

TO: The students of the Montana University System.

FROM: Chase Greenfield, Montana University System Regent and student.

SUBJECT: The State of Montana's Budget and the Montana University System

Fellow students across Montana, I am sure by now some news has reached you about the condition of our state's budget, and have heard that this might affect your institution of higher education and other state agencies. I hope to elaborate a bit on the situation we (the Montana University System) are in as a state entity and ask for your assistance to make the best of our difficult circumstances. First, to explain who I am and why I am emailing you: I am a senior at the University of Montana–Missoula and the sole student representative on the Board of Regents, which oversees all of the campuses within the Montana University System. I want to provide you some information to help you understand what is going on in our state, and also to hear your perspectives, which will assist me when it comes time to act on these reductions.

**What's the situation?** The state budget is compiled for two year blocks and the state legislature votes to affirm this budget every-other spring (in odd numbered years) in Helena. Obviously, with a two-year projection, it is nearly impossible to get every figure right, and adjustments have to be made along the way. This year, our *actual* state revenue (income) has fallen short of our *projections* for state revenue. Members of the State Budget Office and Legislative Fiscal Divisions have generally ascribed our state's revenue shortfall to two things: lower-than-expected income tax collections and an implacable fire season. In short, the state does not have the amount of money it thought it would when the legislature adjourned in the spring of 2017.

**So what does all this mean for students?** Every state agency has been asked by the Governor's Office to calculate budget scenarios for a reduction as large as 10% of the organization's operating budget. For the Montana University System, which is made up of our colleges and universities, that could mean approximately \$22 million this year, and another \$22 million the next year as well. For context, at the end of the legislative session, the Montana University System was walking out with a cut of roughly \$11 million, which resulted in tuition increases across the system. This 10% cut would be nearly quadruple that figure over two years, and would almost certainly mean one of two things for students: tuition increases or (academic) program reductions. We students are already doing more than our fair share by paying for roughly 60% of our education (while the state pays the remaining 40% for in-state students) while paying income taxes and working towards our degrees and certificates to help boost the Montana economy.

**What can we do about all this?** Where we are at now, the best thing we can possibly do is try to reduce these cuts or eliminate them entirely. Write to your house representatives and senators, as well as the Governor's Office to tell them that the Montana University System cannot afford to take another cut. Tuition has been raised already this biennium, and our state ranks 46<sup>th</sup> out of 50 states for education funding per student. Tell them YOUR story, and share

why a state cut resulting in tuition increases or academic program reductions would hurt you, your family, and your career goals. Emphasize especially that a 10% reduction to the Montana University System is unacceptable, regardless of political affiliation, and will hurt the Montana economy and progression of its people. Cuts to the Montana University System would be a cut to the *solution* to this problem, as the higher education has been shown to increase individual income, which results in more revenue for the state through higher income taxes.

The next thing we can do is work to fight against further reductions to state funding in the future. In November of 2018, voters will be asked to decide to renew (or terminate) the six-mill-levy (essentially a property tax) that gives approximately \$20 million dollars to the Montana University System each year. This would be another devastating loss for higher education in Montana if it were to fail, and we CANNOT let it slip through our fingers. This is NOT a new tax (it has been around since the 1940s), nor will it increase this next decade– we need to simply renew this critical source of funding for higher education. Register to vote and urge your friends and families to support the six mill levy on their ballots in 2018.

Finally, if cuts are unavoidable, the Board of Regents will have to make some incredibly difficult decisions regarding our system's budget. I want your voices to weigh in on that conversation. I want to hear your opinion on the *possibility* of tuition increases and program cuts, sharing what you value and what you can afford. I want to hear your stories so that when I cast my vote, I am putting it towards the best possible outcome for students across our state. I am your regent, your microphone on the Board of Regents, but I need to hear your voices to speak effectively on this issue. Email me with your thoughts, questions, or concerns at: [RegentGreenfield@montana.edu](mailto:RegentGreenfield@montana.edu).

If we bond together and push for change, there is a chance that we avoid tragic reductions to the Montana University System. There is an even greater chance that we reduce those looming cuts to a more sustainable level, and cut off any chance of losing more funding in the future. We need to unify this year more than ever before to protect against the possibility of losing ground on accessible and affordable higher education. We, students, have a long history of affecting change on local, state, and national levels– it's time to continue that legacy.

Yours,

Chase M. Greenfield  
Student and Montana University System Regent, 2017-2018.