Dear F&ES Students and Community,

The spring 2020 semester was not what any of us had planned or predicted. The COVID-19 pandemic presented numerous, unique challenges to every student. As members of the F&ES Student Affairs Committee (SAC), we saw this situation as a call to action: we represent the voices of F&ES students, and right now these students--our friends--had a lot of questions and concerns.

Your Student Life (StudLi) and Academic Affairs (AcAf) representatives wanted to publish this letter summarizing our actions and progress from this term for a few reasons. First, for current students, we seek to be transparent about how the F&ES student government operates and how it solicits feedback. Second, we seek to help current and future F&ES affiliates understand how SAC advocates for students’ interests. And third, we seek to record this odd historical moment for posterity, explaining how students, faculty, and staff collaborated to affect real change.

Below are some of the things we worked on and accomplished in the Spring 2020.

- Wrote and distributed three (3) surveys, analyzing a sizable amount of data.
  - A survey on “recent changes” at F&ES, including the adoption of a new school name and changes to the MODs curriculum. This survey coincided with an in-person students-only SAC Chat, which addressed many student questions about why these changes took place. Findings from the 101 survey responses were presented to the Master’s Planning Committee—the body that oversees the MEM curriculum—to inform future decision-making.
  - A COVID-19 response survey that garnered 156 responses. F&ES was the only Yale graduate school to conduct a survey of this nature with questions specific to healthcare concerns. As a result, these anonymized survey responses were a critical talking point when graduate student representatives engaged Yale leadership on the topic of extending student health coverage.
  - A Class of 2020 survey, to determine what the graduating class felt was a proper (virtual or in-person) way to conclude their hard work at F&ES, given the cancellation of May 2020 commencement. When a strong desire for an in-person reunion emerged from the 126 responses, SAC allocated most of its remaining spring budget to subsidize Class of 2020 travel to this future reunion.

- SAC-StudLi collaborated with the Graduate and Professional Student Senate (GPSS)—a University-wide student leadership body—to approach Yale leadership and advocate for extended Yale Health coverage for graduating students past the usual July 31 end date.
The aforementioned survey was instrumental in this advocacy.) On June 1, Yale Health announced an extension of specialty care coverage for eligible 2020 graduates through October 31, 2020.

- Co-organized a virtual Student Forum with Dean Burke shortly after the switch to online classes, with a peak attendance of 109 people. This provided students with an open, informal session to raise concerns and receive immediate updates on the hard work of Staff and Faculty during the school’s virtual transition.

- Attended four [4] Master’s Planning Committee (MPC) meetings as full members of the representative MPC decision-making body, and voted for the reinstatement of various non-ladder faculty re-appointments. SAC-AcAf also proposed various curriculum changes and modifications based on direct feedback from students directed to us by email and in-person outreach.

- Suggested content for the F&ES COVID FAQ page, providing staff with a student perspective on what questions needed answers in this uncertain time (including detailed answers re: personal leaves of absence and accessing Yale resources).

- SAC-AcAf collaborated with the Office of Academic Affairs to help write the Spring 2020 footnote that will appear on student transcripts, co-authoring language that would succinctly explain F&ES’s alternative grading options this term while curbing judgment of students who chose Credit/Fail.

- SAC members of the class of 2020 stepped up to the plate to serve as the student graduation committee. This team worked with staff to co-organize the agenda for 2020 Virtual Graduation that would help provide closure to the class. The graduation committee also worked with the class photographer to organize a Sage Hall class photo that attempted to balance students’ wants and needs for protest and formality.

- Alumni + students had a hand in changing the school acronym from SOE to YSE, a change that has implications for F&ES history years from now.

- SAC-StudLi hosted a virtual SAC trivia with 13 teams and 77 students and staff, to bring students together and foster camaraderie even when miles apart.

- SAC supported and helped kick off Wednesday Community Conversations this year, evolving from a two-person planning group to a formal five-person committee with a range of student, staff and faculty involvement. The first Community Conversation of the term - on the issue of divestment mechanics - filled Burke Auditorium to capacity. The final - a Digital Community Conversation on COVID-19 - was cited by Student Affairs as an emotional highpoint for the term.

The members of SAC are volunteers, elected by the student body to work independently of, but collaboratively with (whenever possible), the Yale F&ES staff and administration. This was definitely not what any of us expected to volunteer for. As a body, we commit to continue working hard for you as the COVID-19 situation evolves. The events of this semester have
reminded SAC of the importance of reporting what we do on a more regular basis; going forward, it is our intent to release an annual SAC report. We’re not perfect, but we promise to continue advocating on your behalf and providing students with a powerful collective voice. Thank you, student body and staff, for having faith in us.

-- Your Spring 2020 SAC representatives
  Diego Angel ’21
  Sundara Bhandaram ’20
  Jake Billhorn ’21
  Jeamme Chia ’21
  Andie Creel ’21
  Mads O’Brien ’20
  Christina Ospina ’20
  James Puerini ’21
  Pallavi Sherikar ’20
  Radhika Sundaresan ’21
  Viola Taubmann ’21