

Dr. Zachary Smith
Witt/Kieffer Executive Search

Dear Dr. Smith,

Thank you for talking with me regarding the President opportunity at the University of South Dakota. I appreciate being notified of my nomination and encouragement to consider this position. Please consider this letter as a statement of my interest in the position and as a means to provide the search committee with an impression of my experiences as an academic leader with a strong record of executive leadership. I believe my 30 years of teaching, research, and administrative experiences at six universities have prepared me well for this position.

It has been my privilege to serve in academic leadership capacities in two predominantly undergraduate institutions, two comprehensive institutions and two research institutions. Currently, I have the fortune to serve as Provost and Sr. Vice President for Academic Affairs at Georgia College & State University (GCSU), Georgia's designated public liberal arts institution. GCSU is located on a historic campus that has been transformed into a selective liberal arts university for the state of Georgia and is a Carnegie Classification – Community Engagement institution.

In my role as Provost and Sr. Vice President for Academic Affairs at GCSU (Georgia College), I have the opportunity to collaborate and lead highly engaged faculty, supportive staff, and alumni in a welcoming community to provide an innovative curricular and co-curricular student environment. An environment that prepares students for a workplace that is more complex and at times more uncertain than in the past, and develops the next generation of innovative, entrepreneurial, caring, and thoughtful leaders regardless of the profession they chose. To achieve this I have built a team of highly effective, diverse leaders by attracting outstanding leadership (hiring several Assistant Vice Presidents, academic deans, and other key academic leaders) while empowering incumbent senior leadership in the advancement of the university's goals.

In May 2017, I was appointed by the University System of Georgia (USG) Chancellor to serve as interim President of Valdosta State University (VSU) while retaining affiliation with Georgia College until a new President was appointed. In my role as interim President at VSU I had the distinct honor and pleasure to learn a great deal about the faculty, staff, students, and alumni as well as the community and region in a short period of time. During my six months I led the preparation of the FY18 budget and narrative for the University System of Georgia office, began focusing on the university's debt, began addressing how to balance face-to-face student population with online students, and met with many local and regional leaders including legislators. I focused my energies on student success as well as continuing the positive trajectory of increasing enrollment of first time in college (FTIC) students and graduating FTIC and transfer students in a timely manner. I worked effectively with the University System of Georgia's Chancellor and the system office, the Board of Regents, local leaders, as well as the Faculty Senate, Staff Council, VSU Alumni Association and VSU Foundation Board.

After reviewing the university profile and the impressive resources provided for the University, it is clear to me that the University of South Dakota holds a key role as the state's flagship institution, as well as the lead institution for University Center in Sioux Falls. The University has the opportunity, assets, and momentum to be the best small, public flagship university in the nation built upon a liberal arts foundation. I would like to offer

some glimpses into my leadership experiences and insight on how my skills align with the requirements for the next President of the University of South Dakota.

Organizational Capacity/Management: My leadership roles and responsibilities have progressed through the years from graduate coordinator to interim President. Each providing me the opportunity to practice collaboratively shared governance in different settings and to actively engage in an open and transparent leadership style that makes for successful decision making. During my academic career, students and their success have always been central to my work. My faculty work provided the foundation for my commitment to scholarship, learning, and discovery among faculty and students alike that is reflected in my progressively responsible leadership roles.

As Provost at GCSU, I led a university-wide program prioritization effort across all units, not just academic affairs. Through this endeavor, in conjunction with other efforts, close to \$1M in funds was redirected in the first year to areas that better align with our mission and vision. Making these impactful budget and prioritization decisions can be difficult, but are more readily accepted and adopted when guided by a collaborative and transparent university-wide initiative that is inclusive of all stakeholders. During the last two years, I oversaw the development and now implementation of Georgia College's strategic plan for 2016-2021. I would look forward to working with faculty, staff, students, alumni and community members to continue bringing to life University of South Dakota's 2013-2020 strategic plan

With respect to fiscal affairs and personnel matters, I have significant executive leadership where I was solely accountable for all budget and personnel matters. Budget decisions need to be tied to the university's mission, strategic plan and priorities. As President, it would be my responsibility to ensure the effective utilization of resources to meet the university's goals and attain its vision.

During my tenure at the University of Florida the public phase of the \$1.5B *Florida Tomorrow* capital campaign was underway. As part of the capital campaign efforts I participated in Foundation sponsored trainings on exploring principal gifts, women's philanthropy, and donor development. In my role as Associate Dean (and interim Dean), I assisted the Dean and the College's Development Officer with development efforts, including but not limited to working with potential donors and assisting with crafting donor agreements. As a result, the college doubled its private gifts, had a significant increase in alumni giving, and exceeded its goal for the capital campaign. During my short time at VSU, I worked closely with the Vice President for Advancement in meeting with current and potential donors to continue efforts in their comprehensive campaign that was underway. I found this work exciting and would look forward to vigorously working with the University of South Dakota in successfully closing the current campaign and continuing its philanthropic successes.

In my various administrative responsibilities, I have provided academic leadership at the department, college and university levels. In these roles I have practiced an open, participatory, and collegial style of leadership, and am committed to academic freedom and democratic decision making. I am a firm believer that successful leaders surround themselves by the most qualified people and that good leaders seek out and mentor such people. I subscribe to Jim Collins' assertion that organizations need the "right people on the bus." And as such it is important to have an administrative team that shares the values of professional integrity, honesty, and ethics. I have high expectations for myself as well as for those I work with. I strongly believe all constituents (i.e., students, faculty, staff, alumni, administrators) should be fairly treated and that communication is critical in developing and sustaining a productive work environment. I am comfortable in delegating responsibilities and empowering people to make decisions, and when possible, involving those closest to the problem in the decision-making process. I sincerely believe successful leaders must make critical or sometimes unpopular decisions, and at the same time be able to recognize and acknowledge when they are wrong and make it right. And in all things

personal and professional, I am a firm believer in the wisdom of humility and having a positive attitude, all wrapped with a sense of humor.

Community Engagement: The President must be able to inspire by effectively articulating the university's vision and mission while promoting its achievements. In essence, the President has to be the "champion" to a variety of audiences that need to hear the university's story; however, *how* the story is communicated will be different depending on the audience. To a local group the story is the community outreach being conducted and how it impacts their daily lives. To alumni the message may be what is happening back at the university in their college/program, sharing what students today are doing, and encouraging alumni to stay engaged and support the university. To the Board of Regents the story may be how our academic and professional programs are integral to the region, state and beyond. The President must be cognizant of the audience and their needs by not only being articulate in sharing the university's vision and mission, and celebrating accomplishments, but also persuasive, passionate, and inspirational. Regardless of the type of audience, each interaction presents itself as a unique opportunity to advance the university's profile and reputation.

As President I would leverage and build upon the efforts made by President Abbott to ensure that University of South Dakota continues to be a strong economic driver in the region. In today's higher education landscape economic impact with one's community and region is critical. I would make sure the USD is at the table, and when appropriate, taking the lead to ensure a strong, vibrant Vermillion with an educated workforce to meet the demands of employers. As an example, recently I was able to negotiate with our local hospital, Navicent Health Baldwin, to house our graduate nursing program. This was a win-win for both the hospital and GCSU.

Working with the appropriate legislative bodies to increase resources to the University will be important. Being able to articulate the value of University of South Dakota to the local community, state and region will be imperative. While interim President at VSU I met regularly with local leaders including local legislators to talk about the value of higher education and VSU's value add to the region. I realize this is a critical role for the President.

Diversity & Inclusion - Commitment to Students/Student Success: As a result of my faculty experience at six institutions, I not only recognize but also value the importance of strong, viable and active undergraduate, graduate and professional programs. As a graduate coordinator (Western Illinois University) and an interim Graduate Dean (University of South Florida), I was an advocate for graduate student success. Under my leadership at USF, we started the Graduate & Professional Student Council (GPSC). From my role at University of Florida as Associate Dean and now as Provost, I have had direct influence on student success, which is one of my core values that shapes my decision making. In my role as Provost, I directed the restructure of our Center for Student Success which allows the professional academic advising staff to focus on retention, progression and graduation among our undergraduate students, and consequently enables faculty to focus on mentoring students for their careers and/or graduate/professional school. This student-first approach to all we do has increased our retention as well as four year graduation rates (increased by 25% in 3 years). Both undergraduate and graduate students rely on faculty; faculty who are committed to taking the extra steps to support them. It is critical in higher education today to have faculty who value and see student support (often times co-curricular activities outside the classroom) as critical to a student's success.

Another contributing factor for student success is maintaining affordability. Georgia College recently unveiled *Think 30*. Similar to the *Finish in Four* program recently launched at USD. This initiative will focus on cost containment and completing degrees in four years by encouraging 30 credit hours per year to fulfill degree requirements for a four year degree. This program will effectively contribute to student success as it becomes integrated into advising and mentoring, as well as enrollment management recruitment and retention efforts.

With respect to enrollment management, this unit reports directly to me at Georgia College. I have extensive experience in working to recruit and retain both first-year as well as transfer students. The latter being a group that will be key, in my opinion, for institutions given community college growth. Creating clear pathways for transfer students is imperative in being successful, as many may be non-traditional students and/or first generation. A successful enrollment management operation is resource intensive in terms of both technology and personnel, utilizing sophisticated social media strategies as well as recruiters working on the ground with high school guidance counselors, students, and family members to encourage them to make the campus visit. Today's enrollment management is fast-paced, forward facing, and requires adequate resources to begin recruiting students as early as middle grades.

Academic Excellence & Innovation: Recently implemented within Academic Affairs at Georgia College, *GC Journeys* is an essential and immersive set of experiences that begins from the very first year of study and continues through graduation. This program requires students to participate in five transformative experiences that may include study abroad, or a community-based learning engagement, or one of our many leadership programs. Other options might include undergraduate research or completion of a major creative endeavor. In addition to these experiences, our students will be more career ready as our career services teach students how to incorporate a wide range of experiences and lessons learned. *GC Journeys* is preparing students to enter the workforce with the necessary skills needed for success -- independent thinking, finding creative solutions to complex problems, embracing diversity, ethical reasoning, and strong communication skills.

To be successful, University of South Dakota will need to “think out of the box” and use best practices to successfully increase completions, enhance undergraduate degree efficiency, build new revenue streams, maintain and increase highly ranked programs, and work toward meeting critical workforce needs. Being intentional and strategic, I believe this is doable with the hard work of institutional leaders, faculty and staff.

My administrative curriculum vitae provides details of my academic career including publications, grants, faculty governance involvement, professional activities, and university and professional organization honors and awards received.

My previous administrative and faculty roles at several universities along with the accompanying responsibilities and experiences, have provided me with many challenges and opportunities. Each of these positions afforded me a unique opportunity to broaden my perspective regarding higher education administration, which I believe provides me with the necessary skills needed to be the next President of the University of South Dakota.

Thank you in advance for considering my application. I enthusiastically look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Kelli R. Brown". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Kelli R. Brown, Ph.D.