

Summary of the Feedback on President Bodnar's draft recommendations

Introduction

President Bodnar released a set of draft recommendations for UM's future titled "University of Montana Strategy for Distinction" on April 17, 2018. Feedback on the draft recommendations was collected through May 12, 2018 via an online form posted on the Office of the President's website. Responses were recorded in Qualtrics and analyzed using InVivo, with assistance from the Social Science Research Lab.

Respondents

There were 845 responses (some are duplicates). Of total respondents, 31% identified as faculty; 23% identified as alumni; 20% identified as students; 6% identified as staff; 19% identified as "other" and included parents of current students, donors, representatives of professional organizations, and faculty at other universities, etc.

Themes

Responses were coded and the following themes identified:

- Support for President Bodnar & the draft recommendations
- Comments on proposed faculty reductions and re-organization of academic units
- Support for the humanities

Discussion

Support for President Bodnar and the draft recommendations

Respondents submitted a substantial amount of general support for the draft recommendations. Overall, the support was centered on the need for change, the importance of a strategic approach to address budget shortfalls, the loss of morale after years of budget cuts, appreciation for strong leadership taking decisive action, and the need to make "difficult decisions" in order to move forward. There is a sense that UM is at a "crossroads" at which critical decisions are needed. Some respondents urged the President and administration not to back down from making the hard choices they believe need to be made for the sake of the institution.

Selected comments

- "Make these hard choices and let's move forward."
- "I am extremely encouraged by the UPC's proposed action plan, and by President Bodnar's leadership, transparency, and the general statement on how he intends to act on this exciting new vision for UM. We are at a crossroads and bold action is essential to our survival."
- "As the President's statement makes clear, the weak and directionless across-the-board cuts of the last several years cannot continue..."

- “We are at a critical crossroads. We finally have a president with vision and the willingness to face up to our institutional and structural problems. We MUST make the suggested changes NOW. We can't wait if we want to stabilize the situation and start moving out of this long period of decline. I've been here for 13 years and for most of that time we've been lurching from budget crisis to budget crisis. Morale amongst staff and faculty very low and that isn't something that can continue if we want to improve our student's [sic] experience and improve retention.”
- “We have been in a state of budgetary and administrative ‘paralysis’ for years. We have gathered data and perspectives and analyses during a multi-year, open process culminating in the UPC recommendations. Now, at last, we have a new President and Provost willing and able to take those recommendations, listen attentively, and move forward!”
- “I know that difficult decisions lie ahead, but this kind of strategic realignment is exactly what we need to move forward as a university. I applaud President Bodnar and the rest of his leadership team in taking on this bold initiative.”
- “Difficult decisions have to be made, and for at least 3-5 years, the decisions have been evaded. We cannot continue to bury our heads in the sand and do nothing. Past administrations have asked for units/departments to voluntarily come up with solutions, and no one has been willing to give up anything or be creative in merging resources. The reality is here - we do not have the funds to do everything we are doing, and do it well. The mindset of 'no change' has to go.”

Comments on proposed faculty reductions and re-organization of academic units

Respondents made comments about the proposed faculty reductions in specific departments and programs and the proposed re-organization of academic units. When commenting on the proposed faculty reductions, all commenters expressed concern that faculty reductions would be detrimental to their programs. In most cases, commenters expressed concern that the data used to estimate the faculty reductions were flawed; therefore, the proposed faculty reductions were incorrect.

Feedback on the proposed re-organization of academic units expressed concern that new groupings of various programs and degrees would negatively impact individual program identities, result in dilution of discipline-specific expertise, and lead to the perception of diminished program quality. Some questioned whether the proposed re-organization of departments within the College of Humanities & Sciences into divisions would create any efficiencies or savings. Many commenters expressed concern that the proposed re-organization would instead create a new level of administration and bureaucracy, resulting in less efficiency and increased expenditures.

A number of commenters submitted feedback about specific programs. Recurring comments addressed proposed actions such as:

- Moving the Climate Change Studies program from the Davidson Honors College to the W.A. Franke College of Forestry and Conservation
- Consolidating graduate degrees into an MA of Social Science
- Moving the Master’s of Public Administration program from the Department of Political Science to the Baucus Institute of the Blewett School of Law
- Maintaining the Department of Native American Studies as a standalone unit

- Maintaining the specificity of language majors rather than grouping them into broad geographical sections; alternatively, offering one major in world languages and cultures with the option to specialize in a specific language.

Selected comments

- “Anthropology is already an incredibly interdisciplinary field, incorporating genetics, history, biology, chemistry, criminal justice, and a number of other fields and concepts within our work and education. But as interdisciplinary as it is, it is still its own field with its own goals and theoretical frameworks; it serves an independent function from other social sciences and to group it with them is to lose the point of it entirely.”
- “Consolidating departments only has marginal savings, and then only if it results in workforce reductions. Eliminating staff or department chair releases when department consolidations occur does not make the work go away, and I have great concern about that.”
- “It is one thing to eliminate faculty positions in non-performing majors. It is another to create divisions that may or may not achieve cost savings, at the expense of degrading the excellence of existing programs.”
- “I believe the Modern and Classical Languages department will be better off if individual language degrees were retained, rather than a general degree in Asian Studies or Classical Studies, etc. As a Japanese major, I transferred to the University of Montana primarily because there was a language degree, rather than a general degree.”
- “The Native American Studies department should remain a stand alone department for many reasons. The donors who funded the Payne Native American Center did so with the intent that it would serve as a gathering place for the Native American students on campus. Secondly, UM is the only university in the country that can boast that there's a building dedicated to the first peoples. Knowing that NA are the largest minority in the state, with IEFA as a state mandate, then it only makes sense that it remains as a stand alone department.”
- “The UM Dance program is the sole collegiate Dance Program in the state of Montana, and one of the few programs to offer BFA and BA degrees with a dance concentration in the northwest region of the US. The Dance Program has already had damaging cuts, and further cuts will severely compromise the ability to offer quality academic degrees, and position Montana to be the only state in the union failing to offer academic degrees in dance. We stand to lose a lot of students if dance is not maintained and nourished.”

Support for the humanities

A majority of the comments were submitted in defense of the value of the Liberal Arts education UM offers, the humanities generally, and the specific programs offered by the Global Humanities and Religions program, the Department of English, and the Department of Modern and Classical Languages and Literatures.

Commenters stated that proposed cuts disproportionately target humanities disciplines and favor professional programs. These cuts are described as “short-sighted” and a threat to UM’s excellence in the humanities and liberal arts. Respondents urged the President to honor the university’s long-standing liberal arts tradition and our prominence as the flagship liberal arts

institution in Montana. Words such as “attack”, “eviscerate”, and “disembowel” were used to describe proposed changes. Respondents expressed concern that proposed changes to UM’s humanities programs will narrow, rather than broaden, UM students’ worldviews, with detrimental effects to the institution, the students it serves, and their communities. Current students and alumni described the transformative power of their UM liberal arts education and feared the loss of these experiences for future students.

Selected comments

- “How will the university remain relevant as a school that fosters the liberal arts without sufficient faculty to train and guide the next generation? We need the liberal arts. The skills that I learned from my professors at the University of Montana provided me with the ability to teach students with compassion and rigor, to think deeply on contemporary issues, and to appreciate the most important and beautiful aspects of humanity.”
- “The Draft Proposal for UM strikes me as a short-sighted, quantitatively driven attempt to undermine the humanities and in fact the liberal arts at, ironically, the flagship liberal arts university in the state of Montana.”
- “The strategic direction of UM, based on UM’s mission statement, and underscored by the president, is rooted in the fact that UM’s founding and historical identity is the liberal arts education. In other words, this identity depends on the strengths of the areas of learning that cultivate general intellectual ability rather than technical or professional skills.”
- “The humanities and liberal arts represent the oldest and most noble pursuits in education: education for its own sake. These are not vocational programs. These are not professional programs. Yet they are the first steps on the path to excellence in whatever field a student chooses to pursue. If our goal is to produce critical thinkers with the capacity to engage in inquiry, creative scholarship and problem solving, and to push the development of knowledge beyond its current boundaries, then these programs must be prioritized for investment, rather than continue on the decades-long path to their elimination.”
- “The faculty cuts proposed will disembowel the humanities curriculum at UM and contradict the spirit of the University’s proposed mission statement.”

Language and Culture

Many commenters expressed distress that UM may be cutting individual language degree programs; most of these commenters are current students or alums who received a minor or major in a language. They note that the proposed creation of Asian and European language majors inaccurately portrays UM’s language offerings and perpetuates troubling cultural stereotypes. Many commenters believe that languages and literature should be key offerings at a flagship liberal arts university.

Commenters also note that studying a language (and its culture and civilization) helps students to better grasp global issues and appreciate diversity, both vitally important outcomes of language study. This exposure is especially important for Montana students from isolated or rural areas. The study of languages provides opportunities for UM students to travel abroad. Within Montana, UM provides students with international connections; this is part of UM’s identity. Several commenters noted that Montana schools, and specifically Missoula County Public Schools, promote languages and language immersion programs with the understanding that students can further those language studies at UM. Lastly, UM’s language degree programs distinguish us from other universities in the state and are what drew some commenters to UM.

Selected comments

- “While I agree with the majority of this plan, and I believe it is well presented and thought out, I must protest the elimination of specific degrees in foreign languages. I believe it is critical that a humanities and liberal arts institution like the University of Montana maintain degrees in Spanish and other foreign languages.”
- “...studying foreign languages and their cultures is more important than ever right now. We as a country have fallen behind in terms of cultural awareness, and the proposed cuts to the foreign language programs and their potential elimination is terrifying.”
- “I am a current teacher of Spanish in rural Montana and serve as the vice president of our state language teachers' organization, MALT. It is appalling and disturbing that UM is cutting the language department in terms of majors. As a graduate of these programs and an advocate of language learning on a local, state, and national level, it is incredibly disappointing that our flagship liberal arts university in the state of Montana has abandoned the language majors.”
- “If University of Montana had not had the opportunity to major and minor in foreign languages, I would never have enrolled, not even for my first degree in Biology, because I took language classes congruently with my science classes from the beginning of my academic career and they are integral to my academic interests in science, communication, and history.”
- “We’re the only Russian program in the state and one of a small few in the Northwest. Our faculty have won a national teaching award and UM’s distinguished teaching award. Our focus on student success has been particularly rewarding.”
- “At a time in which MCPS is investing and expanding Spanish learning opportunities in K-12, it is beyond concerning that UM is poised to divest from this.”
- “Missoula has the first public immersion school in the State at the elementary level – Paxson and will soon have Spanish immersion at Washington Middle school which will feed students into schools such as Hellgate where students can achieve very high levels of Spanish knowledge. These students need to find at UM upper-division courses they can enter as they pursue advanced Spanish classes.”

English

Commenters weighed in to support the English Department, particularly the Creative Writing program. The overall focus is on the quality of the English Department and the positive connections that students develop with its faculty.

Regarding Creative Writing, commenters noted that the program is nationally recognized, has a reputation far beyond UM or Missoula, and has produced many noteworthy alums. UM’s literary culture has, historically, contributed importantly to Missoula’s literary and creative culture. Similarly, commenters noted that the English program draws students to UM because of its unique options in Ecocriticism and Literature and the Environment. Commenters also point out the value of the English Teaching option.

Selected comments

- “It was not just the terrific authors of the era – James Welch, Kevin Canty, Bill Kittredge, Richard Hugo, Chris Offutt – that made Missoula the ideal place for me to learn my craft. It was the community created by those writers and their students that made Missoula what it was: the penultimate place to entrench oneself in the written word; to feel at home in crafting draft after draft of short stories and novels and articles; and to write with purpose and passion, surrounded by other writers, all in pursuit of higher learning and of higher craft.”
- “The proposed cuts to English will dismantle our campus's historic, vibrant creative writing program. It is much easier to destroy a program than build one, and I am heartbroken to think of this incredible community of writers, students and teachers coming to an end.”
- “Not only is it a high-performing program, but it is a necessary one, and one that could--if allowed to foster -- help UM achieve distinction. For instance, there are nine incoming graduate students to English Literature alone (as opposed to five in 2017, of which I am one). Such growth demonstrates that this program is desirable and profitable. Further, the Literature and the Environment option (undergrad) and Ecocriticism option (grad) are subsets of the English Literature program that are attractive and unique. They are programs that students come to UM for, as UM is well situated geographically to attract such students, and they are programs not offered by many other universities.”
- “I am a proud graduate of the English Teaching program and I have taken full advantage of the vision provided by the university, taking advantage of the substantial opportunities for students to engage with their faculty, connect across disciplines, and gain important career skills such as written and oral communication, cross-cultural understanding, teamwork, service, and leadership development.”
- “The University of Montana has hosted legends like Richard Hugo and the Welches, as well as contemporary greats like Colin Meloy and Andrew Sean Greer, the latter of which just won Pulitzer! Indeed, Missoula has been dubbed “the Paris of the West.” That is to say, we have a strong literary identity.”
- “It's an incredibly special place. Writers from all over the country look at what we've done with respect.”
- “[Attached find a link to a video in which students from The University of Montana speak to the value of the English degree.](#) I think that you will be proud of their ability to articulate their attachment to The University of Montana and their understanding of value of their education.”

Conclusion

This document summarizes the broad themes identified in the feedback received. The totality of the comments received are available in the appendix to this summary. Readers are encouraged to review the appendix for a more comprehensive look at respondents' comments.