

MONTANA KAIMIN

THE COST OF BARGAINING

For around 450 graduate employees at the University of Montana, a small teaching stipend is all they have to get them through the school year. The graduate union is hoping to change that.

STORY BY CORBIN VANDERBY
PHOTOS BY DIEGO HERNANDEZ



6 Bill update

Cover photo by Diego Hernandez

13 DJ life

14 Basketball fav remains

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Kiosk



The Montana Kaimin is a weekly independent student newspaper at the University of Montana. The Kaimin office and the University of Montana are located on land originally inhabited by the Salish People. Kaimin is a derivative of a Salish language word, "Qe'ymin," that is pronounced kay-MEEN and means "book," "message" or "paper that brings news."

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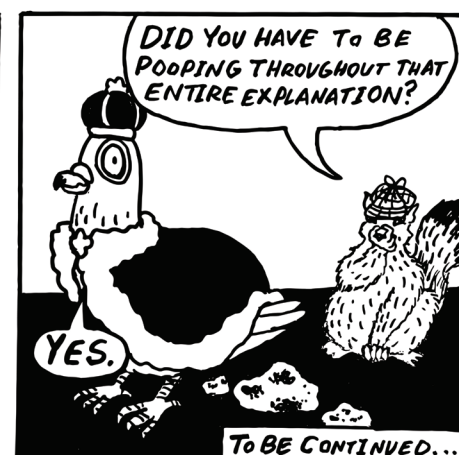
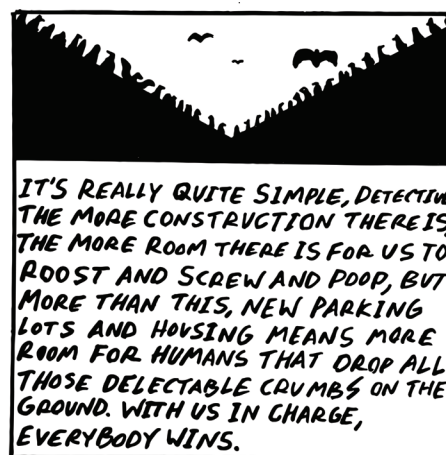
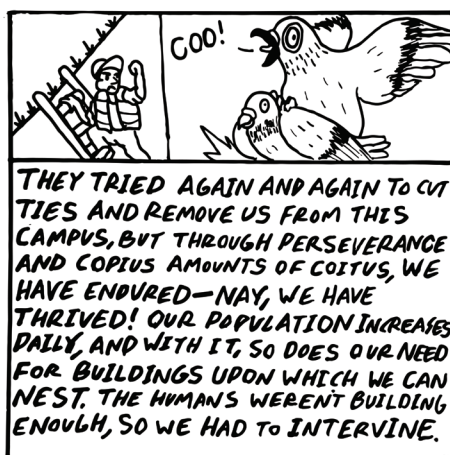
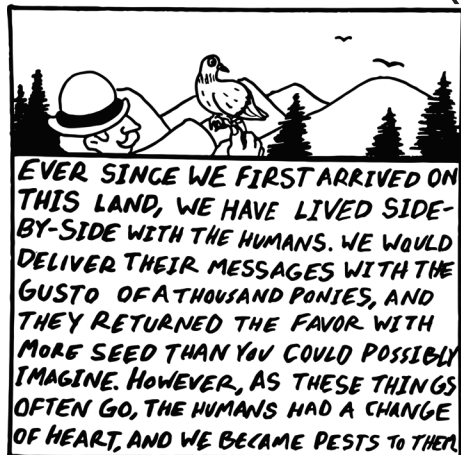
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DETECTIVE SQUIRREL: SE 2 EP 11



BARRETT CLEMENT | MONTANA KAIMIN *BARRETT*

Admin: Give us 15 minutes

University of Montana leadership has recently taken the stance of declining to comment, refusing to interview or flat out not responding to requests about issues that are important to students — and we’ve had enough.

About a month ago, the Kaimin implored the University of Montana administration to listen. Now, we are asking it to talk.

If the University administration is going to promote civil discourse among students throughout the year and hold events focused on having conversations with one another, then it needs to have civil discourse with the students beyond just public events.

We know speaking with the Kaimin is not the only way to speak to students. But as the University newspaper, we act as the voice of the students and carry the responsibility of communicating between the administration and its community. So when the administration chooses to not talk to us, it is choosing not to speak to everyone.

Historically, journalists have been referred to as the “watchdogs” of the government, or the “fourth estate.” Journalists report, question and monitor the government and its actions. Lately, however, journalists have continuously been refused interviews with the nation’s top public officials, and are now being removed from press conferences and cleared out of offices they’ve had access to in the White House for decades.

In the latest move, the White House announced it will select the news organizations that have access to it instead of an independent, third-party organization choosing them, breaking nearly a century of precedent. This is not just an attack on journalism. It is an affront to the people’s legal right to access actions of the public government.

But it isn’t just the presidential cabinet that is icing out journalists. UM’s administration has been doing it, too.

As of March 4, President Donald Trump has signed 76 executive orders reshaping the ways businesses, universities and federal agencies function. In an effort to explain how this will impact students, the Kaimin tried to reach out to the administrative office on campus for information on how this affects the University.

After numerous emails and phone calls, Adrea Lawrence, the provost, who oversees all academic programs, declined to comment. President Seth Bodnar’s office directed us to Dave Kuntz, the communications director, who can only provide limited information

and who rarely works directly with students. Again, as the Kaimin tries to report on the removal of diversity, equity and inclusion in our programs, the administration has been silent, with numerous department heads choosing not to respond to emails or phone calls.

Yet, when we do stories focused on UM’s successes or easy topics, people aren’t afraid to comment.

We understand some of these topics are difficult. But silence is much harder. It leaves room for speculation, rumors and unease. It keeps students in the dark and fosters distrust.

A few weeks ago, the Kaimin requested documents that are public record regarding Brian Holsinger, former Lady Griz head basketball coach, and his sudden resignation. The University denied the request — another example of its silence. Eventually, whether the truth about these issues come out in the paper or by word of mouth, students will find out what is happening. The only difference is the University commenting on it or not.

Even if UM doesn’t know what is going to happen in a situation, tell us that. Students want to know what is happening, even if the answer is nothing.

A mass email every few weeks isn’t good enough for the student body. We pay an average \$15,642, part of which pays for the Kaimin, to attend this University, according to the Office of Global Engagement, and we deserve to hear from the people whose salaries we pay.

All the Kaimin, and students, want is an opportunity to ask questions. Not in intimidating group interviews with multiple administrators and one student journalist. Not in an interview where all we walk away with is “no comment.” Even if administrators can’t comment, tell students why, especially if it’s because they were told they can’t speak about an issue.

This is a public University — an extended branch of the government — where students have the right to know. Not just because we deserve it, but because we are legally guaranteed it.

Once again, stop hiding in your offices and behind the computer screens. Come speak to students. We value your voice and need to hear it more than ever in these unprecedented times.

Like it? Hate it? Let us know.

Email us your opinions at
claire.bernard@umontana.edu

SUDOKU

Edited by Margie E. Burke

Difficulty: Easy

		5					9	
	7		3	2				
9			8				2	6
			9			4		
	6		4	1			7	3
	1							7
		4		6				
	2			7			8	

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HOW TO SOLVE:

Each row must contain the numbers 1 to 9; each column must contain the numbers 1 to 9; and each set of 3 by 3 boxes must contain the numbers 1 to 9.

Answer to Previous Sudoku:

6	2	7	8	4	1	9	5	3
8	4	9	5	7	3	6	1	2
5	3	1	2	6	9	7	8	4
1	6	2	3	8	5	4	7	9
4	7	8	6	9	2	5	3	1
9	5	3	7	1	4	8	2	6
3	9	5	4	2	7	1	6	8
7	8	4	1	3	6	2	9	5
2	1	6	9	5	8	3	4	7

Balancing act



Monet Buerkle makes her way across a slack line on the Oval during a sunny evening on Feb. 27. **DIEGO HERNANDEZ | MONTANA KAIMIN**

In this week's briefs...

CORBIN VANDERBY

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UM RESEARCHERS FEAR THE IMPACT OF FEDERAL BUDGET CUTS

A group of professors and researchers at the University of Montana and leaders in the science field wrote and released a letter published by Lee Enterprises last Thursday stating their worry over proposed federal government budget cuts.

According to the letter, over 100 faculty and 500 staff at UM could be at risk. The letter was written by Douglas Emlen, Montana regent professor of biology, Jeffrey Good, director of UM's Genomics Core, and Jedediah Brodie, the John Craighead Endowed Chair of Conservation. However, the letter also featured over 100 signatures stating their departments and positions at UM.

"We're talking about dismantling the capacity of university systems to do science," Emlen said to NBC Montana. "It's that big a set of cuts we're talking about."

The cuts discussed in the letter are proposed by President Donald Trump's administration to shrink government spending. The targeted departments are estimated to fund a third of UM's total revenue. They include the National Institutes of Health, the National Science Foundation, the Department of Defense and more.

The funds help the University research topics such as forests, wildlife, climate change, public health and more. The letter stated cuts to the institute of health would eliminate \$2.6 million a year from UM's budget that goes to work treating and preventing diseases, including cancer and addiction.

Hunter Hill, a biomedical postdoctoral researcher at UM, said to NBC Montana that he and his peers are looking for work elsewhere if grants stop coming in.

"We've been pretty stuck, we feel like there's not a lot we can do," Hill said to NBC. "We've felt a little hopeless."

Congress will decide on the country's budget by March 14. If the budget is not approved by then, there could be a shutdown of government operations.

Corbin Vanderby is the news editor for the Montana Kaimin and can be contacted at corbin.vanderby@umontana.edu. For more stories from Vanderby and other reporters, visit online at montanakaimin.com.

MONTANA APPROVES MEDICAID EXPANSION

Last week, the Montana House passed a bill with support from both parties that looks to promote Medicaid expansion.

Multiple bills were proposed by legislators over Medicaid, including one that wanted to let it slowly sunset, but it did not advance.

The bill will act similarly as it has in the past, considering Montanans with incomes 138% of the federal poverty level are eligible to use Medicaid. In 2024, the federal poverty level was \$15,060 for a single person.

Medicaid expansion allows a single person making \$20,783 to qualify. Almost 80,000 Montanans, including many students, are supported by the Medicaid expansion.

Senators approved the bill 30 to 20 and it is now headed to Gov. Greg Gianforte to be implemented in the budget.

Ed Buttrey, a representative from Great Falls who passed the bill, told the Daily Montanan that one change the bill makes to Medicaid expansion is the state will no longer have to contract out employment services. Instead, the Department of Labor and Industry will provide the service.

According to a fiscal analysis of the bill, this will cost the department another \$125,000 to support more people.

There are also other bills still in consideration that could impact Medicaid and its expansion.

Another House bill from Rep. SJ Howell seeks to allow continuous eligibility for Medicaid users, allowing them to stay covered for 12 months without having to fill out paperwork. The bill received support during its second reading, but Howell acknowledged it would be expensive.

Senate Bill 187 seeks to add traditional healing, which includes things like herbal medicine and ceremony, eligible for coverage under Medicaid.

Another Senate bill aims to change Medicaid expansion by including work requirements, restricting coverage to those considered able-bodied and requiring applicants to receive up to 100% of the federal poverty level.

All three of these additional bills are yet to be decided upon as the Montana legislative session enters its midway point.

The gun divide: College handgun culture



UM senior Lily Serber fires her 9 mm hand gun at Deep Creek Shooting Range on Feb. 28. Serber occasionally visits a gun range to practice using her concealed carry weapon.

MARLEY BARBOEISEL | MONTANA KAIMIN

Listen to Madelynn Pandis on the Kaimin Cast as she talks with students about college handgun culture.

As of February 2021, Montana no longer requires a permit to legally carry a concealed handgun in public. This means Montanans can now discreetly carry a handgun without a background check.

There's a new proposal in the Montana State Legislature that would create a gun registry for enhanced concealed weapons permits. But is anyone actually going through the process of getting their concealed carry license when they aren't legally required to?

Lily Serber, a senior at the University of Montana studying accounting and management information systems, did. But, she said, "Ramping up background checks, ramping up regulations isn't going to help when the bad guys get a gun. Because if the bad guys want a gun, they'll get a gun. It's the people who are wanting to buy a gun for good intentions that are the ones that the regulations are going against."

New episodes out every other Monday. Scan for the latest.



POLICE BLOTTER

ABBY WILLIAMS

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There were some shitty crimes this week, people. At this point, I hope that bird flu is the next COVID-19 so we all have to stay in our rooms and contemplate our actions.

FEB. 24 – TWO SEXUAL ASSAULTS ON CAMPUS

Two sexual assault cases were recently reported to the University of Montana Police Department. The first crime happened between the 2023 to 2024 academic school year in an unnamed residence hall. The case has been referred to Title IX.

The second was a sexual assault and fondling case at the music building on the afternoon of Feb. 24, 2025. This case is still open and being investigated.

If you or someone you know has been sexually assaulted there are resources on campus that can help. The Curry Health Center offers therapy. Your first session is free, then it costs \$20 for every session after. You can also anonymously report an assault or problem. The Student Advocacy Resource Center is available to help connect students with resources like counseling and conversations are confidential. The Center can be reached 24 hours a day at (406) 329-6559.

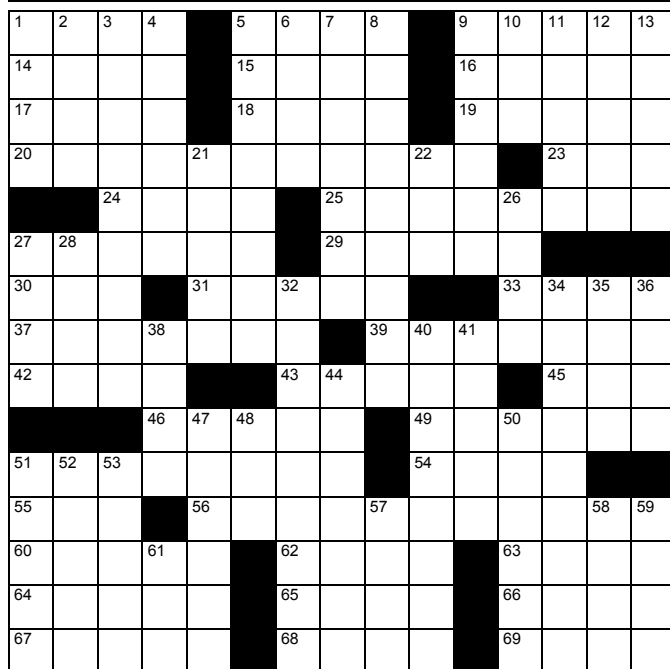
FEB. 22 – ANYWHERE BUT OUTSIDE

A student in Aber Hall was caught with alcohol and given a minor in possession charge. It's been sunny, with clear skies and warm weather. Why can you not just go to the footbridge and get wasted there? You can also fit more friends on the beach than you can in your box of a room. Or, even better, you can start studying for midterms sober! Who knew?

FEB. 23 – PUT THE PHONE DOWN

A case of online theft is still open after a student fell for an online scam. This has to be the most embarrassing crime to write because it actually pulls at my heart. I am a full believer that UM should offer classes that help combat this. Show examples of scam texts, fake phone calls, things like that. That would be a fun final!

Abby Williams is a news reporter for the Montana Kaimin and can be contacted at abby.williams@umontana.edu. For more stories from Williams and other reporters, visit online at montanakaimin.com.



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ACROSS

- 1 Tacks on
5 Actor Idris
9 Durable wood
14 Arrestee's request
15 Kaput
16 Integra maker
17 End of a threat
18 ___ Clinic
19 Katmandu's land
20 Like many traditions
23 Night school subj.
24 Tied up
25 How some shall remain
27 Kindle
29 Musical work
30 Hepburn film, "Adam's ___"
31 Ring-tailed animal
33 Get rid of
37 Calcium or carbon
39 Ref's call
42 Supermodel Banks
43 Pavarotti, for one
45 "Armageddon" actress Tyler
46 Steel girder
49 Popular theater name
51 Vegas hotel
54 Big Apple team
55 Map abbr.
56 Like some colors
60 Textile pattern
62 Dove competitor
63 Creative spark
64 Draw forth
65 Worse than bad
66 Keister

- 68 Lean (on)
69 Catch sight of

DOWN

- 1 Look out for, maybe
2 Spanish surrealist
3 Take apart
4 Record holder
5 Oilers' home
6 Like some meat
7 Civil War weapon
8 Worshipful love
9 Touched the tarmac
10 Part of a royal flush
11 Delhi money
12 Crude
13 They may be decked
21 It follows that
22 Flightless bird
26 Smaller amount
27 Guitar ridge
28 Too smooth
32 Bill of ____; removal of rights
34 Sledding sites
35 Make fit to print
36 "Whip It" band
38 Word after junk or black
40 Officially
41 Common side order
44 Like tearjerkers
47 Financial supporter
48 It may be easily bruised
50 Closet array
51 Biblical tower
52 Dance around, as an issue
53 Abate, as rainfall
57 Barroom foot rest
58 Lowest tide
59 Cooper or Coleman
61 Hotel amenity

Answers to Previous Crossword:

R	A	C	E		A	B	A	S	H		C	R	I	B
I	R	O	N		L	A	T	H	E		R	O	S	A
D	O	N	S		G	R	E	E	N		B	E	A	N
E	S	T	I		M	A	B	L	E		E	A	R	T
S	E	R	G	E										
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					L	I	T	E	R	A	T	U	R	E
					U	S	E	R		R	E	L	I	C

Musical-o-scope

KAIRI LISING
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It's time to embrace your deepest secret, something we all hide in the darkest recesses of our minds. We all love musicals and we all have a favorite. The dancing, the flashiness, the costumes and especially the singing – what's not to love? The question is: What does your favorite musical say about you?

PISCES (FEB. 19-MARCH 20):

Pisces, you're a wandering artist with your head in the clouds. You're passionate and hardworking, yet nothing seems to come from your efforts. Don't worry though, one day you'll get your big break! You just have to break up with the love of your life, of course, just like "La La Land."

ARIES (MARCH 21-APRIL 19):

You like to think of yourself as a "Hamilton," perserving and strong, but that 9 a.m. class proves to be a little harder to get to than you think. Let's face it, you're King George and you'll be back in your bed.

TAURUS (APRIL 20-MAY 20):

You always loved "Into the Woods": the magic, the dramatic irony and especially the princes. Everybody knows it, your weakness is dashing hotties. It's cool, Taurus, but you have to be better about not forgetting everything as soon as a sex pot walks your way.

GEMINI (MAY 21-JUNE 20): Gemini, I'm sorry to say, you're not Elphaba from "Wicked." As much as you want to be the charming outcast with a kind heart, you always end up being Glinda. A bitch. At least you're popular?

CANCER (JUNE 21-JULY 22): You're such a hopeless romantic, Cancer. You're hoping that one day, you'll find your star-crossed lover just like in the "Romeo and Juliet" adaptation "West Side Story." Secretly, though, you're a masochist. Why do you keep rewatching things you know will make you cry?

LEO (JULY 23-AUG. 22): You like to keep your head in

the sand, Leo. "Politics has nothing to do with you," is your mantra. Crazy how when you say that, suddenly your friends disappear. Oh well, life is a "Cabaret."

VIRGO (AUG. 23-SEP. 22): The hills are alive! With the "Sound of Music!" And also avoiding your responsibilities! Fun-loving and free, you're just like Maria. Reality is harsh, though, and soon you'll realize life sucks. But for now, frolic through the flowers!

LIBRA (SEP. 23-OCT. 22):

Dark, gothic, romantic. That's your "Phantom of the Opera" vibe, Libra. However, as much as you like to give up your moodiness, it just comes off as a guy mooching in a basement. And sorry to say, you cannot hit those notes.

SCORPIO (OCT. 23-NOV. 21):

OK, teenage dirtbag. We get it, you're a "cool kid." Your obsession with the movie-adapted musical "Heathers" glaringly reflects that. You love slurpees, crude humor and primary colors. Maybe if you loved deodorant as much as you love this musical, you would pull more bitches.

SAGITTARIUS (NOV. 22-DEC. 21): It's a hard knock life, Sagittarius! Or at least that's what you tell yourself. You like

to describe yourself as "Annie," a young, struggling upstart with a heart of gold. Sorry to say, Sag, but you're here because of daddy's money. Sooo, let's just say you're closer to Annie post-adoption.

CAPRICORN (DEC. 22-JAN. 19): You're just so darling! Everyone sees you as a charming ingenue, but the truth is, you have a dark side. You like leather! GASP! Just like "Grease," you'd change for anyone you find hot. Let's hope the next thing you fall in love with is good grades.

AQUARIUS (JAN 20-FEB 18): Loving and thoughtful, that's you, Aquarius! Kinda like Orpheus from "Hadestown," you'll do anything for the people you love. You're still human, though, and doubt comes in.



BARRETT CLEMENT | MONTANA KAIMIN

New Montana bills could affect UM students

LOGAN YANTES

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Among new bills introduced in the last month of Montana's legislative session, one redefines residency qualifications that could impact out-of-state students and the University of Montana.

One House bill introduced by Republican Rep. Jane Gillette states individuals living in Montana temporarily for work, education or training programs will not gain county or state residency unless they plan to stay in Montana after completing their program. This bill could affect many out-of-state students, which represent 44% of the student body at UM. As for in-state students, it would also remove the ability to vote in Missoula. With the language in this bill, in-state students would have to mail in ballots or go back home to vote.

UM's Student Senate said for students that live in Eastern Montana, this is a difficult proposition. "This bill would also make it for students in different towns to drive back home and back to vote, which, if you live in Sidney, Montana, isn't really possible," said Elizabeth Kamminga, the UM Senate president.

Questions about representation for these students are being discussed in the Montana Senate. Some legislators mentioned that the language of the bill at this point it too vague. it does not specify how long an education program should last to be considered short-term.

Tuition for full-time out-of-state students at UM is \$33,000 a year. That is lowered to around \$8,500 for in-state students.

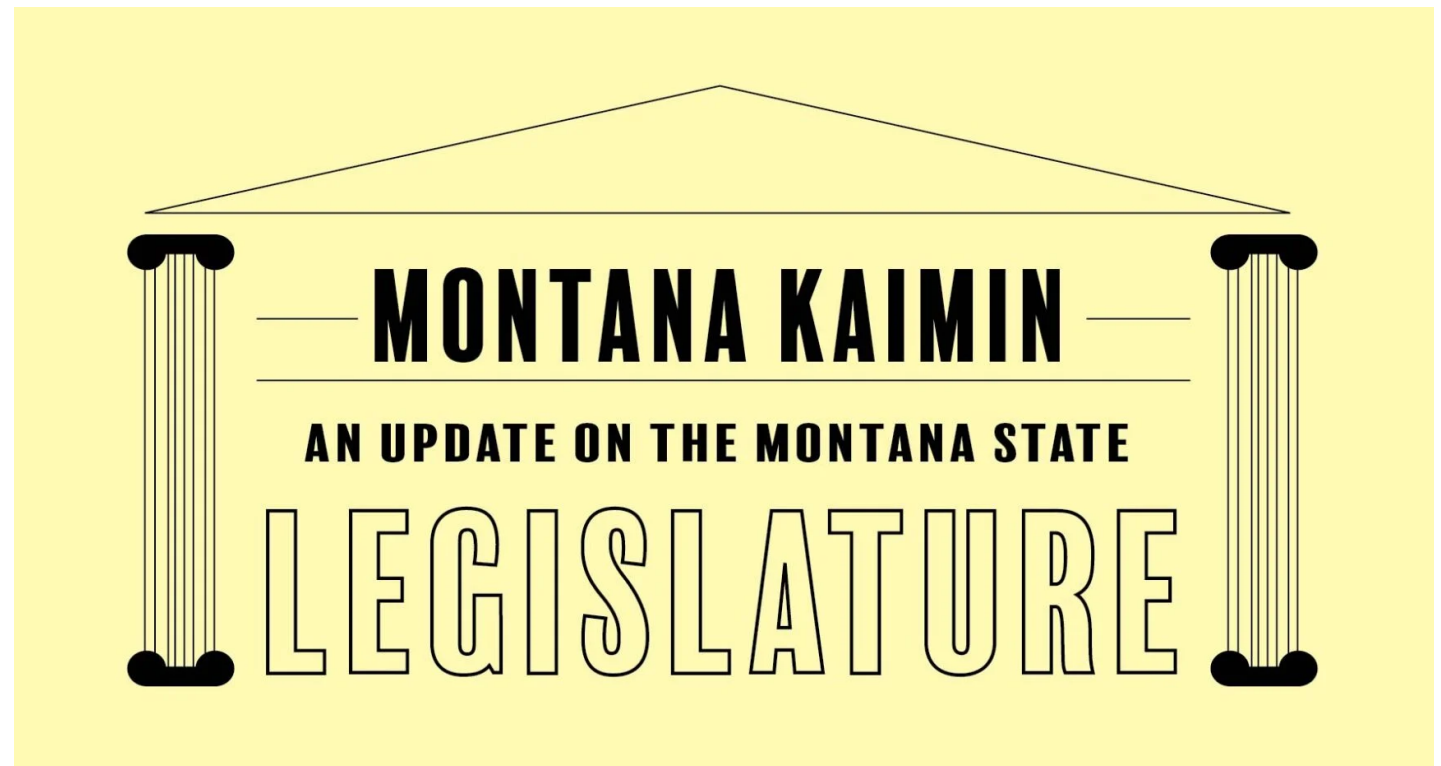
Another House bill, introduced by Republican Rep. Kerri Seekins-Crowe, aims to make abortion trafficking in and out of Montana borders a felony for pregnant patients and those who help them. Abortion trafficking is an adult taking a pregnant minor to get an abortion without parental consent.

The bill also aimed to outlaw chemical abortions and related prescriptions via the internet over environmental concerns.

Environmental concern is built into the Montana Constitution. One of the issues brought up in legislature was preventing exposure to city water waste, where birth control chemicals can be found.

A 2016 report by the Montana Bureau of Mines and Geology that studied contaminants in Gallatin County waters stated that wastewater treatment plants removed most organic water contaminants.

The study also stated that estrogen, a hormone present in birth control, poses the biggest threat to human health. But the most commonly occurring estrogenic chemical found in the water was bisphenol A — which is found in plastic containers such as water bottles, not in birth control.



MCKENNA JOHNSON | MONTANA KAIMIN

This bill was tabled in committee but points to a growing number of bills similar to this one in legislation.

Another Senate bill making waves in higher education aims to expand opportunities for university athletes regarding Name, Image and Likeness deals. Previously, Montana law restricted athletes to earning compensation from approved sources.

With how recently Montana has added NIL legislation, many student athletes are currently only scratching the surface of what is out there. "A lot of people, on my team especially, only really capitalize on it in kind of an entry level way," said Ty Ferguson, a senior track and field athlete from Big Timber.

This bill would remove those limitations, allowing athletes to engage in more professional branding and endorsement deals. "If there's more doors being opened, people are going to check," Ferguson, 21, said.

While many see this as an important step toward financial freedom for student athletes, concerns have been raised about the additional pressures these opportunities may impose.

According to the National Institute of Health's website, "NIL deals create multifactorial pressures (i.e. brand management, social media presence, legal engagements, contractual obligations) that could lead to academic burnout. These new demands are

also time-consuming and may further distract athletes from their academic responsibilities."

Another House bill proposed by Seekins-Crowe would make gender-specific bathrooms mandatory at state buildings, including dorms, campus buildings and other public facilities, passed both the House and Senate. The bill then was sent to the governor to codify and sign. However, the bill was sent back to the Senate in a process called enrolling.

According to Hope Morrison, a student lobbyist in Helena that works to represent students during the session, enrollment is when the bill is formally written in its final version, incorporating any amendments made during the legislative process.

However, this bill was not approved. This means that it was sent back to the legislature for further corrections, adjustments or re-examination, according to Morrison. The future of the bill remains uncertain as lawmakers reconsider its final wording and potential implications.

With the murky situation of the bathroom bill, another bill that was concerning to the Student Senate at the University of Montana was successfully tabled and killed. The Senate bill, proposed by Republican Sen. John Fuller, would take away the student representative on the Board of Regents, which makes major decisions for the Montana University System.

This bill effectively removed the voting power of the student position, taking away representation. This bill had bipartisan support and its tabling was a huge win, according to UM's Student Senate, ensuring that students retain a voice in major University decisions.

Additionally, a Senate bill aiming to introduce skeet shooting as a collegiate sport passed and is on its way to implementation in the Montana University System.

Finally, a Senate bill sponsored by Democratic Sen. Mary Ann Dunwell designed to protect student renters from unfair wear-and-tear charges when moving out failed to pass. Nonetheless, two similar bills are currently in committee, offering similar protection for student renters who continue to face disputes with landlords.

On top of the new bills, older ones have since been pushed forward or tabled. As the 2025 legislative session continues, bills like these are still in committee and others await final approval.

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Black Solidarity Summit puts action into words

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The Black Solidarity Summit took place at the University of Montana last weekend, educating students on how to be an ally and create positive change to defeat racism.

“A theme of this event has been solidarity and building community,” said Evyn Kolczak-Hardy, a freshman studying social work from Missoula. “These events are kind of the action in those words.”

The event, run by the Black Student Union from Feb. 27 to 28, featured multiple speakers and workshops, including Dee Daniels, one of the founders of the Union, and Wilmot Collins, mayor of Helena.

Daniels spoke about growing the union from around 10 to 125 students from her freshman to senior year, saying she got to know herself through starting the union.

“I still, to this day, consider my time in Missoula, Montana, as one of the highlights of my life,” Daniels said, with her message to students being to “take advantage of the opportunity to know who you are historically.”

She said this helps create a more loving world full of informed decisions and part of this can be done by finding love and solidarity through the union.

A panel of Black Student Union alumni followed with a similar theme of using the union to create a community of unity, and to find not just allies, but co-conspirators. The distinction is allies are those who will “make you dinner,” while co-conspirators will “stay after dinner with a sleeping bag.”

“To quote someone I know, allyship is not a noun, it’s an action,” said Black Student Union Vice President Sylvie-Aganoti Tower. “Coming to events like the Black Solidarity Summit are ways in which you can support, you can learn, and you can leave this event knowing.”

The finale of the two-day summit included a keynote speech from Helena Mayor Wilmot Collins. The first Black mayor elected since Montana gained statehood in 1889, Collins talked about how equality and Black history extend beyond race, and how education is key to create a true, clear, understanding and fair country.

“We’re trying to educate our neighbors about some of our contributions, some of what we’ve done,” Collins said. “It’s not about race, and people are forgetting that. Our environment is so toxic right now, everything is of Black, white, and brown. That’s not what life’s about, it’s more than that.”

Mayor Collins started by sharing his journey of starting as a janitor in Helena, to eventually becoming a substitute teacher and exploring more career paths before getting into politics.



Helena Mayor Wilmot Collins, elected in 2017, speaks to a crowd in the UC Theater on Feb. 28 as the keynote speaker for the 2025 Black Solidarity Summit.

HENRY DOELLINGER | MONTANA KAIMIN

While it took him many years to enter the political sphere and eventually become mayor, he shared how knowing the importance of owning his own narrative helped him guide himself with truth and genuineness.

“If you don’t own it, it will own you. If you don’t tell your story, they will tell it for you,” Collins said in his speech.

Collins also said marginalized groups all need to realize their similarities to build unity. In accordance with this, Black history is not just “Black history,” but American history. He told the audience about the importance of confronting uncomfortable truths, and while progress for equality has been made, “We are still on the 40-yard line,” he said.

Collins concluded by discussing diversity, equity and inclusion in reference to recent

executive orders made by President Donald Trump. He said diversity, equity and inclusion are not just about race, but about giving everyone a fair chance to succeed, which includes those with disabilities, people of color and more.

His message for the audience was to look beyond your own comfortability, and find who you are in the world using your own culture and history through his three guiding principles.

“Get involved in your community, step outside of your comfort zone and make people feel heard,” Collins said.

Students from the Black Student Union, who ran and organized the entirety of the event with the Branch Center, said they were able to connect with alumni of the program

and hear about its history. They hope that solidarity will remain prevalent on campus as the legacy of the program continues to grow in Missoula.

“If you are someone who is trying to go against the grain and go against the current status quo, just being here is a wonderful start,” said Mint Pitassy, a member of the union. “You know, even listening can be an act of defiance.”

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STORY BY CORBIN VANDERBY
PHOTOS BY DIEGO HERNANDEZ

**AS THE COST OF
LIVING IN MISSOULA
CONTINUES TO RISE,
THE UNIVERSITY OF
MONTANA GRADUATE
EMPLOYEE UNION IS
HOPING TO CONVINCE
THE UNIVERSITY TO
RAISE THEIR PAY.**

Story Ponvert speaks to students about class assignments
after teaching on Feb. 27.

THE COST OF BARGAINING

IN 2024, STORY PONVERT DECIDED to get a master's degree to pursue his dream of writing a novel. He knew it would be two years of hard work with few opportunities for pay, but he could make it work. However, he also knew that with just an \$18,000 yearly stipend he would have to be smart with his money. Paying for rent, groceries and school would all have to fit in that budget.

The stipend comes from Ponvert's teaching assistant job. The University of Montana offers graduate students the option to work as teaching or research assistants. In return, the University waives their tuition and offers a stipend to help cover living costs.

With the cost of school at UM for an out-of-state, full-time graduate student around \$68,000 a year, the deal seemed like a no-brainer. Ponvert already had previous teaching experience.

The teaching assistant job meant instructing a beginning writing course, WRIT 101, to a class of freshmen by himself, as opposed to assisting an experienced professor.

"We're called [teaching assistants], although practically, we're really not [assisting] anything," Ponvert said. "We are instructors of record."

For each assignment, Ponvert spends about an hour per student for grading and offering constructive feedback. With a class of 23 students, this means an entire day's worth of work, not including time spent preparing for each class, which meets twice a week for 80 minute sessions.

But it isn't just teaching that takes up his time. He has his own 12 credit course load, which takes three-hour chunks out of his day. Ponvert is also often assigned weekly readings of full novels or has to work on his own writing projects.

The waiver Ponvert is given to teach does not cover additional tuition fees that help fund things like the Student Senate or cover the cost of course materials. These fees range by programs. For a master's in writing, fees total to around \$3,000 per year. Taken out of his stipend, that leaves Ponvert with \$15,000 to survive off.

Although the hours and stipend amount varies from department to department, most graduate students at the University of Montana experience low wages, high expenses and exhausting workloads.

Ponvert knew he wanted to fight for a bigger stipend and to remove the extra fees on students' bills, but knew he didn't have the power to make it happen alone. That's when he joined the Graduate Employee Union.

The union, formed in 2024, advocates for graduate students working as teaching and research assistants at the University of Montana. One of its goals is to push for better compensation and overall representation.

After fighting for years to form and be officially recognized by the Montana University System, the union will have its first real opportunity to make strides for better benefits. On behalf of the 450 graduate employees, the union will enter its first financial negotiations this summer to address some of the students' biggest concerns: compensation for work and health care.

According to Kerry Davant, who helps negotiate contracts, the meetings will begin on June 22 and finish June 30. Davant works as the director of human resources for the Office of the Commissioner of Higher Education — the organization that manages Montana's public universities and colleges. Any changes made during negotiations will go into effect during the 2025-26 academic year, Ponvert's last year at UM.

Ezra Mendales, vice president of the union, said initial conversations last summer went well, even though they couldn't talk about anything financial.

"It was clearly stated that next time we meet it's going to be more of a negotiation," Mendales said. "But just the fact that we started off on this foot of meeting each other halfway makes me really optimistic for the coming bargaining session."

In the meantime, Ponvert will have to make do with his stipend in an increasingly costly world.

UNION GOALS

When finding a place to live in Missoula, Ponvert originally applied to live in the University Villages, where rent ranges from \$810 to \$1,205 a month. But Ponvert was put on a waiting list and did not get a lease.

Now Ponvert lives off-campus where he pays \$1,200 in rent alone — around 80% of his monthly income from his stipend. He said he could live cheaper and get a roommate, but he's lucky to have some savings from before school to help him out — savings not every student has.

"They're not even pretending that that is a living wage," Ponvert said. "[Most grad students are] not paying tuition, so they're going to school for free, but then they either have a job, or they get support from their family, or they go into debt — or some combination of the three."

Ponvert himself holds a few online one-hour tutoring sessions each week to bolster his income. He said he would work more, but on top

of his own courses and the teaching assistantship, he doesn't have the time.

To help combat these struggles, UM Union President Bethany Miller said the union has three main goals: raise stipends, improve student employee health care and remove student fees from graduate employee bills.

Miller said the union wants to raise stipends to better match the cost of living in Missoula.

According to the Cost of Living Index, the average rent for an apartment in 2024 in Missoula was \$1,546. To spend only 30% of an income, one would need a yearly salary of over \$55,000. Even if grad students are willing to pay 50% of their income on rent, they wouldn't be able to on most graduate employee stipends.

Another union goal is to address and decrease pay inequalities between departments.

According to Paul Lukacs, associate dean of research and graduate studies, teaching assistantships start at \$5,000 for master's students and \$8,000 for doctoral students. After that, any additional funding comes down to each department's budget.

While Ponvert's stipend was \$18,000, Miller, who's getting a doctorate in pharmaceutical science design, received \$26,000. Scott Whittenburg, dean of the graduate school, said the average probably sits around \$20,000, but students in larger, more competitive departments tend to make more.

The median pay of teaching assistants in 2023 was over \$35,000, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, seven times larger than the master's degree base rate at UM.

Both Whittenburg and Lukacs acknowledged the lower-than-average stipend rate and said the graduate school is always advocating for better pay for student employees.

"We are not competitive with other institutions around the country," Whittenburg said. "We also know that is not really enough to support the kind of lifestyle I think most students would like to have."

Lukacs said the teaching assistantship rate has risen over the years, but both he and Whittenburg said it is not something the graduate school tracks and did not provide further details.

Miller said the union doesn't have any specific numbers it's looking to instate as a baseline fee, but rather it wants to work with the University to adjust the pay.

Health care is another important topic for the union. All students at the University of Montana taking six or more credits are required to have some form of health insurance.

Graduate students with teaching or research assistant positions are offered the same insurance plan as undergraduate students, as they are not considered full-time employees at the University. UM's health care plan isn't cheap. Ponvert looked into purchasing it, but once he found out it would cost him over \$4,000 a year, almost 25% of his stipend, he applied for Medicaid instead.

Lukacs said if student employees were considered full-time, they would be offered the same health insurance as other faculty members.

Miller and Mendales both said being considered part-time employees isn't fair.



Josh Beisel, a 27-year-old doctoral student and eligible graduate employee, uses the trees on the Oval as part of a proportional prediction sampling test.



Bernice Lin, a doctorate student studying neuroscience, looks at fruit fly brain stem cells through a microscope.

“Even though they mark us as part time, none of us are working less than 19 hours a week,” Miller said.

Being considered a part-time employee makes negotiations more complicated, as Montana law states part-time employees working less than 20 hours a week regularly are not eligible for benefits like health care.

The union is working on sending surveys out to graduate employees to prove they are working full-time hours to help obtain full-time employee status.

Miller said this is something Montana State University’s graduate employee union has struggled with in past bargaining sessions.

Lukacs said being considered part-time employees is part of the agreement they sign when they come on as teaching assistants and that they shouldn’t be working more than 19 hours.

“You might have a student who’s TA’d a

number of times and a student who’s never done it before,” Lukacs said. “It might take them different numbers of hours, but it’s not because it’s a different amount of work.”

The third point the union hopes to address is tuition fees, such as the Student Senate fee or the campus recreation fee. Some fees are more specific to what courses students are taking.

According to previous Kaimin reporting, these fees can total anywhere from \$815 to over \$5,000.

Miller and Mendales said reducing these fees is a goal during negotiations, but similar to the stipend issue, they don’t currently have any specific numbers.

Lukacs and Whittenburg said the graduate school has not looked into removing or reducing fees for graduate employees, as they are required for every student, including undergraduates.

“Those fees also pay for a lot of really important services for graduate students, and they all like using the health center, and they like using the rec center,” Lukacs said.

Ponvert said he’s never been to the University’s rec center and wishes he had the option to waive the fee.

Lukacs and Whittenburg also said internal and external grants and scholarships can help cover those fees, which are available for all students to apply for.

Overall, the union said its biggest goal is to be bargaining in good faith and to understand the University’s situation as well.

“We don’t know the ins and outs of their financial system,” Mendales said. “We’re going to advocate to get as much as we can, and meeting the administration halfway on what is achievable in this [collective bargaining agreement] is part of it.”

One concern Whittenburg brought up for

some of these negotiations is the recent federal freeze ordered by President Donald Trump. A series of memos released by Trump on Jan. 28 ordered the freezing of all federal funding to nonprofits, local governments and publicly funded universities, including UM, as a part of his effort to cut anything related to diversity, equity and inclusion, gender ideology and the Green New Deal.

This was challenged by the National Council of Nonprofits, among others, and led to a court injunction delaying the order by five days.

On Jan. 29, the White House rescinded the order. Karoline Leavitt, press secretary for the White House, stated in a press conference that the intent of the rescission was to “end any confusion created by the court’s injunction,” but the President’s executive orders on federal funding “remain in full force and effect.”

The attorney generals for 23 states and the



Union vice president Ezra Mendales and union president Bethany Miller prepare for graduate employee union meeting.

District of Columbia filed a federal lawsuit against the order, which led to a judge issuing a temporary restraining order on Jan. 31 that is still in place until the conflict is settled in court.

Although the issue is still being played out in court, it's possible new funding for research grants could be frozen in the future.

Whittenburg said a few graduate students who had previously received grants were found to violate certain executive orders issued by Trump, which were then frozen. However, the students were still able to receive funding from other pools within the graduate school, according to Whittenburg.

Whittenburg also said he and Paul Lasiter, vice president for operations and finance at UM, have been meeting and discussing scenarios, including if the school experienced a 15% reduction in federal grants. According to Whittenburg, the pair believes the University could manage by finding alternate sources of funding.

"They're not gonna miss a paycheck," Whittenburg said. "They're probably not gonna notice it."

FORMING THE UNION

Although it received official recognition last summer, UM's union has been battling to organize for four years.

Unionizing is a large and complicated legal undertaking. First, it needed to be recognized by the Montana Department of Labor and Industry as well as the Montana Federation of Public Employees.

The union had to prove student interest. This meant collecting at least 300 students to sign a petition.

After that, stewards representing each department under the graduate school were chosen, leadership was elected and union

cards were passed out to official members.

At the head of the union is President Miller. Miller, like Ponvert, also works as a teaching assistant to help pay for school. She helps a professor proctor and grades exams in one class and one lab.

Unlike Ponvert, Miller's stipend is \$26,000. Miller said this variation is common between departments and is probably due to her pursuing a doctorate instead of a master's degree, as well as being in a STEM program. Miller said these inequities are something the union would like to address in the upcoming negotiations.

"I feel like I'm in a place of privilege," Miller said. "I also have the benefit of sharing bills with a non-graduate student partner who's able to supplement a little bit. It's not the case for everyone, obviously, so just trying to advocate for those who don't have the same situation."

Mendales, a second-year doctorate student studying evolutionary genomics, works alongside Miller as the union's vice president. Mendales is a teaching assistant for two separate labs, an undertaking that he said takes eight hours a week, not including time spent grading and preparing.

They both acknowledged that most of the leadership for the union are studying STEM fields, but recruiting from the humanities has been a priority.

"Our elected leadership are STEM so that was low-hanging fruit to be able to raise our numbers really quickly," Mendales said.

Miller said the union had a couple big wins from the negotiation last summer, including removing the requirement for all graduate employees to pay out-of-state tuition, which can sometimes be around \$30,000 greater than in-state tuition. It also added terms enforcing workplace safety and anti-discrimination.

According to Miller, the union currently has 120 members, which accounts for around 27% of eligible graduate employees, and hasn't recently experienced pushback or stigma from non-union members. But Miller said it wasn't always that way.

Before being officially recognized, Miller said many graduate employees refused to join out of fear of discrimination by the University.

According to previous Kaimin reporting, when the union first formed in 2022, posters hung up around campus asking students to help unionize were often removed. Emily Ferguson-Steger, director of student life, told the Kaimin at the time this was because they didn't go through the proper approval process.

Now that the union is officially recognized, Miller and Mendales said they don't receive pushback from administration and students tend to be more comfortable joining.

Although they made it through the challenges, the UM union wasn't alone. Acting as inspiration, Montana State University graduate employees unionized back in 2011. But it wasn't easy for them, either.

CALL IN THE 'CATS'

According to MSU's Graduate Employee Organization website, informal organization began in 2009 when a group of students confronted the graduate school dean on issues including the growing cost of living and health care.

Montana State told the students it couldn't change anything unless the students unionized. Over the next year, MSU grad students worked with the Montana Education Association-Montana Federation of Teachers to help organize. In 2010, it held a vote for unionization, but MSU officials claimed the students weren't allowed to, as it didn't consider them employees.

This led to a legal battle lasting 20 months, with multiple appeals to the Montana Labor Board. Finally, in 2011, it ended with the union receiving official recognition.

Now, the graduate union in Bozeman represents over 700 teaching and research assistants at MSU and has been through multiple collective bargaining agreement negotiations through the years.

According to its website, a 2019-2020 agreement led to increased wages, raising 2% in 2020 and 1% in both 2021 and 2022. It also increased base monthly stipends for graduate employees from \$130 a month to \$225. Finally, it implemented required training on the subjects of sexual harassment, discrimination, safety and academic misconduct.

Previous reporting by the Kaimin said past organizers of the University of Montana's union took inspiration from Montana State's union, even basing its constitution on theirs.

"The fact that they unionized in [2011] was super inspiring to us," Colette Berg, a former union organizer, previously said to the Kaimin.

But these two Montana universities aren't the only ones with graduate students looking to unionize. The struggle for graduate employees is nationwide.

THE UNION BOOM

According to the Hunter College directory, which tracks bargaining agreements in higher education, the number of graduate student employees in unions grew by 133% between 2012 and 2024.

Another 2020 study from the University of Albany showed nearly 60% of graduate students struggled highly with food insecurity, which in turn led to elevated levels of anxiety, depression and stress.

Ponvert said he was lucky he came into graduate school with savings, but still finds himself eating cheaper to keep spending down.

Whittenburg said although he recognizes that money is an issue for these graduate employees, he believes it shouldn't be their only consideration.

"I understand the fact that the money figures into it someplace, but now the bigger picture is: What is your career going to look like when you get out?" Whittenburg said. "So I think that's where the decision really ought to be made."

When Whittenburg went to graduate school in 1974, the average cost of tuition and fees at public four year universities was \$512, which, adjusted for inflation, would be about \$3,490 today.

When asked, both Whittenburg and Lukacs agreed that going to graduate school was the best time of their lives.

"You're spending all of your time working on research projects that are of interest to you. You have very little concerns about life and existence. It's just a wonderful time to be," Whittenburg said.

They both said they experienced things such as low pay, long hours and sleep deprivation. Whittenburg said graduate school was when he first discovered coffee and needed multiple cups to get through the days. But he also said the learning was invaluable.

The same goes for Ponvert. Although he believes he could be paid and supported more, he said he doesn't regret coming to UM at all.

"I like the work that I came here to do, I like meeting all the people I've met, both the fellow students and the faculty, and I like the teaching," Ponvert said. "Yeah, sometimes it's hard, but I think it's good overall."

However, the negotiations this summer could give students like Ponvert one less thing to worry about as they pursue higher studies.

"UM's grad program has a lot going for it, but it's true that they're not supporting us like I think they could," Ponvert said. "I just think that we should be paid more. I think we should have health care and stuff like that, and the way that you get those things is through the union."

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Master of Fine Arts' thesis asks audience to see ambiguity

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From Feb. 26 to March 7, bright canvases of color will hang on the blank white walls of the University of Montana's Gallery of Arts. At first glance, the paintings are of everyday life — a woman sitting on the curb on her phone, two friends eating a gyro — but the more time spent looking at it, the more questions arise. Why are they there? What are they thinking?

Lily Kip, a Master of Fine Arts student in painting, is finishing up her last year of graduate school with her thesis exhibition titled "There's Still Time To." Kip wants audiences to live in the ambiguous nature of her oil paintings.

"That kind of convinces you to keep looking at it and spend time with it. It sort of forces the viewer into the perspective of the photographer," Kip said.

That ambiguous nature comes from the source material, photos from Kip's phone. But she didn't just pick any photos of her friends or family posing. Kip specifically chose pictures where, at first glance, it isn't clear what's going on.

She wanted her paintings to evoke the same feelings that she gets when she's in a conversation with people. "It's impossible to know what someone else is thinking or feeling. I've no idea what you're thinking, and how terrifying is that?" Kip said.

Most of the photos used in the exhibition were taken from recent months and from when she was 18. Throughout those 10 years, Kip, now 28 years old, took photos every day. Her Google photo library is in the thousands.

"It's like this point in your life when you're old enough that you have a past. You have somewhere that you came from. Usually you have a family, you have a childhood, you have a high school experience, but you also have a future," Kip said. "So part of [the exhibition] relates to the flashes you get of understanding what someone's feeling or going through.

Kip's thesis exhibition has been a work in progress her entire graduate career. The first piece was painted about two and a half years ago. Looking back through grad school, she cites two professors who helped her through it all.

Kevin Bell, a professor in the School of Visual and Media Arts, found Kip's background notable in how she approaches her art. "She has a background in English literature in her, so her perspective is a bit wider than other students," Bell said. "She's coming from the world of words as opposed to images, so it's fun to see how her explorations into literature have informed her work."

Kip's undergraduate degree was a double major in English and art. After graduating, she had to jump from service job to service job to survive. Then the pandemic hit, which gave Kip a lot of time to self-reflect.

"I realized that it was art that was missing from my life. I wasn't doing it anymore and I needed to do it," Kip said. "There's a certain point where I was kind of like, 'OK, what is my adult job going to be?' And I decided I wanted to teach college art." So she applied for graduate school and made her way to Montana.

Valerie Hedquist, director of the School of Visual and Media Arts, saw Kip's potential from the very beginning of her graduate career. "[Kip] came in already developed as a painter and she knew what she wanted to say with her paintings. What was key for us was taking those already well-rounded skills and pushing her further," Hedquist said.

Kip's primary medium of choice is oil paints, but she takes a non-traditional approach. In her undergrad, she only took two painting classes, abstract oil and color theory. "So there's all these traditional methods of building up layers and shadows and highlights that I just don't do because I never learned how to do it," Kip said. She loves color and wants all of her paintings to be bright and vibrant.

Each painting in her exhibition is saturated with color and swimming with ambiguity. Kip wants every viewer to take their own lived experience and interpret her work differently. "The idea is that 'there's still time to' . . . blank. It's open ended," Kip said.

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Lily Kip puts up the vinyl title for her exhibition, "There's Still Time To," on Feb. 25. Kip's exhibition is located in the Social Sciences building and will be open to the public until March 7. **NOAH EPPS | MONTANA KAIMIN**

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A peek into a two-hour set at the KBGA radio studio

ELIZA CAREY

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The KBGA radio studio in the University Center is a time capsule for generations of music lovers.

Two of the four walls in the room are filled with shelves of CDs, spanning genres and decades. The windows framed a young sunset on a Friday afternoon, and in its pale light sat Stella Smith, on air for 89.9 FM college radio.

A song was fading out of the speakers.

She put on headphones, slid her finger down a lever on the soundboard, pressed a button and leaned into a microphone.

"That was 'Lights Out' by Santigold, 'obvious' by Oklou and 'Ssx' by The Hellp. That last song title isn't too friendly for someone with a lisp to say," she said in her charming voice with a slight impediment.

She laughed to herself, took her headphones off and pressed play on "Cupid de Locke" by The Smashing Pumpkins — a whimsically melodic tune. She turned the studio volume up until it was loud enough for herself.

Smith, from Boise, Idaho, is graduating in May with a degree in media arts. The 21-year-old music fanatic began her radio show in March 2023 with a friend. Their show was called "DreamGirlz." The namesake alluded to the fact that each show coincided with different archetypes of people.

For example, the duo made a playlist for a show they called "Cuntry dreamgirl," which included old folk and country-sounding music. Another was "Daddy's money dreamgirl," which has "Rich Girl" by Gwen Stefani as the sixth track.

Malcolm Contreras, a senior in music composition and the music director at the station, said themes for shows are encouraged and fully up to the DJs. "It's quite the variety radio station," he said.

Having a radio show through KBGA is entirely volunteer work. Students don't get paid for it. Like Smith, they do it because they want to.

Smith's partner graduated in December, leaving her to fill a two-hour show every Friday, and finding a new dream girl each week became too hard.

Even without the pressure of a set theme, it's not easy to fill a two-hour show every week. But Smith loves that it forces her to find new music all the time.

"Let's say I have one song I like right now, I'll go to that artist, look at similar artists, and go through those similar artists' similar artists," Smith said. "One-hit wonders actually have great stuff when you look back on their

discography. Half the time these people were in a band before or have a solo album."

The sun set even farther behind the trees, emitting an orange glow on Smith's long brunette curls.

Another song faded out.

"You just heard 'I Wanna Be Adored' from The Raveonettes and 'Julie' by Horsegirl," she said into the microphone. "Now, some more tunes for you."

She pressed play on 'Eulogy For You And Me' by Tanya Davis, a spoken poetry piece with a slight melody and catchy beat.

"[Smith] brings the super epic vibe to the station with some crazy song pulls. She has been with the station for a few years now as DJ Darlin', and it's always lovely to see her pull up to the KBGA events, supporting local music," Contreras said.

It was in her eighth grade year when Smith started developing her impressively vast music taste.

"You know, everyone was listening to Travis Scott, and I like Travis Scott, but no one ever wanted me on aux in the car because I would want to listen to '50s and '60s love songs," she said. "I live for a fucking ballad."

Now, she has listeners who message her to compliment and thank her for her shows. "One time an old DJ from KBGA called in and said he liked my show and what I was doing. It meant a lot," Smith said.

Contreras said college radio is a lot more than just radio shows that a few folks listen to. "It's also about harboring a community of like-minded folks that want to lift each other up and see each other create," he said.

For Smith, sharing a piece of her soul every week can feel quite personal. She said her shows often reflect how she is doing mentally. "There was a time when I was going through a rocky time in my relationship, and that definitely reflected through what I was playing," she said.

Smith looked up at a punk music poster in the studio from the early 2000s with awe and nostalgia. "I can look around this room and see the history of when they were playing songs that came out in their time," Smith said. "It's important for young people to have a space to share what they are listening to instead of just what's on the Billboard Hot 100."

She leaned into the microphone one last time: "This is DJ Darlin,' thanks for listening and have a beautiful Friday."

Smith's show is every Friday from 4 to 6 p.m. Contreras said to become a DJ, students can email pd@kbga.org or stop by the office on campus to get set up with DJ training.

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Stella Smith, known as DJ Darlin' to her listeners, hosts her music radio show in the KBGA studio on Feb. 28. Smith has been a DJ with KBGA since March of 2023.

NOAH EPPS | MONTANA KAIMIN

Transfer talent turned fan favorite sticks around for another year

DILLON RICHARDSON

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The University of Montana men's basketball team was presented with a pleasant surprise prior to its senior night celebration on Feb. 15: Its star fifth year guard is staying in Missoula for one more season.

As the crowd was getting ready to celebrate the six seniors of the class of 2025, the announcer directed everyone's attention to the jumbotron in the center of Dahlberg Arena. Joe Pridgen, who transferred to UM from Northeastern University prior to the start of the season, greeted the fans.

"The last eight months at the University have been amazing for my family and I, and we can't thank you enough," Pridgen said. "With that being said, I want to let you all know that I'll be coming back next year to help the men's basketball team compete for a championship in the '25-26 season. I'm excited for the future and can't wait to see you all in Dahlberg."

The announcement was met with a standing ovation, as the Griz showed their support for the player who has provided many memorable moments this season.

Pridgen started his career at the College of the Holy Cross in Worcester, Massachusetts, where he averaged 17.4 points, 6.8 rebounds, and 2.2 assists per game. He then transferred to the University of North Carolina, Wilmington in 2020, then again to Northeastern University in 2021, before finally landing at UM prior to the 2024-25 season.

After earning his degree in communications from Northeastern, Pridgen said he still wanted to use what he thought was his final year of eligibility. After putting his name in the transfer portal, coaches from UM reached out to him, and he loved the idea of playing in Missoula.

"My wife is originally from Kalispell," Pridgen said. "It was kind of just a perfect fit for my wife and my daughter."

Pridgen said after the first day at UM, he knew that he would fit in.

"Right away I felt a connection with my coaches, felt the connection with my teammates," Pridgen said. "It's been everything we've been hoping it would be so far."

After a while, Pridgen began to enjoy the culture and community Montana brings.

"I love the mountains, the rivers," Pridgen said. "It's just a good vibe. Montana is calm."

After college, Pridgen wants to stay in Missoula as a youth trainer, helping kids stay active, grow their mental strength and expand their game, a passion that comes from his past, where he mentored his four younger brothers, three of whom are currently playing at the collegiate level.

While Pridgen is trying to help the Mis-

soula community, he is also trying to help lead UM's men's basketball team to its first Big Sky Conference Championship since 2019. As of Feb. 25, Pridgen leads the team in rebounds with 6.8 per game, as well as being third in points with 11.8 per game.

Pridgen also has over 30 dunks on the season, including one against Montana Tech University that landed him in the number two spot on the SportsCenter top 10.

He said dunking is always fun to do, and it fits perfectly into his style of play.

"Being able to jump and hang on the rim and there's a thousand-plus people watching, it's a good feeling," Pridgen said. "You hear the crowd go crazy or you hear the opposing crowd kind of sigh ... it makes you feel like you're doing something right."

Travis DeCuire, men's basketball head coach, said he thinks Pridgen is doing a whole lot of things right, and his arrival this year sparked change within the team.

"He's our heart and soul," DeCuire said. "He's what I needed. He's what the doctor ordered."

DeCuire, who passed George Dahlberg in career wins with a victory over California State University, Sacramento on Thursday, said it has been a while since one of his teams has been tough enough to handle adversity.

"We haven't been tough enough. We haven't been physical enough," DeCuire said.

He thinks Pridgen is the guy that brings mental and physical toughness to the table.

"In my eyes, he's our MVP," DeCuire said.

Both Pridgen and DeCuire said while the season has been good, they are excited for what's to come, specifically the Big Sky Championship in Boise.

"My favorite memory from this year hasn't happened just yet, but I want to say a Big Sky Championship," Pridgen said.

DeCuire said he agrees a championship is the goal, but the team still has work to do.

"I still watch film and think there's room for growth," DeCuire said. "I hope we can still get better. I think we can still play better."

Pridgen said he believes the work they've done this year can get them to that goal and a big part of it has been the team-first mentality.

"It's always been about winning for us, it's never about the individual or the stats we get," Pridgen said. "We expect to be at the top."

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UM graduate student Joe Pridgen jumps for the net during a game against Portland State University on Jan. 30. The guard was instrumental in securing a 92-78 Griz win. **MARLEY BARBOEISEL | MONTANA KAIMIN**

Recent policies on transgender athletes

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Recent federal, state and NCAA policies have been banning female transgender athletes from competing in their sport.

The policies, acts and bills, all of which have been introduced or passed this year, specifically take aim at collegiant transgender women competing at the NCAA level.

On Jan. 3, a bill was introduced into the U.S. House of Representatives. Less than two weeks later, it passed to the Senate with the support of both of Montana's representatives.

According to the Washington Post, the bill failed in the Senate on March 3.

The bill, introduced by Rep. Gregory Steube, R-Fla., reads "It shall be a violation of subsection (a) for a recipient of Federal financial assistance who operates, sponsors, or facilitates athletic programs or activities to permit a person whose sex is male to participate in an athletic program or activity that is designated for women or girls."

On Jan. 23, Keeri Seekins-Crowe, a state representative from House District 39, encompassing an area east of Billings, introduced another bill with similar language to the first.

In an email to the Kaimin, Seekins-Crowe stated, "This bill is about standing up for Montana's female athletes and students, ensuring they have the same opportunities and protections that generations before them had."

She stated this bill is a continuation of the work she has been doing for years.

"I've heard from parents, coaches and athletes who are deeply concerned about the erosion of these protections, and it's my responsibility to make sure their voices are heard," Seekins-Crowe said in the email. "This isn't about exclusion — it's about preserving fairness, safety and common sense in our schools and athletic programs."

Along with language detailing who is allowed in certain bathrooms, the bill proposed by Seekins-Crowe also reads: "It is an unlawful discriminatory practice for an educational institution to allow a male person to participate in athletic programs designated for female persons."

On Feb. 6, the NCAA announced a change to its policy regarding transgender athletes following President Trump's executive order on the matter.

The NCAA published an update stating: "The new policy limits competition in women's sports to student-athletes assigned female

at birth only. The policy permits student-athletes assigned male at birth to practice with women's teams and receive benefits such as medical care while practicing."

As governance at many levels takes hold, the impact on schools across the nation will vary widely. The University of Montana does not currently have any openly transgender athletes competing in either male or female sports.

In the past, the Griz had one of the first Division I transgender track runners, Piper Eastwood. In 2020, Eastwood won the mile at the Big Sky indoor track and field championships and was a top cross country runner for UM.

UM received both praise and detestment alike for allowing Eastwood to compete, according to Jean Gee, the senior associate athletic director for student affairs and NCAA compliance.

Under the current rules, if UM allowed a transgender female athlete to compete on a women's team, that team would become "mixed gender" and not be able to compete in the women's category.

Regardless of the current roster, UM still has to consider these changes and abide by these laws and policies.

In a Dec. 17, 2024 hearing before the Senate Judiciary Committee, NCAA President Charlie Baker told Senators that there were less than 10 transgender athletes across the NCAA.

The NCAA had 549,707 student athletes in 2024, meaning transgender athletes make up around 0.002% of the NCAA athlete population.

This is not the first time the NCAA has changed its policies around gender. In 1981, the organization began to include women's sports.

In Erica Fraley's early years as a high school and collegiate pole vaulter, she was self-described "pioneer" in women's pole vaulting. The sport was allowed in her Oregon high school only a few years before she started vaulting in the 1990s and wasn't in the Olympics until 2000.

"It went through the same thing of lawsuits and people pushing and breaking the rules to give women the right to do that," Fraley said. "It should be a big thought process that people are continually trying to give people the opportunity."

Fraley also said she wants to acknowledge the inherent differences between male and female sports. She coaches both men and women, and sees the differences in their

abilities in a way coaches who only oversee a male or a female sport see.

"I know that in no way can my females compete with what the males are doing. It's just not possible physically," Fraley said.

Fraley said she sees a complex web of negative outcomes depending on who is restricted.

"A trans athlete that has biologically male attributes competing in a female sport, scientifically we know that athlete is going to have a huge advantage," Fraley said. But she said she doesn't see that as a reason to ban transgender female athletes from women's sports.

"Not allowing trans athletes to compete in their chosen area is not fair to them," Fraley said.

Previously, the NCAA required a year of hormone therapy before a trans athlete could compete in their given sport of their chosen gender.

"I think a lot of people think of the solution as 'just give them their own category,'" Fraley said. "That's still putting them away from how they see themselves, which isn't fair to them either. I think the important thing is that we don't marginalize anyone, we find a positive solution for everyone involved."

While the issue is still prominent, other issues in athletics are more widespread, and may affect athletes at UM more.

For Fraley, there are still men's sports without a women's equivalent at the Olympics, like the decathlon. She also sees the NCAA revenue sharing and roster limits as a potential threat to women's sports.

For Gee, one of the biggest problems in the NCAA right now is harassment and abuse, specifically online.

"Sports wagering has become such an issue that student athletes are being threatened because people are on the verge of losing hundreds if not thousands of dollars because some men's basketball player didn't make a free throw," Gee said.

The NCAA addressed this during its congressional testimony.

"The harassment I speak of is much more prevalent in men's championship than in women's championships," NCAA President Baker.

Currently, no federal or state legislation has been passed to regulate college sports betting. In Montana, sports betting has been legal for five years.

A 2023-2024 pilot study showed that harassment and abuse in the NCAA is widespread. The study looked at over a million different messages on social media and found

over 5,000 that were reported to the platform for a variety of reasons.

Women's basketball bore the brunt of harassment, with over 2,500 instances of what the study called "verified abuse." The language represented forms of sexism, violence, racism, homophobia, transphobia and other forms of abuse and harassment.

As Montana's biennial legislative session continues and the new Congress continues to build, whether or not more bills aimed at student athletics will emerge is yet to be seen.

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Behind the scenes

Bringing in the green

WORDS AND PHOTOS BY **RACHEL YEAGER**
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With springtime arriving shortly, eager gardeners looking to get their hands back in the dirt gathered at Cara's Nursery for a fairy garden and terrarium workshop.

The event, run by Casey Ruple, provided attendees with an opportunity to create miniature indoor gardens, bringing a bit of greenery into their homes before the outdoor planting season begins.

"We've always loved doing classes and workshops for the community," Ruple said. "It's a fun way for us to connect with people and share our love of plants. Plus, this time of year, everyone is itching to start gardening again."

Participants had all of the materials they needed, from glass containers and soil to a variety of small plants and decorations. Many attendees appreciated the chance to create something without the hassle of having to buy the materials separately.

"I've always wanted to build a terrarium, but I never got around to it," Anna Milheim said. "Having everything provided and getting to do it with other plant lovers made it even more fun."

Gardening indoors has become a popular way to combat winter blues, offering aesthetic and mental health benefits.

"Watching something grow and taking care of plants can be such a mood booster," Ruple said. "Especially in the colder months, when there's less sunlight, having green living things around can really brighten your space and mind."

Cara's Plant Nursery has more workshops planned for the coming months, including a class on pruning and caring for fruit trees, a bonsai tree workshop where attendees can learn the art of shaping miniature trees and many more. There is another workshop for fairy gardens in the works for April.

For Missoula's plant lovers, the wait for outdoor gardening is made just a little bit easier, one terrarium at a time.

Rachel Yeager is a photographer for the Montana Kaimin and can be contacted at rachelyeager@umontana.umn.edu. For more galleries from Yeager and other photographers, visit online at montanakaimin.com.



TOP: An inside look at Jackie Peterson's terrarium that she created. Inside you'll find many tropical plants like this fittonia.

BOTTOM RIGHT: Anna Milheim and Allie Joy trim and perfect the last pieces of their terrariums.

BOTTOM LEFT: Various decorative materials, including moss, pebbles, colored gravel and shells, are laid out for a fairy garden and terrarium-building workshop at Cara's Plant Nursery.