Open Letter to the UNT Community

From: Martin Halbert (UNT Dean of Libraries)
Subject: Planning for FY13 Library Budget Reductions
Date: April 11, 2013

I would like to take this opportunity to alert you to emerging budgetary impacts that may hinder the ability of UNT libraries in continuing to provide our current level of services and collection development, and enlist your aid in addressing these problems.

In both 2011 and 2012 the library budget was reduced significantly, leading to significant cuts in expenditures for databases, serials, and books. In prior letters to the UNT community dated 9/27/11 and 3/6/12 these reductions and their impacts were described. The FY12 cut to the library budget was approximately $800K, and was absorbed primarily in reduced book purchases. The FY13 budget cut was approximately $1.5M, and was absorbed through a reduction of serials and databases of $1.2M and $300K to student and staff vacancies that were not filled. These cuts to the library budgets arose because of the enrollment downturns that UNT has experienced; these cuts have had (and will continue to have) long term impacts on the resources that the library is able to acquire in support of research and teaching. I speak for the entire library staff and (I am sure) the faculty when I say that this is of great concern to all of us.

The library’s funding comes primarily from a student use fee of $16.50 per semester credit hour (capped at 12 hours per student). This fee has been static for almost ten years at a time of when library materials are escalating in cost at a rate of approximately 8% annual inflation, far in excess of overall inflation in the economy. To give you a sense of what this level of inflation implies, consider that for a $6M serials budget, just keeping the same subscriptions requires an additional $480K each year! If the budget is static or declining, cancellations must be undertaken to cover that annual increase of almost half a million dollars. Keeping library funding flat, or worse, reducing it significantly each year has disastrous long term impacts in terms of cancellations of subscriptions. A comparative analysis undertaken during the last two years of peer institutions has demonstrated a discouraging fact, namely that UNT library funding is roughly half of what is allocated among aspirational peers, in both absolute terms as well as per capita ratios of amounts spent per student.

In this situation of already inadequate funding, the cuts we have received to the library budget have been painful indeed. Reducing the library acquisitions budget by $2M over the past two years has meant cancelling thousands of planned acquisitions and renewals. I have heard from many faculty members about the impacts this is having on your research and the overall level of research productivity at UNT; I share these grave concerns and have relayed them to the campus administration. We are no longer losing materials that are niceties or non-essential, we have had to cut deeply into resources that are regularly used by researchers across all fields. We simply must do something about this situation, and this is why I am writing to you.

In the campus planning for next year’s budget, we have received instructions to prepare for and make decisions on the basis of further reductions to the library funding. We in the...
library will do everything we can to preserve the purchasing power of the library materials budget, but we will ultimately have to accommodate further reductions to the library budget through reductions in acquisition of information and/or services (again by not filling vacancies).

I have clearly heard your requests to reinstate subscriptions, indeed, to continue adding new subscriptions and other information resources urgently needed to support the research aspirations of the University of North Texas. Comprehensive access to current research information is essential to the second bold goal of the university, to “Provide superior graduate education, scholarship and artistic endeavors and achieve status among the nation’s tier-one research institutions”. Continued cuts to the library’s budget will continue to erode our ability to undertake cutting edge research.

In the upcoming budget planning process for FY14 (the academic year that takes place starting in September 2013), I will advocate for reinstating and growing library funding for research information, and I hope you will also advocate for this goal. This could be accomplished through a combination of funding sources which are regularly deployed for this purpose at other public Texas universities, but which have not been used for funding of research information at UNT.

The first source of funding that could be deployed for information resources is the money that UNT gets from the state Higher Education Assistance Fund (HEAF). Article VII, Section 17 of the Texas Constitution established the Higher Education Assistance Fund by adding Chapter 62 to the Texas Education Code. HEAF funds are specifically given to Texas universities to address ongoing academic needs such as the acquisition of library books and library materials. This funding is meant to be an addition to be “an addition to the current university library resources, and are exclusive of normal operating costs.” Library materials are “information sources other than books (either owned or accessed), which include journals, periodicals, microforms, audio/visual media, computer-based information, manuscripts, maps, documents or similar items which provide information essential to the learning process or which enhance the quality of university library programs.” Many other university libraries (for example the University of Houston libraries) in the state receive hundreds of thousands of dollars in HEAF funds to support their information resource acquisitions. The University of North Texas receives approximately $27M in HEAF funds each year from the state; however, none of these funds go to fund the acquisition of books or journals. Tapping the HEAF funds for library acquisitions would enable reinstatement/purchase of many cancelled journals and needed books.

The second source of funding is university indirect costs (IDC) funds received from federal grants. Indirect costs provided by grants often cover many expenses subsumed in the overall costs of undertaking university research activities, and in other institutions are often used to support library acquisitions. After all, the reason for purchasing journals and other information resources in a university library is to support the research of university scholars. Allocating a small amount of the IDC funds received by the university for library acquisitions would also enable reinstatement/purchase of urgently needed information resources.

Finally, after almost ten full years of keeping the library use fee static, it is time to consider a gradual process of increasing the SCH fee. Please note that the SGA supports this fee increase. The library plays a critical role in student educational outcomes, and is the most heavily used facility in all of UNT, with more than a million entrances recorded each academic year by students and other members of the UNT community. The library is packed with students, who are intensely supportive of providing adequate funding for the library. A gradual
process of raising the library use fee by just \textit{50 cents per year for a five year period} would be essentially inconsequential to individual students, but would ultimately restore the amount by which library funding has been cut in the last two years. Students support this very modest increase, and further, they know that they get enormous value out every dime spent on library acquisitions and services in terms of what it does to advance their educations.

I hope that you will support and advocate restoration of library funding. Please join your voices with other members of the UNT academic community in requesting that UNT have the appropriate funding for library resources that is requisite for its research ambitions. Thank you.

Sincerely yours,

Martin Halbert, PhD, MLIS
Dean of Libraries