Dear President Engstrom,

Thank you for the opportunity to take part in the discussion regarding the University of Montana’s current budget situation and, specifically, for the chance to help summarize student feedback to your announcement in November. We appreciate your dedication to shared governance.

By the deadline, we received over 160 separate comments to the comments_students email address. We are still receiving comments to the emails. They total 115 pages with minimal spacing, and over 63,000 words. Approximately 62 of these pages consisted of direct feedback from currently enrolled UM students. The other approximately 53 pages consisted of comments from alumni, staff, faculty, or community members/high school students. Alumni were easily the second largest group that commented, totaling approximately 40 pages of feedback.

The word ‘journalism’ was mentioned 257 times. Forestry was mentioned 123 times. The library was mentioned 91 times. The art department was specifically referenced 68 times. We give you this information because these three programs were discussed the most. Obviously, you should account for some people simply mentioning the word more than once in their comment. It was clear that a coordinated and strategic campaign was initiated by these departments in particular to encourage current students, and especially, alumni, to comment to these emails. We do not feel this should detract from their value, however, it is worth mentioning.

Throughout the comments, students and other folks tended to feel varying degrees of outrage, disappointment, sadness, fear, and, to a lesser degree, disgust. However, there were many that were genuinely thankful for the opportunity to be included in the conversation, while others were skeptical whether their comments would make a difference at all. The major theme seemed to be that people genuinely care about the University’s success and well-being, and many appreciate the magnitude of these types of decisions.
Journalism
Again and again, people expressed a great deal of surprise that journalism was mentioned as a program at risk of some kind of personnel cuts in general. It’s frequently ranked as a top-tier journalism school in the country, and many people feel that cutting one of our best programs would be an extreme disservice. Alumni and current students mentioned very frequently how few faculty make up the department, and how hard they work. Joe Eaton, Jule Banville, Lee Banville, and Nadia White were mentioned by name repeatedly as invaluable. The value of an education in journalism, especially at UM, is exhibited by a variety of highly successful alumni that were mentioned or named frequently. They prove themselves by being employed almost immediately and producing nationally-known pieces. The Journalism School is one of UM’s greatest strengths and assets for recruitment and reputation.

Forestry
Forestry is another program that received a great deal of support. It notably received more emails from current students than alumni. Budget cuts to the forestry program may affect the Society of American Foresters’ accreditation. UM’s proximity to exceptional public lands is unique, and through cutting CFC we are harming unique opportunities for students that cannot receive this same education and experience anywhere else. UM’s CFC is frequently mentioned among the likes of Yale, Berkeley, and other prestigious schools. One student provided a statistic that purports 97% of UM CFC graduates finding work in related fields or entering graduate programs. CFC students learn and work in a variety of different areas directly related to global issues (climate change, land management, ecology, environmental law, hydrology, economics, and many more). The CFC proves its academic quality and merit through national and international recognition in research; some students believed the ecosystem science program needs to be marketed widely, rather than cut or consolidated. Without a strong forestry program, some students feel that UM can no longer be considered a resource management school; it will be a ‘theory’ based school. Faculty that were specifically mentioned as invaluable: Edwin Burke, Martin Nie, Kelsey Jensco, Ashley Ballentyne, Andrew Larson, Brady Allred.
Art
The vast majority of comments regarding the art department were not submitted by current students. They were sent by alumni in the final hours of the commenting period, or other members of the UM community throughout the week. There are only a handful that were submitted by current students. However, the art program was hailed by those who mentioned it as an extremely strong program, despite a lack of appropriate funding. The faculty are passionate, and laying any of them off would drastically affect this already tight program. One comment directly compared UM’s art program to MSU’s, and highlighted that this student intentionally left MSU due to their understaffed, over-stretched program with too many students for faculty to appropriately critique their work. At UM, the student boasted that the faculty-student ratio is at the perfect level, and the current ratio is absolutely necessary for succeeding in the art school, and it cannot afford any compromises in staffing without eventually falling into the same situation as the art school at MSU.

Library
Mentioned several, although fewer times, the library is an essential resource for student success, and is already strained. Its ability to comply with accessibility mandates will be negatively affected by cuts to staff. Additionally, a reduction in the number of hours the library can stay open seems to be likely with staffing cuts, but is highly discouraged. Students need a safe, welcoming, and stable environment in which to study, research, and work.

Liberal Arts
Many commenters were rightly cognizant of the fact that the University’s budget is tight. They felt that enrollment in the liberal arts might be down, not because the academic pursuit of those arts is less desirable in these economic times, but because UM has not provided the liberal arts and humanities departments with the means to provide a quality education. A flagship, liberal arts, research university cannot stand out nationally for its educational merit or its exceptional graduates if the liberal arts tradition in and of itself is compromised. This is the general feeling. People are outraged because this is perceived as an attack on the liberal arts and humanities at the University of Montana. People are genuinely fearful of losing sight of our roots.
“Please don’t lose sight of the Liberal Arts. This is so important to who we are as an institution.”

“We have always been the liberal arts college in Montana.”

“I hope that the discrepancy of the budget can be resolved somewhere else than the library or the Humanities college, because that is what makes our liberal arts school so special.”

“I chose this University because it is a liberal arts school.”

“Despite national trends, Montana needs a place for a quality liberal arts education, and many once considered UM to be that place.”

“The breadth of a liberal arts education is to harness and obtain a broad set of knowledge and critical thinking to further one’s curiosity, creativity, and success. It buttresses one’s ability to engage and function constructively in a society and a world that is full of complexity and nuance.”

We recognize your support of the humanities thus far, and do not sarcastically quote these students. Rather, we want to express to you just a few of the voices speaking out in support of the liberal arts in general. A strong and pervasive perception purports that the liberal arts have been unfairly targeted for cuts or reduction. Students are worried about their reputation in their fields. They are worried about how, if the University of Montana is perceived to be ‘gutting’ the liberal arts, they will be perceived as potential employees and scholars after matriculating from UM? We cannot stress enough the importance of the humanities to not only our institution, as the flagship liberal arts research university in the state, but also to the students and alumni who care so deeply and passionately about their school and home.
Alternatives
Coupled with their opposition to faculty lines being cut or programs consolidated and diminished, many students offered potential solutions. Certain themes were repeated by many especially passionate students and faculty, namely that what they perceive as ‘administrative pork’ at main hall needs to be cut. However, one student suggested that perhaps administrative pay be tied to FTE count.

Other solutions included renovating existing buildings to be more energy efficient and cut long term costs, as well as increasing efforts to attract fiduciary assistance from Helena and alumni. However, it was brought up that some alumni fundraisers appeared to be far too ‘lavish’ in light of the current budget crisis.

Some students stressed their support for increasing the faculty teaching load. Faculty might be encouraged to teach more classes rather than focus on their contributions to outside research. Others brought up a German concept of “Kurzarbeit” or “short work.” This would entail mandatory furlough days across the board, or selectively, in order to make an impact on the budget.

Moving Forward
People expressed a general dissatisfaction with the way this plan was communicated to the university community. There was a strong desire for transparency and inclusion, moving forward. Overall, a recurring theme cropped up: the administration needs to create and maintain a strong, shared vision for the University’s future. This includes a vocalized and proven value of the liberal arts. If anyone is to buy-in to this proposal, these fears need to be put at ease by providing specifics regarding how cuts were determined, providing the exact enrollment numbers for each of the programs (as well as programs that will be ‘unaffected’), and by making sure people feel their voices have been heard.

We believe that some people will be understanding of the fact that programmatic enrollment numbers were not the sole reason for personnel cuts to a specific department; however, they want to know, if not the numbers, then what? Again and again, students expressed a misunderstanding
of the application of the term ‘cuts’ in your plan. We believe this is due, in part, to faculty members telling their students frequently “our program is being cut” without providing additional information about what that means in terms of personnel/programmatic changes. It would be beneficial to stress heavily your points regarding which programs are actually up for elimination/consolidation.

There are significant misconceptions about the differences between general and designated funds, and many students were baffled by the prosperous, well-supported appearance of athletics juxtaposed with suffering academic programs and overworked faculty. There should be more communication about the differences between different pools of money, so the general public can become more familiar with these complexities.

Embedded within the angry, concerned, or fearful commentary are positive tributes to the University. While defending specific programs or faculty lines, the students and alumni make impassioned arguments highlighting the merits and unique qualities of programs and experiences at UM. Due to the potential for layoffs and fewer academic options, they are genuinely concerned that future students will miss out on superb educational and developmental experiences.

We appreciate the difficult decisions that must be made, and the conversations that must be had. Thank you for your commitment to hearing the concerns of students, faculty, staff, alumni, and community members, and for your efforts to incorporate their feedback into the operations of the University. We look forward to working with you to create a shared and stable vision for the University of Montana.

Sincerely,

Cody Meixner
ASUM President

Betsy Story
ASUM Vice President