MOTION TO THE SENATE: please acknowledge receipt of this letter, pass it on to the President, and add it to the Faculty Senate web archive in a timely fashion so that other faculty members can see it well in advance of December 1. Thank you.

November 7, 2023

Open Letter to President Lepre

Submitted by anonymous faculty to Beth Ragan, Faculty Senator, to share with the Faculty Senate upon receipt

Dear President Lepre,

This letter is about a sincere and urgent need to improve communication and relations between the faculty of Salisbury University and you. We recognize that this initiative represents an unusual approach but it grows from an unprecedented level of discontent. This letter is the creation of several faculty, drawing on conversations with and correspondences from numerous others. We conservatively estimate that the contents of this letter represent at least a hundred faculty who have been disturbed by news they have received of your Presidential decisions over the last year or so, whether by rumor or by verified reports. Many faculty are feeling an atmosphere of increasing uncertainty and even fearfulness of the repercussions that might follow from raising concerns over your leadership, so we have not asked anyone to sign this letter. Though we write to you anonymously, you can be sure that this letter represents the views of many more than the several faculty members who've chosen to put it together.

The crucial and primary assumption of this letter is that this effort to communicate with you will be met in good faith. The second, related assumption is that you are receptive to hearing us when we are in legitimate distress. Third, we assume that you do not understand the level of unrest among faculty, which has reached levels of near-panic since you took office. We want you to understand that we are eager to hear your full responses to the questions we raise below, and your answering these questions directly will do much to improve the current state of (mis)communicative crisis. We do not use the word "crisis" here lightly, but to emphasize the turbulence that results from our collective anxiety about the items listed below. Along with each item, we provide consequent and loaded questions, in the hope that this will build a relatively full (but by no means complete) picture of our logic-based distress and of why each item raises a red flag. We do not presume to include every issue that worries faculty, but to provide a picture of representative problems that are having cumulative impact. *Please understand that we are feeling the negative effects of these items on a daily basis.*

The following list is broken in to two sections: first, we relay the rumors that have traction among us; second, we relay the facts we know. We ask that you address every item on this list directly, even if you can disconfirm some. Further, we urge you to consider how to reach *all* faculty with your answers, through means beyond the Faculty Senate that holds meetings at

school pick-up time (thus eliminating the possibility that hundreds of faculty members can make them, let alone those whose teaching schedules clash directly with the meetings). We suggest you write an open letter to all faculty and/or hold an open town hall to which all faculty are invited, in an evening time well after regular working hours are done. We believe that many of the items and related questions we raise stem from the danger in silence or lack of communication: since we do not yet feel a collective sense of connection to you, we have been left to read into what we do not know. Bottom line: we believe that if you want our continued investment in your Presidency, you will take this letter as a call to action.

While we understand that you have only been in the Presidential role for about a year and a half, comparisons with former Presidents are inevitable. President Dudley-Eshbach was a notably forthright and direct communicator in leadership. Though she made decisions that were sometimes controversial, faculty felt able to reach and speak with her directly, especially as she was transparent about her values and the decisions she made as a direct result of these. President Chuck Wight maintained open communications with faculty through live town halls and then open Zoom meetings during the pandemic, while also routinely responding directly to emails on matters that deserved his direct attention. We wonder if you do not understand the contrast between your Presidency and theirs. Those of us with a comparatively long institutional memory respectfully ask that you rethink how you communicate with all faculty. Perhaps your methods will never be straightforwardly echoing those of your predecessors, but we hope you will find ways to communicate much more readily with us so that we can all work together better and with greater confidence in your leadership.

Please note: below, we have switched to referring to your Presidency in the third person to hopefully avoid making anything sound like a personal attack. We do not want to alienate you. We are focused on moving past the rumors and confirmed truths that worry us.

RUMORS THAT HAVE GAINED TRACTION

Sabbaticals under threat

While reports are confusing, many faculty are hearing that sabbaticals that we view as crucial to the scholarly health of our campus are under threat. We know of people being recently turned down for sabbaticals without having a clear understanding of the reasons why. After the lingering and devastating challenges that came with teaching through the COVID-19 pandemic, this blow to scholarly security is heavy indeed.

How are we to maintain our university's research profile and reputation for giving our students' competitive access to leaders in their field when we are unsure of support for this vital part of our scholarly life?

There are newly extreme and costly security measures for the President, including a plain clothes police officer, shatter-proof glass and a new security gate at the Presidential residence, and related renovations to the Carriage House for the President's benefit as a back-up safehouse.

Does the President distrust her own safety in our midst and prioritize that above the safety of all others? Does she understand that her distrust in our space breeds distrust in us? Moreover, at a time when there are some devastating cuts elsewhere, how should we feel about a manifestly significant investment in the President's own security beyond that which any other SU President has deemed necessary?

The budget for Student Affairs has been slashed.
This is one of the most significant rumors that we believe to be true, though we are not sure of the exact figures involved. At a time when record numbers of students are attending SU with documented disabilities and mental health challenges, this news is heart-breaking.
How does this square with the President's stated emphasis on students' well-being?

The new senior advisor to the President (Michelle Stokes) is signing off on new hires and no one seems sure of what that position is and how much control she has.
How can we be confident of decisions being made that serve the professional health of our faculty and our students in turn? How can we feel trust in someone we do not know and who's making major decisions that affect entire programs without our understanding of the bases upon which those decisions are being made?

The President is placing new emphasis on students' doing international programs, but without considering the financial realities that prohibit many students from participating in such programs and without financially supporting the Office of International Education to fund such growth.
How can we support this when there's no open conversation about how to make more international programs accessible to students? How can we avoid increasing the classist problems within our campus community if we force this growth that excludes so many students by default?

FACTS WE KNOW TO BE TRUE

The President now has new budgetary control over the money associated with PIN lines.
What does this mean for faculty control over hires, adjuncts, and all related decisions about where programmatic growth can happen? Does the President consider herself and/or her cabinet better qualified to make such critical decisions over-and-above those faculty and Deans who've been at SU long before she arrived? How can we be sure that PIN lines are being allocated on a fair basis in the absence of transparency?

The full display of faculty book covers that once lined a major wall in the Presidential suite has been put in storage and replaced with portraits of SU presidents. Moreover, where the

President's and Provost's offices have historically been close in proximity to each other, now they occupy very separate spaces on different floors of Holloway Hall.
Does this mean the President values showcasing the lineage of SU Presidents over-and-above the legacies of faculty members, many of whom have devoted their entire professional lives to SU? What are we to make of the quiet speed with which the faculty book covers were taken down, without evident reference to any faculty member, in contrast with the lethargy about deciding where to place them as evidence of the university's appropriate emphasis on the significant peer-reviewed accomplishments of faculty that should inspire our students along with the entire campus community? What does it say if the President does not visibly celebrate the work of her faculty in ways that others have done? Moreover, what does it mean if the President does not apparently have a close working relationship with the Provost? Does this imply that academic life is less of a priority to the President than it has been for other SU Presidents? (While these renovations and office moves may seem superficial, as a specialist in Communication we are confident that the President understands the significance of visual signifiers.)

Business-speak and the branding of SU is newly prominent. The marketing of SU has gone into overdrive, to the extent that we are receiving record numbers of PR emails and articles about good news. Moreover, the President has recently been honored as a "CEO" of the university. This raises loud alarm bells for those of us who believed that a former professor and faculty member was steering our ship.
If our email communications from the President is dominated by good news and positive PR above all else, how can we feel confident that she and her team are dealing directly with the real and challenging issues that affect our lives on a daily basis? If SU is treated as a business over-and-above being an educational establishment, how can we have meaningful conversations about the spectrum of different disciplinary perspectives and values that we offer our students? How can we talk about the life-long learning that we hope to inspire, moving beyond the necessary financial imperatives? How can we trust our President if profit takes precedence over people?

Direct communications with the President are more difficult than ever.
Emailing or trying to set up meetings with President Lepre frequently turns into an elongated process of negotiation. There is no assurance that messages from her will be read in a timely fashion, nor responded to with consistent care for directness.
While we understand that the President receives numerous messages, how can we feel anything but slighted if she is not routinely responding to significant invitations and requests for meetings from faculty that warrant serious and respectful attention? Is she interested in communication with her faculty in real ways?

There are newly advertised pools of money for initiatives and widespread concern over how that money will be allocated.
Can we be sure of being consulted or not losing money for long-standing or well-established faculty positions that Professors, Chairs and/or Deans consider crucial for academic programs?

How can we place our confidence in a President when we do not perceive her transparency and accountability on such matters?

The attention, scale, and physical space given to the Center for Equity, Justice, and Inclusion has been down-sized. *How does this square with the President's professed emphasis on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion initiatives?*

President Lepre, we ask that you respond to this letter as fully as possible no later than December 1. If we do not receive your full and direct response to all the items on our list, we will have no choice but to consider other ways of registering our discontent. This is a moment: we hope it will be the time when your Presidency took a positive turn for the benefit of all.

Sincerely,
Several faculty members who love SU and care about its future