Open Letter to the UNT Community

To: Faculty (c/o Faculty Senate Library Committee), Students (c/o Student Government Association), Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs
From: Martin Halbert (UNT Dean of Libraries)
Subject: 2011 Library Budget Status and Impacts
Date: September 27, 2011

Greetings from the UNT libraries! I would like to take this opportunity to share information with the UNT community regarding the status of the libraries in Denton, provide a summary of several significant goals and accomplishments, 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.

University Aspirations and Library Accomplishments

In the past two years the UNT libraries have engaged in a process of strategic planning in conjunction with the campus strategic aims. The overall goal of the UNT libraries during the next five years is to become a top tier research library in support of the university’s ambition to become a top tier student-centered research university. The UNT libraries are undertaking a range of activities to respond to this university ambition, and have already achieved many significant results which I would like to highlight in this letter.

Growing Research Collections: The libraries of UNT have steadily acquired new research collections to support the research activities of faculty members and students. The vibrant development of new academic programs at our university brings with it the need to support the information needs of these programs if they are not to be hamstrung in their research efforts. Library efforts to grow research collections must be done in ways that are appropriate to each discipline. Science and engineering programs require access to current electronic subscription services, such as Elsevier’s Science Direct and Ebsco’s Academic Search Premier. Commercial content aggregators such as these account for thousands of core scientific journals that are key to scientific and technical research activities at UNT. Academic programs in the humanities and the arts have blossomed with the acquisition of dozens of major archival collections such as the Stan Kenton, Frank Cuellar, and Don Shugart collections in our special libraries. Collections of this caliber are foundational to UNT’s ambition to become a premier research university. Following the urgent requests of academic programs from around the university, we are regularly negotiating the acquisition of new collections to support the faculty’s research and provide the students with the learning resources they need.

What all of these high quality research collections also have in common is that they are extremely expensive to acquire and maintain. Large commercial content services and major print archives each typically require hundreds of thousands of dollars per year to acquire and
maintain access to them. Furthermore, the cost of commercial content is escalating rapidly (more information below). The key point is that quality collections to support research require significant amounts of strategic investment.

**Quality Services for Student Learning:** The UNT libraries are one of the most popular and heavily used services on the campus and are vital to student learning outcomes. In a one year period students will access millions of varied online library resources from their dorms and any number of other remote locations. The library and its enormous organized collection of online information and information services are available wherever/whenever students need it.

While the electronic library is essential to contemporary learning outcomes, the physical library is also a vital part of education at UNT. In a typical year more than half a million individual visits to the main library are recorded. In a year, students will login to onsite library computers more than three hundred thousand times, check out over four hundred thousand physical books and other items, receive customized sessions on research methods and strategies more than twelve thousand times, and use interlibrary loan to receive materials from other libraries more than forty-five thousand times. The UNT libraries have upgraded the quality of services, computers, and operations in library locations such as the newly overhauled Eagle Commons Library in Sycamore Hall, responding to the collaborative learning needs of contemporary students. These upgrades have been extremely popular, and students have asked for a similar level of upgrades in the other UNT libraries.

Additionally, at the express request of the Student Government Association, all floors of the main library have this year gone to 24-hour access for five days out of each week. This new service provides students with greatly extended hours of study and access to all physical collections for UNT students during times when it is convenient for them to use the building. However, it is once again important to convey that the utility and benefits of this and the many other critical services identified above are now becoming jeopardized because of the weakened state of the library budget.

**Current Budgetary Impacts**

Today, ninety-nine percent of the UNT libraries’ budget is funded through the library use fee, which has been completely static since 2004. During the intervening eight years (and for many years before this) the annual cost of research materials has steadily risen by *seven percent or more each year*, as documented by both our own records and trend information published by Library Journal and other sources. During this same period UNT also made the decision to become a top research university. The campus accordingly began substantively expanding its emphasis on research programs, which require far more journals, archives, and other information resources and services, all of which the UNT libraries have regularly acquired in response to the expressed needs of the university. Comparative analysis of peer institutions reveals that we now expend *roughly one half of what our peers expend* on a per student basis for library services and materials, and have been doing so throughout this eight year period.

A shortfall of $800K in the materials budget has occurred this year because of this steady decline in library purchasing power. This shortfall will have unavoidable impacts on acquisition of new information resources this year, requiring curtailed spending on materials this year as a result. I and my staff will work with the faculty to identify strategies to preserve our most critical information resources, but the situation is now serious and the shortfall will continue to grow larger as the price of scientific journals and other expenses continues to outstrip our budget. Cuts to statewide discount programs to electronic subscriptions such as Texshare will mean that
impacts on library purchasing power are likely to grow more severe rather than less severe over the coming years. If this shortfall continues to grow over time, more draconian measures will be called for, including wholesale cuts to journals, cut-backs in services, and library layoffs.

Unless this growing shortfall is addressed, the relative lack of investment in the infrastructure of the library will cripple the quality of the UNT student educational experience and faculty research capabilities in terms of available services, information resources, and accommodations. The contemporary need by students for libraries designed as learning commons is well documented both here at UNT and in other libraries around the country. Faculty must have the information resources they need if they are to pursue research efforts. For the purposes of external review, I initiated a library master planning effort undertaken by external consultants this year, an effort which is now in the final stages of completion. The draft report of the firm conducting this master plan has highlighted many upgrades needed for the UNT libraries over the coming years if we are to continue to advance the learning and research objectives of the university community at the level that UNT should expect. The report also highlights the benefits that the UNT community receives from its libraries, and the opportunities that investments in the library will mean in terms of additional benefits such as improved student learning outcomes, additional faculty research grants, and many other positive academic results.

For all these reasons, I am asking for your support in proposing steps to address the current inadequacy of library funding to meet the needs of the students and faculty. This semester, the UNT libraries will work with the offices of the Provost and President to develop a proposal to put forward to the Board of Regents for remediation of this situation through increases to the library budget. I would like to engage the faculty and students in the development of this proposal, specifically by involving and gaining the stated support of the Student Government Association and the Library Committee of the Faculty Senate for this proposal. I believe that the current library budget crisis can be addressed in reasonable ways through modest but steady budgetary increases over a period of time, thereby gradually fixing the problem which has grown over the past decade. I look forward to discussing this proposal with you during coming months, as well as the many ways that the UNT libraries will continue to advance the strategic aspirations of our remarkable university. Many thanks, all.

Sincerely yours,

[Signature]

Martin Halbert, PhD, MLIS
Dean of Libraries