Salem State University (and Public Higher Education in Massachusetts) is in crisis: How did we get here and what can we do about it?

This past week, President John Keenan, in line with the budget passed by the Board of Trustees, proposed a five week furlough program for all employees at SSU. A furlough program can only be implemented through negotiations with the three campus unions. This is a critical threat, not only to the quality of education that SSU can provide to its students, but also potentially to its future as a comprehensive regional university. This proposal is in direct contrast to the petition signed by some 70% of tenured SSU faculty demanding a rejection of austerity (cutbacks) and calling for collaborative decision making and efforts by trustees’ to advocate for additional state support and Federal emergency funding.

How did we get here?

The purpose of public higher education, including community colleges, the nine state universities and UMass system is to provide affordable, quality comprehensive educational opportunities primarily for Massachusetts residents and, most importantly, “must be truly accessible to the people of the Commonwealth in all their diversity.” (DHE, 2020). But in the past forty years, there has been a consistent defunding of public higher education. Students now pay some 70% of the costs of their education and carry, on average, personal debt of more than $30000 upon graduation.

Thus, increasingly starved for funding, the Salem State Board of Trustees and numerous Presidents, in a process generally characterized by opaqueness and exclusivity, made a series unwise and significant decisions to market the campus to higher income students seeking a premium residential experience, rather than what the majority of our current students have been telling us --that students desire low tuition and fees and modern educational facilities (SSU charges the highest tuition and fees in the system). To effectuate the Board’s vision, in a span of a decade they financed about 200 million dollars to build two new residence halls and upgraded campus activity facilities, i.e., a fitness center, dining halls, athletic fields, a performing arts center and parking. During this time there were few upgrades to our instructional facilities; the Berry Library Learning Commons was the last major academic building (and was paid for by the Commonwealth). Even before Covid occupancy in the residence halls was beginning to decline, and our bi-annual debt payments for these capital projects were taking a larger bite out of the campus’ operating budget. And, despite the campus’ existing high debt burden and Covid revenue losses, the Board at the Trustees at their last meeting, indicated a continued interest in the latest capital proposal (Project Bold) that would commit the campus to $17 million from reserves and/or debt. (DHE has since placed Bold on hold). When campus finances are stabilized, Project Bold should be re-evaluated and revised in full consultation with the campus community, to ensure it meets the needs of SSU’s students, instructors, and the region, and includes a higher funding commitment from the state.
Thus, years of state underfunding and greater debt financing has placed us in a financial crisis exacerbated today by COVID: reduction in both student revenues (from declining enrollment and residence hall fees) and state funding (with the state projecting up to a $6B deficit in the coming year). In response, the President has called for a 5 week furlough for all campus employees as a key solution.

*But this picture ignores the key factor* – students and employees at SSU are being called on to **bail out** the Board’s poor decisions and the state’s neglect of public higher education. In contrast to 2010 when SSU undergrads paid $589 in fees annually (per FTE) to pay off campus capital debt, as of 2019 that amount has escalated to $2960 per student (FTE). The consequence is that students today need to take on much greater personal debt to attend Salem State. The President is proposing furloughs to save an estimated 8 million dollars in FY2021, under threat of layoffs or retrenchment as an alternative. A five week furlough program amounts to a 9% -13% cut to employees’ annual salary. It should be noted that faculty compensation (which is the main source of instructional costs in the budget) has been growing at a slower rate than revenue. In the past decade, instructional and academic expenses decreased from 44% to 40% (in the total core expenses) based on IPED reporting data, and thus is not the primary source of SSU’s financial crisis.

SSU’s employees (and students through increased fees, larger class sizes and reduced course options) are told we all have to make some sacrifices in this crisis. But there is virtually no mention of using some of SSU’s cash reserves (which are about 15 million) instead of these harmful cuts. Nor, on a larger scale, are there efforts to share the sacrifice upward by pushing for progressive tax reform (after all 19 Massachusetts Billionaires saw their Net Worth Jump $17 Billion in the First Three Months of COVID-19 Pandemic – and $17B is nearly three times more than Massachusetts’ projected deficit next year). Nor has there been any systematic effort by the Board or the SSU Leadership or the Council of Presidents to publically push for increased federal or state funding to avoid the worst elements of this crisis.

**What can we do about it?**

**Step 1:** Determine our focus

- Resistance or amelioration: Do we want to reject furloughs or negotiate for the best deal?
- Solidarity: To what extent should faculty and librarians work with students and employees in other unions to ensure that they are protected in this time of furloughs and austerity budgets?

**Step 2:** Identify possible action and purpose(s): Note that actions often can serve more than one purpose.
- **Educate**: These actions are meant to raise awareness for our audiences. These actions are mainly about dissemination of information and frameworks that reinforce our arguments.

- **Agitate**: These actions are meant to display our collective strength. They show that we have a great deal of support and we are able to mobilize it. These types of actions can be low and high stakes in terms of potential repercussions as well as effort expended, and they can challenge power non-confrontationally as well as in ways that seek significant disruption.

- **Organize**: All education and agitation should also serve as a way to organize our membership as well as our allies. These steps should provide members avenues for coordination and participation that will make it easier for them to contribute in the future.

**Step 3**: Evaluate areas for action and influence at the

SSU level: among faculty, librarians, other employees, students, family, friends, management and the Board of Trustees

State level: Among all state universities, Among MSCA statewide, Among all state universities, community colleges, and UMass systems, Among MTA and AFT, With the BHE and Commissioner Santiago, With state and local politicians, With Massachusetts media

National level: With NEA or AAUP, With our congressional reps, With outlets like the Chronicle of Higher Ed