Dear President Keenan,

As Salem State University works to protect the health and safety of the Salem State community and reduce the burden on the local health care system during the COVID-19 pandemic, significant adjustments and accommodations are underway to maintain University functions. As the campus moves to remote learning, the Salem State community — faculty, staff, administration, and students — needs to approach this new learning experience hand in hand. The cosigned student organizations and student leaders are committed to making sure students are represented and student needs are fully and holistically considered. To that end, continued regular communication to the student body and individual students through multiple channels as soon as information becomes available, including whenever possible during the decision making process, is critical to helping students maintain a degree of clarity around their financial and academic futures. Additionally, we encourage the university to learn from and update its emergency preparedness protocol and pandemic protocol going forward to mitigate the costs of disruptions in future crises.

Four priorities below are meant to outline a broad range of student concerns and convey some of the challenges that students are facing. They are not exhaustive. For that reason, individual student questions and concerns communicated to the University through any channel should be both addressed on a case by case basis and also utilized to better understand broader operational decisions. We appreciate that there are significant efforts already ongoing regarding these concerns and hope this input serves to affirm and hold accountable the hard work being done by the entire community to endure this crisis.

1. **Pass/fail**: A pass/fail grading policy must be implemented. The financial and academic dislocation that students are currently experiencing is severe. Each student is facing a unique set of obstacles. Academically, students do not have access to tutoring, disability services, library resources, study rooms, health services, counseling services, groups and clubs, dorm communities, faculty office hours, laboratory space, ensemble space, studio space, practice rooms, the Math Lab, the Writing Center, the Cabot Wealth Management Lab, the Sophia Gordon Center, the Gassett Fitness Center, and the food pantry, to name only a few. Some of these services and resources can be replicated remotely, however, not all can and most only can to a very limited extent. Economic conditions add to the academic strain for students. Numerous students cannot work due to non-essential business prohibitions and families of students are struggling to make ends meet for the same reason. The abrupt change in circumstances for students is also bringing a number of less visible but equally severe hardships including mental health challenges, struggles focusing on academic work, and the feeling of social isolation. All students must be graded on a pass/fail basis for all classes by
default and be able to opt out if they would prefer a letter grade. Pass/fail courses should count toward any major, minor, general education, or other requirements. Only courses with strict, legally mandated grade thresholds, for example, certain courses requiring grades for professional licensures, or courses that would severely threaten accreditation without A through F grading should be exempted. Students should be given the option to opt out of pass/fail back into an A through F system at any time and until after final exams conclude and students know their A through F grade in each course. Some students are worried about the perception of potential employers and graduate schools associated with opting into a pass/fail system and might be discouraged from opting in despite needing the flexibility so a by-default policy makes more sense. The University should strongly consider taking any other special measures either for individual students’ extenuating circumstances or as a result of anticipated accommodations needed to support large numbers of students, similar to the pass/fail measure.

2. **Reimbursements:** On-campus students should be provided a prorated reimbursement for the remaining unused meal plans and housing fees based on the time students left campus. Commuter students with meal plans should be reimbursed for the unused cost as well. Because students are not actually using meal plans and housing for the remainder of the semester, a proportional reimbursement of funds is fair and necessary, particularly given the sudden and severe financial circumstances for many students and their families. The steps taken to make sure some students with unstable housing situations are able to stay on campus are essential and the University should continue to make those and similar accommodations during the crisis. Reimbursements should also be made to students for the costs associated with canceled and suspended academic travel where appropriate.

3. **Commencement:** A commitment has already been made to holding an in-person Commencement. We applaud this decision. When it is safe to host Commencement for the Class of 2020, in accordance with Massachusetts and CDC guidance, it should be held. Students and families must have the opportunity to celebrate their accomplishments on this momentous occasion. Many students are first generation college students and many have overcome enormous odds to reach graduation. In this spirit, the ALANA Ceremony should be held in-person as the only event that formally recognizes our students of color and celebrates their cultures and achievements. While most of the celebrations and goodbyes have already been cut short, it cannot be overstated how important Commencement is to students and our families. Even if Commencement is significantly delayed, all students should have the opportunity to walk across the stage and receive their diploma. The University should strongly consider creating a host of smaller events and activities around Commencement for students to say goodbye to friends and faculty and, to the extent possible, replicate other meaningful events such as the Honors Convocation, Silver Key and Senior Awards, Student Leader Awards, and other similar events.
4. **SSU’s future and advocacy**: The COVID-19 crisis and the resulting economic crisis are likely to impact our community into the future. With students or their families potentially unemployed during the summer and into the fall and in the event classes continue to be provided online only, some students may find it more challenging to return. Although times of high unemployment historically have been periods when many return to school to increase their social and economic skills to help themselves and the country recuperate from a crisis, others will have more difficulty attending. Many students for whom public higher education is meant to serve will be the most at risk. Backing federal and state proposals to provide immediate relief for students and for public universities should be an aggressive priority for the University. Without real advocacy to hold up students who are in crisis at this juncture—including going as far as pressing for free public higher education for the duration of the crisis—students worry that public higher education will be increasingly unable to serve the diverse group of students who need it most.

As student leaders, we commend the steps the University has taken to protect students and the greater community and nation from the spread of COVID-19. We also recognize the hard work and planning required to create new policies and make accommodations in a short period of time in order ensure Salem State can continue to operate and provide education. We ask that you engage with students and work to further adapt to the significant stress and anxiety felt by many students at this time. The administration, staff, and faculty have already taken positive steps to ease difficulty for students and recognizing that this process is only beginning, we hope student voices are heard even more clearly and loudly.

Sincerely,

The Executive Boards of the following Salem State University student organizations:

- Latin American Student Association
- Urban Arts Theater
- International Student Association
- American Marketing Association
- Community Service Initiative
Student Veteran Organization

Honors Program Advisory Council

WMWM Salem

Active Minds

Asian Student Association

SCUBA Club

Distributive Education Clubs of America

Salem State Gender and Sexuality Alliance

Sunrise Movement Salem

Public Higher Education Network of Massachusetts, Salem State Chapter

Historical Association

Student Government Association