December 14, 2015

Dear Alumni and Friends,

With my first semester as Dean of the Alexander Blewett III School of Law at the University of Montana drawing to a close, I’m writing to give you an update on recent developments and to ask for your continued support as we celebrate our successes and rise to meet the challenges before us.

I hope you received the revived Montana Barrister magazine. The Barrister, appearing for the first time in almost fifteen years, highlights the accomplishments of our faculty, alumni, and students, leading with a feature on the public-spirited philanthropy of our benefactor Zander Blewett. Among the many achievements it celebrates is the elevation of the Honorable Sidney Thomas as Chief Judge of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit. Judge Thomas continues our impressive legacy on the federal bench, following in the footsteps of Judge James R. Browning, the longest-serving Chief Judge of the Ninth Circuit. Judge Thomas received the University’s Distinguished Alumnus Award in October.

November saw a string of student victories as the fall competition season reached its peak. First, our Negotiation teams took first and third place in the ABA Regional Competition in Calgary. The winning team of Nick VandenBos and Lindsay Thane, who won the region for the second year in a row, will travel to San Diego for the national finals in February. Then, just a week later, our Moot Court teams took first and second place in their regional competition, hosted here at the School of Law. The winning team of Jason Collins, Hannah Seifert and Adam Wade will compete for the national championship in New York in February.

Also in November, the Board of Regents approved the new Max S. Baucus Institute at the School of Law. The Baucus Institute, focusing on economic development with a global perspective, will help us build our business and transactional programs while giving students new opportunities and solidifying successful initiatives such as the China Study Abroad program. I’m pleased to report that Professor Sam Panarella has agreed to serve as the first Director of the Baucus Institute upon its formal launch in 2016.

These and our other successes show the continued vitality of the School of Law. At the same time, however, we face some real challenges. First, you may have seen the news regarding the low passing rate on the bar exam. Statewide, only 62% of takers passed the bar exam in July, a historic low. We outperformed the state rate, with 68% of our first-time takers passing, but we are still not satisfied with those numbers. Accordingly, we have moved aggressively to respond, along several tracks. We are reviewing our curriculum to make sure we give our students all the skills and knowledge they need to pass
the bar and succeed in practice. We are in dialog with the Supreme Court and the Montana Board of Bar Examiners to consider whether the bar exam is serving our state’s legal system as well as it can. And we are implementing new coursework related to the bar exam this spring to ensure that our students have the best possible chance of passing.

Second, you may have heard or read about plans to reduce faculty and staff positions at the University of Montana to better align staffing with enrollment. For the School of Law, enrollment declined slightly this fall, but is still within historical norms. We have been prudent in our expenditures, so we do not anticipate any reductions in law faculty. And we have maintained an efficient administrative structure, with a staff-faculty ratio among the lowest in the country for law schools. As a result, we believe we are well-positioned to emerge from this period of transition stronger than ever.

Given these challenges, Zander Blewett’s gift could not have come at a better time. The new Chair provided for by their gift will allow us to continue to build, even in the face of campus-wide faculty reductions. The programmatic aspects of the gift will allow us to give new support to students for summer work. And the scholarship fund will help us maintain law school enrollment by ensuring that we remain competitive in an increasingly difficult admissions marketplace.

Still, we continue to depend on the support of alums like you. Our competition teams, for example, depend entirely on private funding. Those teams need broad support to achieve their goals. Private funds will also finance our initiatives relating to the bar exam, providing resources and personalized instruction to the students who need it the most. To maintain the quality of our student body—essential both for our enrollment and our students’ future performance on the bar exam—scholarship support is more important than ever. And now is the best possible time to give for scholarships, with the Blewett gift providing matching funds for any gift of $500 or more. For all these reasons, I encourage you to consider the School of Law in your year-end giving this year.

In closing, I want to thank you for your support—not just financial, but in so many ways—for this institution. Only six months into my tenure as Dean, I have been overwhelmed by the depth of feeling for this law school among Montana’s bench and bar. This is a unique school in an extraordinary state. I am proud to lead it, and I hope you share my commitment to ensuring its future.

I wish you and your family the very best for this holiday season and the new year!

Best regards,

Paul F. Kirgis