

Dr. John Keenan
President, Salem State University
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Dear President Keenan:

The American Historical Association strongly discourages you from proceeding with the reportedly proposed termination of four tenured members in the Salem State University history department, whether now or in the foreseeable future. This drastic reduction in faculty would severely diminish the department's ability to maintain the impressive pedagogical and research standards that the department sets for itself and apparently maintains, along with its striking level of engagement with local communities.

The AHA recognizes the logical inclination to roll eyes when a scholarly association questions plans to terminate faculty in its own discipline. But we are not a labor union. Our interest lies in the promotion of historical work, historical thinking, and the influence of history in public culture. In this case we are concerned about the quality of undergraduate education and the role of Salem State historians in the community. Both stand to suffer from this short-sighted proposal.

This concern with undergraduate education in general at Salem State and history education in particular is rooted in our experience with Salem State faculty in the Association's "Tuning" initiative, and in well-documented accomplishments in this arena. Salem State was one of 120 history departments that participated in AHA Tuning, which involved thinking intentionally about the core value of the discipline to liberal education, and the utility of historical thinking to career and lifetime learning. The history department has employed these standards on behalf of its majors and the general education curriculum to serve the needs of your students. This reinvention is reflected in Salem State's data, which shows history ranked number 1 of 30 majors in the "fill rate" of its courses. The department's average class size is 21.82, higher than the 17.44 university average. It stands well above the university average in revenue compared with cost per credit hour. These data demonstrate that history, in addition to serving the mission of the university, has been profitable. Through Tuning the AHA has put work into history education at Salem State, and we are obviously unhappy to see that work diminished by a major reduction in the resources necessary to maintain the integrity of the program.

The AHA has also recognized the work of department faculty and is especially disturbed that one of your colleagues apparently on the potential chopping block includes a winner of the Association's prestigious James Harvey Robinson Prize, which recognizes "the most outstanding contribution to the teaching and learning of history in any field for public or educational purposes."

The role of historical work in the community surrounding Salem State is in many ways a special case. Salem is a site of considerable historical importance, both in terms of its local and global histories and its expansive role as a center of heritage tourism. The history faculty at Salem State have tied their areas of

expertise and research to Salem and offered knowledge and professional development to its numerous historical institutions on both an informal and formal basis. History department faculty have served as trustees and advisory board members of the Salem Maritime National Historic Site, the House of the Seven Gables, the Witch House, Historic Salem, Inc., the Salem Athenaeum, Voices Against Injustice (formerly the Salem Award), and the regional Essex National Heritage Area, and these same institutions have benefitted from a succession of interns trained and supervised by your history department. Many of these institutions are staffed by history graduates. Your recent campaign featuring the most accomplished “40 Under 40” alumni included seven history graduates, more than any other department. Your history graduates are thriving in museums, archives, public policy, law, education, and business.

From an educational and civic perspective, therefore, this reduction makes little sense. Eliminating faculty in a core liberal arts degree like history is an especially odd move at a time when civic leaders from all corners of the political landscape have lamented the level of historical knowledge of American citizens. In addition, overwhelming evidence shows employers seek the kind of skills a history degree can provide. To decimate a history department is a lose-lose proposition: it deprives students of essential learning and skills, even as it strips a university of the essential perspectives and intellectual resources so necessary to confront the present and shape the future.

We certainly understand the pressure of budgets and do not underestimate the financial necessities you confront at this particular moment. This realignment plan, however, will have serious and deleterious consequences for the practice of history and the quality of undergraduate and graduate education at Salem State, as well as the relationships between the university and surrounding communities. Rather than looking at history as a drain on university resources, you might want to look at how well-connected historians are to local culture and appreciate the likelihood that history is instead an asset to the university’s need to increase overall enrollment.

Sincerely,



James Grossman
Executive Director



Jacqueline Jones
President

cc: Dr. David Silva, Provost