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University of Nebraska-Lincoln
Chancellor Search Advisory Committee
c/o AGB Search
1666 K Street NW
Suite 1200
Washington, DC 20006

Dear Members of the Chancellor Search Advisory Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to submit this letter of interest and my curriculum vitae for the position of Chancellor of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. As a premier Carnegie R1, flagship, land-grant university with exceptional faculty, relevant academic and professional programs; a robust research portfolio with a commitment to discovery, innovation, and translational research; the ability to strengthen economic development and community partnerships; and the desire to elevate student access and success at all levels, the University of Nebraska-Lincoln is well positioned to provide the transformative leadership necessary to shape the future of higher education across our country and around our world. My experiences at The University of Southern Mississippi (USM) and the University of Georgia (UGA) provide the foundation to lead a shared vision for the University of Nebraska-Lincoln to set a new standard among flagships.

Higher education is at a critical juncture as its foundational principles of knowledge creation, dissemination, and application for the common good are increasingly challenged by competing interests; complex governance structures; unrealistic expectations of multiple stakeholders; and uncertain resource allocation models. The pioneers who envisioned universities as places where ideas were born, debated, tested, and refined set us on a course toward the core missions of teaching, research, and public service, with an unwavering commitment to excellence; but over time, these challenges and others have eroded the ability to fulfill these missions. Many of the issues that captivate our world today – from debates about free speech and academic freedom to healthcare and environmental challenges to social and cultural movements – can best be addressed through harnessing the power of higher education.

The next Chancellor of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln must be a leader who is committed to seeing a clear vision through to completion, unapologetically exercises bold leadership, and has an unwavering conviction for stewardship of the state's land and for the advancement of individuals and communities across the state and beyond. As the next Chancellor, my vision

would be to establish the University of Nebraska-Lincoln as the premier institution of choice for diverse, high achieving students; for faculty who are at the top of their field; and for staff who have the ability to work anywhere in the country, through achieving evidence-based metrics that demonstrate alignment and excellence across the enterprise – resulting in the university rising in national rankings from #151 to the top 100, enroute to the top 50. I would also facilitate conversations regarding a desire to re-establish membership in the Association of American Universities (AAU). Facilitating improvements in the metrics required to reach these specific benchmarks will provide a cohesive framework for determining priorities across the enterprise, while unifying faculty, staff, and institutional leadership to work together in the pursuit of shared goals. Achieving these benchmarks will not only strengthen national and international institutional credibility, but also continue to advance the land-grant mission of the institution.

As the university continues to advance, it is important to remain true to the core principles of shared decision-making; operating with order, structure, and discipline; investing in employees to support and inspire their work; collaborating with communities locally and across the state to foster new partnerships and economic development; increasing enrollment, retention and graduation rates among all student populations; supporting students who enter the university at different levels of preparedness; and continuing to cultivate critical relationships with internal and external stakeholders – all of which sustains the core of a successful, impactful institution.

I have extensive experience working within the constructs of the core leadership pillars and key preferred leadership attributes listed in the position profile. Each of these components is critical to the success of the institution, but I believe that access, affordability, and creating a campus community where each person – student, faculty, staff, visitor, etc. – is respected, valued, appreciated, and has a true sense of belonging, unequivocally determine the extent to which each of us individually and collectively will be successful. People are our greatest asset.

Although my curriculum vitae details many of my most significant accomplishments, I would like to provide greater context for my approach to the following key areas: producing high-performance outcomes in a culture of shared governance; fiscal oversight; affordability, access, and student success, with an eye toward diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging; academic profile enhancement and innovation in the context of research and economic development; athletics as a key outreach tool; the external role of the university chancellor; cultivating a spirit of philanthropy; and supporting advancements in health and wellness programs.

For nearly 30 years, my approach to institutional leadership has been to surround myself with highly capable, experienced leaders in their respective field, and then enable them to execute institutional priorities across the enterprise. I am committed to practicing integrity, character, compassion, and stewardship in every aspect of the work – and I believe consistently demonstrating these values sets the tone for how each employee approaches their own work. I am a problem solver; I am not afraid to ask hard questions; and I thrive in complex, dynamic environments. During my time at the University of Georgia, I increased collaborations across the institution and the community to enhance and expand student services and co-curricular programs at the flagship as well as three extended campuses. Most recently, as President of The

University of Southern Mississippi for nearly a decade, I led the institution through a transformative rebirth despite resource constraints and significant challenges.

I am so proud that today, The University of Southern Mississippi has advanced from R2 to R1 status; met and exceeded all Board policy metrics related to financial sustainability; improved the academic quality of the student body while implementing a whole host of academic support services; and cast a bold new vision for coastal operations, grounded in the expansion of critical academic and research programs designed to harness the rapidly expanding global ocean economy through the Gulf of Mexico. As a result of our efforts, USM is now one of only 14 R1 institutions in the country that also compete at the NCAA Division I level and maintain accreditation across all four major areas of the Arts. Evidence of our progress in each area has strengthened the institutional brand and facilitated greater public and private resource development opportunities. Achieving these ambitious goals required the investment and participation of individuals at all levels of the enterprise – from front-line staff to expert faculty to executive leadership. Creating a culture of shared governance and academic freedom enabled our faculty and staff to have confidence in the university's vision and institutional priorities – which, in turn, enabled them to create effective, welcoming teaching and learning environments for all students and propelled us to realize our goals quickly and holistically.

As leaders of institutions of higher education, we have an obligation to be good stewards of both taxpayer and tuition dollars, as well as all sources of funding that come to the institution. I utilize fiscally conservative practices, with a focus on achieving measurable progress for long-term financial stability. I believe in making strategic investments with moderate, calculated risk – when proposed investments are accompanied by a plan for meaningful return. I also believe in exercising discipline when it comes to cost of attendance. I do not believe the institution should place the burden of tuition and fee increases on students and families because of its unwillingness or inability to make hard budgetary decisions. Balancing the need for new revenue with creative strategies to save money, make money, and raise money enabled us to stabilize USM's financial position and bring the institution into compliance with specific system expectations for days of cash on hand, reserves, and coverage of annual debt payments.

The quality of teaching and advising, in support of student success at all levels, forms the foundation of a successful institution. I have a strong conviction that student success is among the most participatory activities within a university community, as each individual has a role to play. The first 20 years of my career were focused primarily on advancing student growth and development, culminating in my service as the University of Georgia's senior administrator charged with developing, administering, and maintaining student services and programs for more than 34,000 students. My work in Mississippi further demonstrates how communities are made better – especially rural and underserved communities – when individuals have access to quality education and workforce training. I believe in the power of higher education to change the trajectory of an individual, of a family, and ultimately of our communities, and I have personally witnessed its impact at four distinct institutions across the southeastern United States. This transformation starts at the ground level with students from all walks of life, many of whom enter universities at different levels of readiness and preparedness. Our work at the university must be

focused on inclusion, which sometimes means meeting students and families where they are regarding scholarships and other forms of support, in a true partnership that results in degree completion.

At USM, our initial goal in support of student success was to address systemic issues related to degree completion. Within a framework of needing to meet students where they are, we developed a strong focus on intentional, intrusive advising; a partnership with faculty to implement innovative pedagogical techniques designed to reach Gen Z students; a revised financial aid packaging model along with an installment-based payment plan; and expanded student counseling services and mental health awareness education. Building each diverse class of students with a foundation of strong support systems requires an appreciation for the pressure points of college readiness, affordability, and the balance of academic rigor and support resources to propel all students forward on their path toward timely graduation. With regard to graduate education, we were able to increase graduate student stipends and enhance insurance coverage, technology support and equipment, mentorship from senior faculty, and additional resources for professional development and support. These investments better ensured the ability to attract and retain the most productive graduate students and the overall sustainability of the research enterprise.

Embracing each student as an individual and fostering a genuine sense of belonging will further distinguish the most successful universities. Having spent nearly a decade as President of an institution in Mississippi, a state whose history on diversity, equity, and inclusion is well-documented, I am proud of the holistic advancement of diversity and inclusion at USM, to include being at the forefront of changing the state of Mississippi's flag; establishing USM's first institutional Office of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion; enhancing resources and support for students of color, including Indigenous Peoples of Mississippi; supporting the addition of a Land and Labor Acknowledgement statement for course syllabi; and increasing the number of women in senior-level administrative positions.

The university of today must integrate alignment of its academic programs and services with global initiatives that enhance student learning across the spectrum of the most diverse and socially conscious generation of students that higher education has seen throughout its history. We must have a greater appreciation for the ways in which the pace of change is impacting how, when, and where students want to learn. Additionally, industry is dictating to the higher education community what it expects from new graduates and which degrees will be valued in the workplace. The evolution of the modern university has created a path that requires us to embrace change and the nuances of an unpredictable future, and at USM, we spent much of the past decade developing new academic programs – and repurposing some existing programs – to align with emerging industry trends in the region.

An important symbiotic relationship exists between academic program development to keep pace with market demands, research innovation, and economic development. The spirit of inquiry inherent in a thriving research enterprise that leverages ideas toward discovery, innovation, or commercialization for the public good enables us to achieve breakthroughs that

were once only a glimmer in our imagination. The ability to continue these pursuits from an entrepreneurial perspective to fuel economic development and bridge the gap to the consumer better ensures the university remains the leader in translating innovation to application. At USM, I was very intentional about creating and maintaining a culture of research innovation and support that led to earning an R1 designation. Realigning institutional economic development operations and outreach functions to become part of USM's research enterprise also strengthened mutual advancement between faculty work and entrepreneurial partnerships with business and industry. In the context of Nebraska's agricultural and natural resources industries and the associated impact of both on the economy, related work being conducted at the university is critical to the success and advancement of the state.

Universities and their home cities are fortunate to host athletic events that serve as economic drivers and key outreach tools for community, alumni, and donor engagement. The University of Nebraska-Lincoln's storied athletic programs not only enable the institution to advance revenue generation, innovative marketing strategies, and best practices in the overall fan experience, but also provide a platform for the institution to lead national dialogue regarding critical issues facing today's student-athletes, including the NCAA name, image, and likeness policy; changes to the transfer portal; and ongoing conversations surrounding conference realignment. It is important that the university chancellor and senior leadership remain engaged in supporting student-athletes and coaches to maintain a competitive, yet balanced environment for all teams, while remaining committed to a culture of compliance, accountability, and overall student-athlete wellness and mental health, especially as demands on their time and performance levels continue to increase on their path to competitive success and timely degree completion.

I have a deep understanding of the ways in which perceptions regarding all aspects of the institution can be shaped by the role of the university chancellor as a public figure. In many instances, those perceptions influence the university's brand and have a direct impact on the success of community partnerships, alumni engagement, and private support, as well as faculty confidence in institutional leadership. The chancellor must not only advocate for the institution across a wide range of stakeholders, but also establish expectations related to philanthropy and the involvement of alumni and donors in the advancement of shared goals. Fostering a spirit of philanthropy is influenced from the very first touchpoint an individual has with the institution, as the quality of the experience for students, employees, and visitors catalyzes the cultivation of rich, productive relationships that deepen generational connections to the institution.

The ability to raise private dollars is critical to long-term institutional success. Over the past decade, we completed a great deal of work to re-establish a culture of philanthropy at USM by inspiring investments in the university while instilling confidence in the institution's commitment to maintaining the integrity of gift implementation. During my tenure, USM reached significant fundraising milestones, to include publicly launching the largest organized, comprehensive campaign in institutional history with 73% of the campaign goal raised during the silent phase; achieving the largest single-year fundraising total in the USM Foundation's history; constructing the first building that was fully privately funded through the Foundation; and increasing endowment values by 98%. Previously at the University of Georgia, I expanded Student Affairs

fundraising infrastructure and staff support to generate funding for critical student support initiatives, including the lead gift for an alcohol awareness and education center.

I am committed to elevating high-quality health and wellness, including mental health. I believe residents of the state of Nebraska are counting on the university to lead healthcare innovations that solve issues that are negatively impacting their health. If we do not have good health, nothing else matters, and I have a strong conviction for pushing the envelope on health-related programs and initiatives. During my time in Athens, Georgia, I was a member of the Board of Directors for St. Mary's Health Care System, which included a 196-bed hospital, 134-unit senior community, 34-bed Alzheimer's facility, 12-bed hospice house, home care agency, medical group, and ambulatory care outpatient center. In my role as Vice President for Student Affairs at the University of Georgia, I managed oversight of a robust on-campus health center with more than 20 healthcare providers, which was continually accredited by The Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations, as well as a dedicated student counseling services unit that has grown to include more than 20 licensed providers. As President of The University of Southern Mississippi, I supported innovations in healthcare through partnerships developed by faculty as well as the expansion of student counseling services and mental health awareness education. I look forward to working with faculty and academic leadership at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln to improve health and wellness for families and communities wherever the needs exist, especially in underserved areas.

My experience and skillset align with the position announcement for the University of Nebraska-Lincoln as summarized in this letter and detailed throughout my curriculum vitae. I have the proven ability to bring together multiple internal and external stakeholders in the pursuit of shared goals, especially as it relates to engaging business and community leaders as well as elected officials at local, state, and federal levels. In order to be successful in the ever-evolving global landscape of higher education, we must create and maintain a culture of open, consistent communication, which fosters trust and respect among all institutional stakeholders. My greatest strengths include connecting with people, facilitating the free expression of diverse viewpoints, and building honest, transparent relationships, so that even when consensus cannot be achieved, each voice has been heard and considered to the extent possible.

The University of Nebraska-Lincoln has much to celebrate. I also recognize that there is tremendous opportunity to build on the institution's long tradition of excellence. I am excited about the opportunity to apply the work ethic from which I have approached enhancing the core missions of teaching, research, and service over the past decade to the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Thank you in advance for your review and consideration.

Sincerely,



Rodney D. Bennett