Dec. 8, 2015

To the Faculty Senate, Provost Brown, and President Engstrom:

A visit to the library during the evening, long after most faculty and administrators have gone home, immediately reveals how vibrant the Mansfield Library is and how crucial it is to the academic institution of the University. It is exciting to see students at work, engaged in academic conversations, and investing time and energy to their studies. As faculty and administrators, we often fail to see how students work. Although the ultimate budget picture remains obscure to the campus community, what is clear is that a reduction in personnel at the Mansfield Library will likely affect the number of hours that the library is open, resulting in reduced access to physical media, to consultations and assistance, to study space, and to technology. Access to all of this, which contributes to academic support and translates to retention of students, depends on the University’s officers’ recognition of the importance of investing in its human capital.

Despite significant cuts to the library’s budget over the past three years, the library has managed to increase its services. New group study spaces have been created for UM’s student veteran population; the Math Lab, catering to students in developmental math, opened at the beginning of the semester; new quiet study space is now available for students wanting to work without distraction.

The Mansfield Library provides services reaching a major portion of the university campus as well as the community at large. In FY 2014–2015, the library faculty facilitated 569 classroom sessions, reaching in excess of 13,000 students. In the course of the same period, more than half a million people walked through the doors of the Library. In fact, despite the fact that UM currently has fewer enrolled students than it did at its peak in 2011, library usage is rising. Between FY2012 and FY2013, students participating in library instruction increased by 20%, and between FY 2013 to FY 2014, it increased by another 25%. Moreover, the total gate count has remained within 2% of the figure when enrollment was at its highest. The library is able to reach so many people, whether students, faculty, or members of the community, precisely because the doors are open 111 hours per week on the Mountain campus alone – more than any other building on campus. The current round of budget cuts would likely impinge on the library’s ability to offer such extensive services.

Over the past three years, the Mansfield Library has been required to reduce its budget disproportionately to other academic units. In FY2013, the Library was beset with a one time only rescission of $141,544. In FY2014, the Library faced a base budget decrease of $360,000 in addition to a one-time only rescission of $277,000. These cuts resulted in the cancellation of existing databases and journals. The Faculty Senate acknowledged the critical role that library collections play for student and faculty alike by passing a resolution in May 8, 2014 requesting the President, Provost, and Vice President for Administration and Finance provide
adequate yearly inflationary increases to the library collections budget. This resolution was reaffirmed April 9, 2015. Although the library was pleased to learn that its budget would remain flat in FY2015, it did not receive its usual inflationary increase which required the elimination of $145,000 worth of ebooks, memberships from the budget, as well as reduction in monograph and media acquisitions. The Library clearly has been able to do remarkable things as its budget has contracted.

During President Engstrom’s remarks, he implored the campus community that “Everybody at UM is a recruiter.” The Mansfield Library contributes to this role actively through public exhibitions and library events. During FY 2014-2015, 3000 people attended library events. Last year, the library hosted an exhibition produced by the US Holocaust Memorial Museum and coordinated eight public programs led by University, community and national scholars related to the Nazi Book Burning content. And, this May, we look forward to an exhibition of Shakespeare’s First Folio. Through public exhibitions such as these, the Mansfield Library actively develops educational opportunities for the University of Montana that also draw members of the community to the campus.

But recruitment is only one aspect of the current budget crisis. President Engstrom remarked on the importance of improving “customer service,” which he described as being central to “our on-campus service to students.” The Mansfield Library’s commitment to individual consultations (more than 529 to students and faculty requiring research assistance), to in person reference transactions (27,851), to tech support (through helpdesk requests, lending laptops, supporting wireless network access, etc.) all represent academic support to students. And, in an academic environment, it is important to note that the “customers” are students first.

The University Library Committee is concerned that decisions are being made (or are at least being communicated to the UM community) without consideration of curricular issues and the implications they will have on the institution’s academic mission. The “right-sizing” of the university has been explained as being necessary due to the fact that during the years of growth the University of Montana “had ‘ramped up’ aggressively” faculty and non-faculty FTE. The Mansfield Library, however, did not benefit from growth in this area; its FTE has remained essentially flat (71.24 FTE in FY04 compared to 67.7 FTE in FY15). Despite a constricting budget, the Mansfield Library has managed to offer important excellent service to its patrons in ever increasing aspects.

President Engstrom’s November 17, 2015 remarks on the campus budget have raised severe concerns for the University Library Committee about the impacts on the Mansfield Library’s budget allocations as well as staffing. Our committee acknowledges the gravity of the campus budget situation; nevertheless, we would like to advocate on behalf of the Mansfield Library so that it may continue to offer high quality instructional support. The committee urges the President and Cabinet to recognize the Library’s contribution, not only in terms of providing the infrastructure for instruction, research and creative scholarship, but also in terms of
its role in recruitment and retention. We encourage you all to walk through the library at night, to see the campus at work, and experience the Mansfield Library as more than a repository of books and journals, but as a hub of academic activity. The Mansfield Library's ability to serve as a site of learning and exploration for all segments of the community and thus to contribute to the recruitment goals and student retention strategies depends on maintaining the appropriate staffing to lead classroom library sessions, provide individual reference support, and simply to keep the doors open.

Respectfully Submitted
University Library Committee