan, CAP. The players include the governing board, the governor, the legislature, campus leaders, student lobbyists, and others. Herding cats irreverently describes the challenge.

Biographical Information on the Speaker

Sheila Stearns is a native Montanan who has held a variety of senior administrative positions in higher education, including vice president of the University of Montana, chancellor of the University of Montana – Western, and president of Wayne State College in Nebraska. Since 2003 she has served as the commissioner of higher education in Montana. Her degrees are in English, history, and educational history and leadership. Her particular interests have included access to college for low-income students and the connection between higher education and economic/workforce development.