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2025 WHITNEY BENEFITS COMMUNITY REPORT

Whitney Commons inclusive playground

On September 18, 2025, Whitney Benefits held a ribbon-cutting for the brand-new inclusive playground at Whitney Commons East Park. Since then, families have been flocking to enjoy the space, and we've heard many great questions from the community. To help keep the community informed about the project, Whitney Benefits Executive Director Erin Kilbride is sharing answers about the playground's history, design, and future.



Q: Where is the new playground located?

A: The new playground is in the east park at Whitney Commons. It's an addition, not a replacement, offering nearly 9,700 square feet of play space designed for kids of all ages and abilities.

Q: What makes this playground special?

A: It's not just another playground — it's a National Demonstration Site for Inclusion, designed using research-based best practices to welcome children with different physical, developmental, cognitive, and sensory abilities. Great West Recreation put together plans prioritizing inclusivity by using a team of experts and following best practices for inclusive playground development.

To make it fun and unique, the playground also has a western theme that celebrates Sheridan's character. Families will find:

- Multiple play structures
- Swings and zip lines
- Exercise equipment for adults
- Shaded seating and a water fountain
- Features for children of all abilities
- Everything is built to meet safety standards while making play accessible for everyone.

Q: Will the rest of Whitney Commons be affected?

A: The previous small playground at Whitney Commons will remain, as will the availability of the large pavilion and the spray grounds. While the new playground decreases the grassy area in the east park, the west park still offers a large grassy area, and the turf surfacing was intentionally used in order to keep the park beautiful.

Q: How does this playground fit into the bigger picture goals of Whitney Benefits?

A: Whitney Commons has always been intended to meet Mr. Whitney's vision of holding land to offer a community gathering place. Adding an inclusive playground creates another reason for families to come together, enjoy the

outdoors, and make memories. It complements the amphitheater, walking paths, picnic areas, and open green space already loved by the community and is adjacent to both the YMCA and the HUB on Smith, hallmarks of our community.

Q: What's next?

A: Whitney Benefits Trustees have been excited about this project for years, and they are thrilled to see families enjoying it. The organization will continue to maintain the playground, and all of Whitney Commons — so it stays safe, fun, and welcoming for years to come. We know some hallmarks of an inclusive playground are missing, such as a roller slide, and are hopeful to continue to look at these kinds of improvements in the years to come.



Q&A

Q: How was the new playground funded?

A: The playground was made possible by Whitney Benefits, a local nonprofit with a long history of supporting education and community spaces in Sheridan. The idea began almost ten years ago, but due to other financial commitments, it was put on hold. The board voted in the fall of 2024 to move forward with using Great Western Recreation to design and construct the playground in the east park. Construction began July 28, 2025. Once started, the project was completed in just six weeks.

Q: Why did Whitney Benefits decide to build another playground?

A: Sheridan has grown, and so has the need for safe, welcoming places for families to gather. Until recently, Sheridan had no all-inclusive playgrounds where children of all abilities could play together. After the success of Bondi Park and Blacktooth Playground, Whitney Benefits wanted to expand opportunities by bringing a large, inclusive playground right to Whitney Commons, the heart of our community.

Forward thinking branding

Over the past two years, the Whitney Benefits staff and Trustees have undertaken a thoughtful evaluation of the organization's strategic plan to ensure its goals and objectives remain aligned with the vision and mission of Mr. Edward A. Whitney. Through this process, the needs for a refreshed brand identity emerged, one that honors our legacy while reflecting our forward-looking mission.

In collaboration with Melanie Araas of 3 Willow Design, the Whitney team worked diligently to refine the organization's image. The new logo represents both the foundation's 100-year history and its vision for the next century. Complementing this update, Whitney partnered with Erik Kulvinskas of Big Shifter to design a new website that connects users to Whitney's past, present, and future.

Students can now easily access loan applications and related documents online, while community members can view upcoming events at Whitney Commons and make reservations for future gatherings. We invite you to explore the rich history and ongoing work of Whitney Benefits by visiting our new website at www.whitneybenefits.org

WHITNEY BENEFITS CHAMPIONS CAREER PATHWAY PARTNERSHIPS Connecting students, industry and community

Sheridan and Johnson Counties are fortunate to have an exceptional educational system,

stretching from early childhood through post-secondary programs. All four school districts consistently rank among the top ten in Wyoming—a remarkable achievement. Yet, while it would be easy to rest on those successes, our community sees a greater opportunity. The educational landscape is shifting rapidly, and we want to ensure our system stays ahead of the curve.

Our vision is clear: every student should graduate with the skills, knowledge, and experiences needed to step into a high-demand career that provides a livable wage. We want more of our young people to stay, live, and work here—strengthening the local economy and building on the proud legacy of this community.

This vision echoes the commitment of Edward A. Whitney, who more than a century ago recognized that higher edu-

cation was out of reach for many families. His dedication to expanding access to college opportunities laid the foundation for Whitney Benefits and continues to inspire our work today.

Mr. Whitney understood—greater educational attainment not only raises personal income but also drives economic growth and resilience. In today's world, where technology and industry are evolving at unprecedented speed, education is more critical than ever. New jobs are emerging, old ones are disappearing, and success requires fresh skills and adaptable knowledge.

To meet this challenge, Whitney Benefits has convened Sheridan and Johnson County school districts, Sheridan College, and leaders in the health care and manufacturing industries. Together, we are building a PK-16 career pathways ecosystem. This effort focuses on career pathways and work-based learning (WBL), ensuring students are well-prepared, skilled, and inspired for the opportunities ahead. By

aligning education with local workforce needs, we can expand postsecondary options and contribute to a strong, dynamic economy. A vital element of this effort is investing in the YouScience platform to help students discover their strengths and career interests.

For many students, the question "What comes next?" can feel daunting. YouScience addresses this uncertainty by going beyond traditional interest surveys and instead using brain-based exercises to identify a student's true aptitudes—skills like spatial reasoning, problem-solving, and critical thinking.

Once aptitudes are revealed, the platform pairs them with careers where those strengths are most in demand. Students see concrete options—ranging from possible local jobs and technical certifications to college degrees—and how to get there. By tying classroom learning to future relevance, YouScience boosts engagement and confidence that can strengthen resumes and open

doors to work-based learning and future careers.

What does this look like for students? It means more relevance in their learning. Today's students thrive when they see how education connects to real life. Hands-on experiences, exposure to the world of work, and opportunities to explore personal strengths and interests make learning meaningful. With tools like the YouScience platform, students can identify their aptitudes and begin envisioning future careers. At the same time, expanded WBL opportunities will let them apply their learning in real-world settings—bridging the gap between classroom and career.

The future is bright. With four outstanding school districts, one of the state's premier community colleges, and a strong network of local businesses, our students have every reason to succeed right here at home. Together, we are preparing the next generation not only to thrive individually but to build and sustain a thriving Sheridan and Johnson County.



TESTIMONIALS

Raith Durham



More than anything, Whitney Benefits provided me with options that I otherwise would not have been afforded. Knowing the loans were interest-free gave me peace of mind and was a major reason I applied. I received Whitney loans twice – first while earning my bachelor's degree, and again when I returned

for my master's. The first loan helped cover living expenses beyond what my scholarship provided, and the second allowed me to completely change career paths and pursue graduate school.

I earned my Bachelor's in Exercise Science from Black Hills State University, where I also played basketball, and later completed my Master's in Secondary Education from Grand Canyon University. Today, I teach math at Sheridan High School and coach football and basketball. I feel fortunate to give back to a community that gave so much to me and hope to help young people develop the work ethic, discipline, and accountability needed to succeed in whatever path they choose.

Chali Dobrenz



I left high school bright-eyed and ready to take on the world — just not entirely sure which direction to go. Though my path wasn't traditional, Whitney Benefits was there for me

when I finally found my calling in nursing. Because of this incredible organization, I was able to earn my nursing degree without the burden of government financing or high-interest loans.

I became a nurse in 2016 and have had the privilege of serving the Sheridan community at our local hospital — beginning in surgery and post-anesthesia care, then intensive care, and now as one of Sheridan Memorial Hospital's House Supervisors. I'm married to a local firefighter, and we have three beautiful, hilarious kids who keep our lives full and lively!

I'm deeply grateful to be doing meaningful work while raising my family in a community I love. Whitney Benefits made the process of obtaining an interest-free loan feel easy and personal — while making an enormous difference in the lives of local students.

Cameron Ellis



The opportunity to obtain a local interest-free loan through Whitney Benefits was a significant enabler in the completion of my college education. When I graduated from the University of Wyoming with my bachelor's in engineering, I realized I needed a deeper understanding of how businesses

operate to be competitive in my career field. UW offered limited financial aid at the time for their MBA program, without Whitney Benefits' interest free loan the cost of the program would have been prohibitive. The ability to repay the loan in full and receive additional discounts was an additional savings, effectively reducing the total cost of the loan by thousands of dollars.

Cameron was born and raised in Sheridan, WY, and is a 2013 graduate of Sheridan High School. He attended the University of Wyoming for his undergraduate engineering degree and his MBA. Cameron moved back to Sheridan with his wife in 2019 and is Director of Engineering & Business Development for Kennon Products, Inc. He is a proud father of three and enjoys sharing Wyoming's great outdoors with his family.



Edward A. Whitney

A legacy that shaped Sheridan



Whitney Benefits is a 501(c)3 nonprofit corporation dedicated to carrying out the vision of Mr. Edward A. Whitney. Gifts are tax-deductible and impact local educational and community opportunities.

Edward Augustus Whitney remains a quiet but powerful presence in Sheridan, Wyoming, more than a century after his death in 1917. Though little is known about his personal life, his vision for community betterment lives on through Whitney Benefits, the first educational foundation in Wyoming.

Whitney left behind a fortune of \$852,000—nearly \$14 million today—and spent three decades carefully planning how it should be used. His Will, considered one of the most enduring in Wyoming trust law, directed that the funds provide:

1. Interest-free student loans for both “the hand worker and the brain worker.”
2. A community gathering place in Sheridan to benefit residents.
3. An agricultural college in Sheridan.

My estate does not belong to me; I'm only its steward: it belongs to the people and I dare not be careless with it, he wrote—words that continue to define the foundation's purpose.

Established in 1927, Whitney Benefits has since awarded more than \$54 million in loans to 6,370 local students, contributed over \$104 million to Sheridan College, provided \$11.7 million to the YMCA and funded community landmarks such as Whitney Commons Park and the Sheridan Ice Rink.

Though Whitney left few personal records, his foresight has touched generations.

Sheridan's educational opportunities, public spaces and community life stand as living testaments to his belief that wealth is best used in service to others.

For those wishing to learn more, Samuel Western's The History of Whitney Benefits and Solace in Numbers explore the remarkable story of this benefactor whose quiet generosity continues to shape Sheridan County.



INTEREST FREE STUDENT LOAN PROGRAM

THE TRUE COST OF A STUDENT LOAN

\$24,000 LOAN

FEDERALLY SUBSIDIZED AT 6.53% INTEREST

+ \$6,875 INTEREST

INTEREST-FREE WHITNEY LOAN

\$0 INTEREST

\$40,000 LOAN

FEDERALLY SUBSIDIZED AT 8.08% INTEREST

+ \$14,442 INTEREST

INTEREST-FREE WHITNEY LOAN

\$0 INTEREST

2025-2026 ANNUAL COST OF ATTENDANCE COMPARISON



**Cost of Attendance (COA): COA includes tuition, fees, books, supplies, and room and board/living expenses.*

Students interested in applying can visit www.whitneybenefits.org for details.

The current application period for Spring 2026 funding closes March 1, 2026.

SHERIDAN COLLEGE

Sheridan College and Whitney Benefits have an ongoing partnership thanks to Mr. Edward A. Whitney, who prioritized contributing to the establishment of a college in the City of Sheridan in his Last Will and Testament. Whitney Benefits has provided land and financial resources to the Northern Wyoming Community College District since 1948. The college today is almost unrecognizable from what it was 80 years ago and has made great strides in providing quality education to Sheridan County and all of northern Wyoming. Today, Whitney Benefits has given over \$104 million to Sheridan College to support programs and capital projects, including \$4,118,610 given in fiscal year 2025.



MULTI-YEAR GRANTS



Legacy Grant: In response to a need to assist with student programs, the Whitney Benefits Trustees committed over \$11 million in 2018 at Sheridan College in the Legacy Grant. This was the first of many grants that directly support student programs and not only capital projects. The legacy grant commemorated the 100-year anniversary of the death of Edward A. Whitney. This grant supports a variety of programs, including agriculture, CNA, computer coding, machine tool, welding, diesel, arts, music, and recruiting and mentoring programs. The final payment for these grants was made in June of 2025 with some reallocations of Legacy funding being utilized through June of 2026.

Centennial Residence Hall: Also in 2018, Whitney committed \$7.1 million for the construction of a 100-bed residence hall to address the need for updated student housing. Sheridan College has worked to increase students living on campus over the past few years to build a robust campus community culture. Centennial Hall is the newest campus residence building on the Sheridan College campus and is located just east of the Thorne-Rider Campus Center. Centennial Hall has been open for student occupancy since the Fall of 2020 and includes three floors with traditional rooms, common lounges, and study rooms. Whitney makes payments on this grant annually and will continue to do so through 2044.



Master Grant: The largest multi-year grant made by Whitney Benefits to Sheridan College was committed in 2014. At that time, Whitney Benefits committed \$31.9 million to Sheridan College to support the Mars Agriculture and Science Center, the Whitney Center for the Arts, the Technical Center, and other capital projects. In fiscal year 2025, Whitney continued to fund this extraordinary multi-year gift with a grant of \$2,130,610. Annual payments on this grant will continue through 2030.

♦ **Sheridan College Endowed Agriculture Instructor:** In 2016, Whitney Benefits committed of the establishment of an endowment of \$750,000 to match equal funds received from the State of Wyoming to support an agriculture instructor at Sheridan College. This instructor supports the continuous growth of Agriculture programs at Sheridan College.

♦ **E.A. Whitney Endowed Professorship in Agriculture:** This endowment was established in 2007 for \$1,250,000 to match equal funds from the State of Wyoming. The professorship supports the University of Wyoming College of Agriculture's partnership with Sheridan College by allowing a research and teaching professor to be based at the Sheridan Research and Experiment Station on the Adams Ranch.

♦ **Edward A. Whitney Endowed Health Science Chair:** Originally established in 2006 as the Endowed Nursing Chair and then expanded to include the entire college of health science in 2019, Whitney contributed

\$1,000,000 to match funds from the State of Wyoming to create this endowment. The current chair, Katie Hiller, supports both the nursing program and dental hygiene programs at Sheridan College and acts as a liaison for Sheridan College nursing students who go on to earn their BSN through the University of Wyoming. She has also implemented upgrades to the nursing simulation lab and provides regular training to students and staff in the simulation center.

♦ **Nursing and Dental Hygiene Practicum:** In 2007, Whitney Benefits gifted \$500,000 to Sheridan College to be matched by equal funds from the State of Wyoming to establish funds for a nursing practicum. In 2020, this grant was amended to include dental hygiene students as well. Now, nursing and dental hygiene students at Sheridan College can access funds in this endowment to support potentially costly educational experiences that are required to further their education and clinical knowledge outside of the Sheridan community.

WHITNEY BENEFITS SHARES THE GIFT OF WATER WITH SHERIDAN

Water is one of Sheridan's most valuable resources, and thanks to the foresight of Edward A. Whitney, Whitney Benefits continues to share this gift with the community. Whitney Benefits owns 143 Park Reservoir water shares, originally tied to land from Whitney's estate. Each year, the foundation makes these shares available for community use – releasing up to 55 million gallons of stored water in the most recent reporting year.

While some of this water helps maintain Whitney Commons and other Whitney-owned properties, the majority flows back into Sheridan through partnerships with local organizations. Together, these collaborations ensure that parks, pathways, sports fields, and community spaces remain green, welcoming, and vibrant for all to enjoy. Through these partnerships, Whitney Benefits provides water to the Sheridan

Recreation District for Thorne Rider Park, Oatts Baseball Complex, and Dan Madia Soccer Field, as well as to the City of Sheridan for Washington Park, Black Tooth Park, Kendrick Park, and the elk pasture. Sheridan County also receives water for the Sheridan County Fairgrounds, supporting a space that brings the community together each summer.

Whitney's reach extends into education as well. At the University of Wyoming Science and Research Center, located at Whitney's Adams Ranch near Sheridan College, students and educators rely on Whitney-donated water for crop irrigation and experimental test plots that support hands-on learning. Across the community, Whitney's stewardship of water is a living example of philanthropy in action—sustaining the places where Sheridan gathers, learns, and grows.

ADAMS RANCH

SHERIDAN RESEARCH AND EXTENSION CENTER

The 484-acre Adams Ranch was among the properties Edward A. Whitney passed to Whitney Benefits through his 1917 Last Will and Testament.

Today, the ranch is leased to Sheridan College through a no-fee agreement valid through 2038 and serves as a key site for agricultural education and research.

The University of Wyoming's Sheridan Research and

Extension Center (ShREC) operates its field research program on the ranch, supported in part by the E.A. Whitney Professorship in Agriculture Endowment established in 2007.

This collaboration provides a unique hands-on learning environment where students and researchers can study plant selection, soil health, and sustainable land management in a real-world setting.

UW / SC AGRICULTURE STUDENT HIGHLIGHTS

Building on this foundation, the partnership among Whitney Benefits, Sheridan College, and the University of Wyoming continues to thrive. Since ShREC relocated its main headquarters to the Watt Agricultural Building in 2013, the program has expanded opportunities for undergraduate and graduate students in agriculture and natural resources. Under the leadership of Dr. Donna Harris, the E.A. Whitney Endowed Professor, students and research teams are advancing plant-breeding initiatives that address Wyoming's unique environmental challenges. Many participants—some of whom began their studies at Sheridan College—have gone on to pursue advanced degrees and careers in the agricultural sciences, reflecting the long-term impact of Whitney's investment in education and research. Below, we have highlighted three exemplary students who illustrate different aspects of the ShREC, Whitney Benefits, and Sheridan College story.

Jane Sylvestre, originally from Laramie, Wyoming, is one of the first students to complete her Bachelor of Science degree in Plant Production and Protection from UW completely in Sheridan. Jane earned her Associate of Science in Rangeland Management and Plant Sciences from Sheridan College – during which she worked as an undergraduate research intern with UW's Sheridan Research and Extension Center. She recently completed an internship with CABI Biosciences – a research organization in Switzerland – and is now an Assistant Supervisor with Sheridan County Weed and Pest District! The unique partnership between Sheridan College, University of Wyoming, and Whitney Benefits supported Jane's pursuit of her educational and career goals to land in a position she loves.



Heidi Schueler, grew up in Huntley, Montana and moved to Sheridan to study Plant Sciences and Horticulture at Sheridan College. Heidi took on a challenging role of managing day-to-day operations at the Sheridan Research and Extension Center research vineyard during her summers at Sheridan College. She completed her Bachelor of Science in Agroecology at the UW main campus in Laramie before moving back to Montana to work as a horticulture educator with Montana State University Extension. Realizing that she wanted to pursue further education, she re-joined ShREC as a graduate research assistant working toward a Master of Science degree under the direction of Drs. Brian Mealor and Donna Harris – the E.A. Whitney Professor in Agriculture at UW. Heidi's diverse research questions range from improving alfalfa resistance to the alfalfa weevil to enhancing our understanding of native plant materials for reclamation purposes in the Powder River Basin.



Grace Vinarao, came to Sheridan from the Philippines where she was actively involved in plant breeding programs there. The opportunity to work in the diverse, applied plant breeding program led by Dr. Donna Harris was one of the main reasons she applied to study here. Grace's research focuses on better understanding drought stability in field peas and describing the range-wide genetic structure and diversity of the native plant prairie junegrass. Grace was recognized for her science and leadership by the National Association of Plant Breeding as one of 24 National Borlaug Scholars in 2025. Coming from a farming family, Grace hopes her research will improve agricultural productivity and economic conditions for smallholder farmers in the future.



HEALTH SCIENCES AND HUMAN SERVICES AT SHERIDAN COLLEGE

This past summer, Whitney Benefits committed to grant \$350,000 to Sheridan College to enable students in health-care and human services to have access to new, hands-on learning opportunities. The funding will be used to equip and furnish experiential learning spaces where students can practice real-world skills in settings that reflect the clinics, hospitals, and community organizations they'll serve after graduation.

This support from Whitney Benefits aligns with Sheridan College's 2030 Strategic Plan, which emphasizes student-focused initiatives, including developing relevant programming, expanding living/learning partnerships with local stakeholders, and creating short-term training opportunities to fast-track students into the workforce. The investment comes at a time when the demand for behavioral health workers continues to rise—jobs in the field are projected to grow by 18% nationally over the next decade. Sheridan College hopes to meet that need locally by expanding its programs and preparing graduates to step into vital roles across the region.

This grant reflects Whitney's long-standing commitment to education and community well-being. The project is about helping students succeed, filling critical jobs, and improving access to care for families in Sheridan County. Sheridan College is working closely with Sheridan Memorial Hospital and other local healthcare providers to sustain and grow these training opportunities. With this support, students will graduate ready to serve as nurses, behavioral health specialists, and human services professionals—strengthening the healthcare system and quality of life in Sheridan for years to come.

