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SB04-22/23: Resolution Authorizing Approval of Staff Senate Signature of Bear Necessities Statement to University Administration

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The University Of Montana -- ASUM Bear Necessities

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SB04-22/23: Resolution Authorizing Approval of Staff Senate Signature of Bear Necessities Statement to University Administration

1 **Resolution Authorizing Approval of Staff Senate Signature of Bear Necessities Statement to**
2 **University Administration**

3 **Authored By:** Kat Cowley, ASUM Bear Necessities Director

4 *Whereas*, the University of Montana (UM) Staff Senate facilitates communication, cooperation,
5 and engagement between the administration and staff of the University of Montana. Staff
6 Senate promotes and works to improve the working conditions and professional welfare of
7 UM’s staff – “The Heart of the Grizzly;”¹

8 *Whereas*, ASUM Bear Necessities has seen an increase in student needs for support in
9 navigating all aspects of college life including, but not limited to: financial aid, housing, food
10 access and security, transportation, childcare, physical access needs, and mental health
11 challenges;

12 *Whereas*, students who do not interface with ASUM Bear Necessities and other supportive
13 offices are in need and deserving of help too;

14 *Whereas*, staff at UM consistently go above and beyond to support students despite having
15 large case and workloads, including staff in the Office for Disability Equity, TRIO Student
16 Support Services, Financial Aid, Curry Health Center, Counseling Services, Facilities Services,
17 Housing, professional advising positions, and more;

18 *Whereas*, in order to provide adequate support for a growing number of students, staff at UM
19 must also receive adequate support;

20 *Whereas*, ASUM Bear Necessities has written a letter in response to the Grizzly Promise
21 Initiative (“the letter”) regarding the initiative of receiving more students while the current
22 student body faces major quality of life concerns;² and

23 *Whereas*, ASUM Bear Necessities notes that recruiting students at the proposed scale of the
24 Grizzly Promise Initiative is irresponsible without building support service infrastructure with
25 appropriate funding and staffing;

26 *Therefore, let it be resolved*, that the UM Staff Senate approves this resolution and letter, and
27 the signing of it by the Staff Senate President;

28 *Therefore, let it be further resolved*, that the UM Staff Senate calls for the UM Administration to
29 reaffirm their commitment to supporting staff in our work to support and retain students; and

30 *Therefore, let it be further resolved*, that this resolution be distributed to Kat Cowley, ASUM
31 Bear Necessities Director; and Kenzie Carter, ASUM Bear Necessities Program Coordinator.

¹ <https://www.umt.edu/staff-senate/bylaws/default.php>

² Letter is included in the Addendum.

Addendum

2/22/2023

University of Montana
32 Campus Drive
Missoula, MT 59801

Attn: Administration (Office of the President, Office of the Provost, Director of Admissions, and other stakeholders)

Please accept this letter of concern regarding the status of our most marginalized and vulnerable student populations, as well as the capacity of our primary support office, ASUM Bear Necessities, to effectively assist students experiencing food and housing insecurity. This memo is in direct response to the recently announced Grizzly Promise Initiative.

While we are excited and the potential opportunities for educational attainment and equity embedded in the Grizzly Promise initiative, we have concerns about the institutional infrastructure needed to support students who enroll utilizing this initiative.

Any step toward making college free and accessible to anyone who wants to attend is a step in the right direction. The pursuit of knowledge should not be trapped behind a paywall. Montanans deserve to be able to decide to attend college without tuition being a primary limiting factor. The Montana University System would not exist without students, and we owe it to them to make the barriers to entry as low as possible.

However, the University's responsibility to our students does not end there.

It is common knowledge that the city of Missoula is in the middle of a debilitating housing crisis. This is addressed in the Missoula County Housing Action Plan which reports, among other things, a shortage of 2,400 housing units; a 109% increase in housing prices in the past 10 years, compared to a 15% increase in Median Family Income in that same timeframe; and the fact half of all County renters are cost burdened. As one might imagine, this puts pressure on university housing, which like much of campus, is chronically understaffed and struggling to accommodate students' needs with limited resources. All this to say, recruitment at the scale the University of Montana is attempting has the possibility of becoming irresponsible (verging on unethical) if we are not willing to create and maintain the infrastructure necessary to support and ensure the quality of life of our students.

At Bear Necessities, we interact with UM students experiencing hardship on a daily basis. According to the 2020 Real College Survey, over 60% of UM students experience some form of basic needs insecurity over the course of their education. When students are hungry, sleep-deprived, and experiencing elevated levels of stress related to basic needs insecurity, it can be difficult if not impossible to retain new information. If the purpose of the university is to educate, but our students are unable to learn because their basic needs remain unfulfilled, the university has failed in our mission.

In an attempt to pair constructive criticism with actionable solutions, our office researched Promise Programs across the country with the following question in mind: *What infrastructure for student support do institutions with successful Promise initiatives have in place?* While the literature we were

able to find on this subject did not specify *which* student support services resulted in the most statistically significant improvements in student retention/degree completion, cross-analysis of existing programs made it clear that “the colleges that best served students reported making significant changes to their support systems as a result of the inception of the promise” (Iriti et al. 2018). The need for intentional revision to student support services was also noted in every Promise program reference guide we could find. Based on these findings, as well as on the conversations, advocacy work, case management, and resource referrals members of the Coordinated Care Team (comprised of representatives from Bear Necessities, TRiO, Office of Disability Equity, Missoula College, Montana 10, and more) have put in with students experiencing basic needs insecurity, we have identified a few ways the University of Montana can support students at a basic human level after they have signed on the proverbial dotted line:

Long-term, big-picture solutions:

- Continued Advocacy for Increased Support from the State of Montana
 - We understand that the University of Montana’s ability to adequately fund student support services relies heavily on entities such as the Montana State Legislature, OCHE, and the Board of Regents, among others. We ask that the University of Montana Administration take into consideration the concerns brought forth by this letter and prioritize advocating for increased funding for the Montana University System to be put toward the priorities listed below
- Increase housing available to students
 - Build additional residence halls and/or UM-owned apartments
 - Provide short-term emergency housing to students experiencing homelessness
 - Re-evaluate priorities regarding future construction
- Meal plan affordability
 - The current All-Campus dining plan costs students just under \$3500/semester, but on average students only have access to \$1200 worth of food. This equates to roughly \$70/week for food, which does not rollover week-to-week. Potential solutions include:
 - Make leftover moneys liquid and transfer over to student account
 - Transparency surrounding what percentage of the student cost of the All-Campus dining plan goes towards feeding students vs how much goes to “overhead”
- Open Education Resources
 - Textbook and supply costs can increase the cost of attendance per semester by thousands of dollars. We recognize the Mansfield Library’s efforts to make resources available to students at no direct cost, despite repeated reductions to their budget. We recommend continuing and increasing support for these efforts to provide free or reduced-cost textbooks and other required school supplies, in addition to pursuing Open Education Resources

Short-term solutions for the meantime:

- Campus accessibility
 - Prioritize elevator maintenance in the annual budget
 - Shovel and salt/gravel ALL walkways and ramps on campus daily in the winter

- Students with mobility aids pay just as much as students without them and deserve to be able to access classes regardless of inclement weather
- Address staffing issues (everywhere, but especially in the following departments):
 - Academic Advising
 - Academic advisors are crucial to student success, well-being, and retention. An adequately supported academic advisor can make the difference between a student graduating on time, or graduating at all. As it stands now, many University of Montana advisors have 200 or more advisees – a ratio that puts undue pressure on advisors and reduces the quality of service they are able to provide students
 - IT
 - Almost every aspect of higher education is digitized in some way, which is great for students who for whatever reason cannot make it to campus. As such, having a fully supported, staffed, and responsive IT team is not just a matter of convenience, but one of equity
 - Financial Aid
 - We love and support the work the current Financial Aid office does to support students! That said, it is apparent they need more hands on deck. When Fin Aid is unable to do their jobs in a timely manner, students’ livelihoods are put at risk. For many, access to financial aid is a matter of not only staying in school, but staying housed and fed. Keeping the Financial Aid office well-staffed and well-paid is an absolute necessity for students’ needs to be met
 - Maintenance
 - We acknowledge that shoveling all pathways and addressing every elevator breakdown—as suggested above—takes a lot of human power that the maintenance crew does not necessarily have. That said, the maintenance crew keeps this campus running and should be granted the funding to hire as many people as is necessary to keep our campus safe, accessible, and navigable

In short, it is the University of Montana’s responsibility as an institution to hold student retention and quality of life in as high regard as we hold recruitment. The University of Montana needs to make a collective effort across all departments and at every level to ensure we adequately support ALL students: past, present, and future. We believe that the above suggestions bring this institution one step closer to fulfilling that responsibility, and thank you for your earnest consideration.

With due respect,

The ASUM Bear Necessities Team, Kat Cowley (Director) and Kenzie Carter (Program Coordinator)

Associated Students of the University of Montana, President Elizabeth Bowles and Senate

University Center Director, Adrienne Smith

The Coordinated Care Team, Peter Donaldson, TRIO; Jimmy Kendall, Missoula College; Bekah Neulinger and Joseph Grady, Montana10; Ben Hamman, Department of Public Administration and Policy; Charity Attebury, School of Law; Kaaumoana Ahina, Office for Disability Equity; Haley Hatfield, Student Wellness Coordinator; Lauren Fern, Faculty

Diversity Advisory Council, Wilena Old Person, Anisa Goforth, O'Shay Birdinground, Jennifer Zellmer-Cuaresma, Devin Carpenter

Sources:

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Delivering on the Promise: Structuring College Promise Programs to Promote Higher Education Attainment for Students from Underserved Groups: https://www.ahead-penn.org/sites/default/files/u2/Delivering_On_the_Promise_Perna.pdf

Education Commission of the States: College Promise Programs: https://www.ecs.org/wp-content/uploads/State-Information-Request_College-Promise-Programs.pdf

Evolution of Promise: The Evidence Behind the Movement – A College Promise Reference Guide: https://assets.website-files.com/61ba001bb59d0528645a4bf9/627bc8e311981966eb09a0cb_guide-evidence-2020-oct.pdf

Missoula County Housing Action Plan: <https://www.missoulacounty.us/home/showpublisheddocument/79379/638070662991070000>

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Statewide College Promise Programs: Balancing Affordability, Access, and Student Success:
<https://www.researchforaction.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/RFA-Balancing-Affordability-Access-and-Success-Dec-2019-FINAL-v2.pdf>

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