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Vice President Operations and Advancement | Colorado State University Pueblo

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Dear Search Committee:

Please accept this letter, curriculum vitae, and references as my application for the presidency at Fitchburg State University. My diverse experience, spanning 20 years, encompassing roles as a faculty member to vice president, at institutions dedicated to inclusivity, access, and affordability, has uniquely prepared me for the role of President at Fitchburg State. While serving as Chief Strategy Officer, Special Advisor to the President, Executive Director of the inaugural Center for Teaching and Learning, and Associate Professor of English and World Languages at Colorado State University Pueblo (CSU Pueblo), I collaborated with various stakeholders, managed large budgets, led system-wide strategic planning, and created innovative programming for students, faculty, staff, and administrators. In my current position as Vice President of Operations and Advancement, I oversee the university's largest division and budgets, I have honed my financial and entrepreneurial acumen, enhanced my creativity, and developed a keen sense of the ways Fitchburg State must prepare today's students for tomorrow's workforce.

The search committee has developed a robust leadership agenda for the next President, seeking candidates who can articulate a compelling vision for Fitchburg State's future with a proven ability to respect and embrace the distinguished history and traditions of a former liberal arts and teacher-training college and its evolution to a comprehensive, regional university; communicate clearly and carefully about new directions for the university with the experience to swiftly and effectively move the campus to implementation; leverage existing innovative trends at Fitchburg in new program development and hands-on learning, while driving international student recruitment, degree completion programs, and adult/mid-career graduate student recruitment; and finally, your next president must respect the commitment of the faculty and staff to student success – with enthusiasm, empathy, approachability, and transparency in order to rally constituents, engage external partners, advance shared goals and be the leader in lauding the impact Fitchburg has made locally, regionally, and across Massachusetts. In this letter, I'll situate my executive leadership experience, as it relates to the five opportunities and challenges identified as the presidential agenda. Finally, I will share the ways in which my own personal journey has prepared me to lead Fitchburg State in what has become an unprecedented moment in the history of higher education at our nation's most critical institutions – regional comprehensives.

Executive Summary

My experiences as a faculty member and my knowledge of academic programming, teaching and learning, and recruiting strategies contribute to a large and complex portfolio, one that positions me to understand all facets of Fitchburg State's infrastructure and the instructional mission it exists to serve. My primary responsibilities include the oversight and accountability for facilities management, a 256-acre physical plant, 14 state buildings, 11 auxiliary buildings; a 24-acre solar farm; all maintenance and

building access, capital construction; parking and campus safety; campus-wide auxiliary services; events and catering, 6 dining locations, and dozens of external partnerships. I lead university marketing, communication, and community relations; the Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) initiatives grants and programming, including the creation of more than 40 articulation agreements with regional community colleges; I have oversight of the university's strategic planning team; I am a successful fundraiser who established the first university advancement team, and together we advance the university's vision and mission via a pipeline of alumni, donors, and friends of the university throughout the state of Colorado. All told, my portfolio includes the leadership of more than 140 people, supervision of 11 direct reports, and the management of complex state, auxiliary, grant, and construction budgets that total more than \$100 million.

Continue to Explore and Expand New Offerings

I have built a career centered on an indelible belief in the importance of serving students. For more than twenty years, my professional focus – as a researcher, as a professor, as a higher ed leader – has been centered on students: educating, understanding the ways academic degrees work for students, and creating new approaches to putting ideals of inclusivity into *practice for everyone*. As a student at Texas Woman's University (TWU), the largest university primarily for women in the United States – where I taught from 2004-2008 – I embraced the campus's core value as my own: "Educate a woman, empower the world." Even now, as a vice president of operations and advancement, as a leader, as an educator, and as a proud product of a regional comprehensive and coeducational public college – I am guided by a principle of service to all.

As an example of the ways in which service has resulted in academic enhancements, during my time as Chief Strategy Officer at CSU Pueblo. Over the course of two years, I created a "works" program, which established more than 50 new internship opportunities for student placement, and I raised funds from private donors who currently fund more than \$400,000 toward formerly unfunded (yet academically mandated) Nursing clinicals and Teacher Education student teaching hours. My work in the HSI/MSI programs and advancement fund more than \$1 million more toward graduate student scholarships, and the facilities and auxiliary services teams continue to transform an architecturally Brutalist campus to one with vibrant outdoor spaces.

In my current role, I have continued to serve the larger academic mission in myriad ways with a specific emphasis on diversifying revenues and enhancing campus spaces. I have testified before the state's Joint Budget Committee and Capital Development Committee to share the academic needs of the students and faculty; I successfully lobbied for two major renovations to critically outdated campus buildings. The first, the Center for Integrated Health and Human Inquiry, created space for the Nursing program, health care and counseling centers, and the simulation lab, and went on to house the newest graduate program offering – the Doctorate of Nursing Practice – a program I helped vet years before in my role as the chair of the university's curriculum and academic programming board and member of the executive committee of Faculty Senate. The second major renovation, the Technology building, will house Teacher Education and Engineering programs, but it will also be home to the Southern Colorado Institute of Transportation Technology ([SCITT](#)), a legislatively established institute that grew from the 10-year strategic plan, Vision2028, for which I was an architect. Just this month, my teams and I led cross-functional system groups that secured a \$7.8M Department of Education Postsecondary Student Success Grant (PSSG),

which will create streamlined advising and customizable tools for student success across the CSU System's three distinctly different system campuses.

Since 1894, Fitchburg State has grown in ways that ensured it would establish itself as an adaptable and resilient institution with a meaningful mission and deep understanding of students' needs; the ways we will be seen over the *next* decade will be determined by our innovative spirit and readiness to meet the future of work *and* learning. Growth in graduate programming, dual degree options, and the commitment to high-impact practices, internships, and undergrad research have positioned the campus to both thrive *and* lead the region at a time when manufacturing and intellectual industries are changing faster than ever before. Seeking new funding opportunities and revenue streams, while at the same time aligning programs with regional needs, is the work that is ahead.

When people comment about how unusual it is to see a former professor running capital construction or negotiating with multi-million dollar donors, I remind them that our buildings – like Fitchburg's Vision or Core Values – do not stand alone; these buildings, like all our work in higher education, form an *ecosystem*. My time in the classroom and my commitment to academic excellence, student success, and recruiting and supporting diverse students prepared me to imagine and implement creative opportunities that serve real people. This is the work I will do as your next President of Fitchburg State.

Serve Diverse Student Populations and Align Growth to Program Offerings

As a leader at a state university and part of a large higher education system, I know firsthand the crucial role that fostering diversity and empowering students to excel in their academic pursuits and future careers can play. In fact, my team now includes, for the first time in campus history, a Director of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) – funded, via Title V Hispanic Serving Institution initiatives programs, as the campus works to ensure that DEI is embedded strategically in academic affairs, human resources, and student life. My dedication to promoting diversity extends beyond categories, aligning seamlessly with Fitchburg State's vision of creating a welcoming and enriching community.

Indeed, Fitchburg State's future may also depend on how the campus embraces and serves a changing student demographic and our response to the ever-increasing pressures to recruit and retain a diverse employee pool. Over the last decade, I have authored more than \$10 million in federal HSI grants, run programs that changed our university's bottom line, and I have created pathways that led to professional and personal successes for all learners, including our employees. During my tenure as Vice President of Operations and Advancement, CSU Pueblo expanded the employee education assistance program and developed on-campus mental health and wellness benefits (recreation center no-cost memberships, 50% off at the campus café, and much more). As an additional example of the ways my commitment to campus served the people of CSU Pueblo, during the pandemic, I led all on-site campus operations; for more than two years, I provided daily reports to our state and campus community. These complex reports included statewide and local meeting minutes, CDPHE statistics, and national trend data. We stood up a testing site, kept campus open when state mandates allowed, and as a result, we did not furlough a single employee or make unnecessary budget cuts. In 2022, our work was recognized as one of the nation's most innovative and excellent by the American Association of State Colleges and Universities.

Collaboratively Envision Future Opportunities and Strategies

I've already detailed some of the ways I understand, advocate for, and lead infrastructure requests and

renovations in service to the academic mission and student success, but as your board and administrators know, much of the work to bolster and sustain a strong foundation for a university campus happens behind the scenes and requires ongoing collaboration, creativity, and a constant ask for stakeholder buy-in – all messy and time-consuming work. I oversee a campus of more than 250 acres, including adjacent athletic facilities, residence halls, apartments, a solar farm, and more than 1.2 million gross square feet in the academic corridor. I understand the time and care a campus the size of Fitchburg State requires; I know how to rally support, how to identify new partners, and, most importantly, how to support the teams who do so much of the unseen labor.

Certainly, no campus thrives without an identified true north. Fitchburg State’s work during the 2023-2024 academic year to complete an inclusive and transparent review of the campus mission, vision and core values flags the importance the campus sees in validating its identity. Reestablishing, reimaging, or simply revalidating the ways Fitchburg State will differentiate itself in a crowded higher education marketplace must be central to the work of the next president. From recruitment to retention, how the campus – and the president – interact with students and engage with a community of alums, donors, and partners must be part of the future Fitchburg State will solidify for itself in the Massachusetts Commonwealth. How will we align programming and recruitment efforts with donor development with *future* student needs and long-term campus planning? What does future growth look like at Fitchburg State, and how do we know? What data can we collect, what stories and tangible plans can we link, further establishing our ecosystem of academics, facilities, community, and donors?

Over the last two years, as we emerged from a pre-post-pandemic world, I led a comprehensive master planning process at CSU Pueblo. The goal was to link academic pragmatism with an aspirational vision and provable, data-driven needs. The process took hundreds of hours and involved community members, board members, system staff, campus leadership, students, families, and all employees. After 20 months of research, data assessment, and big dreaming, we developed “[Forward Together](#).” This ambitious plan merges a 10-year strategic plan, a \$100 million comprehensive campaign, and a bold academic program plan. It received unanimous support from our Board of Governors in December 2023.

I understand the impact of Fitchburg State’s 17 NCAA DIII sports on overall enrollment, student success, and campus-community life. Over the past seven years, I’ve worked alongside the vice president for athletics, Dr. Paul Plinske, to support 20 NCAA Division II athletics programs – including fundraising for a critical \$1.2M investment for a new track. I served as the campus NCAA governmental liaison, representing the voices of the campus and the more than 670 student-athletes who chose Pueblo to call home; I supported and collaborated with 30 coaches and all student-athletes during the years of the pandemic, as the university lead for all COVID response and campus planning. I have worked hand-in-hand with our budget office, president, and athletic director during tough times when eliminating a sport was determined the best path for campus sustainability and our students’ success and when adding sports could be a driver for enrollment and campus life.

A sustainable campus serves students and the state, but more to the point, smart decisions around energy demand and supply can positively impact a campus’s financial future. In 2021, CSU Pueblo became the first higher education institution in Colorado to reach “net zero,” which was the result of an energy performance contract and a power purchase agreement my teams and I negotiated between Black Hills Energy, Capital Dynamics, and Johnson Controls, Inc. (JCI). Today, I serve on JCI’s Higher Education

Advisory Board, a national appointment to a board dedicated to optimizing energy use at college campuses across the US. I likewise serve on the CSU System information technology (IT) Advisory Board, which was responsible for a strategic alignment of IT systems between CSU Fort Collins, the Land Grant institution, and CSU Pueblo in 2023; as a member of this cross-functional group, I oversee IT projects, including funding and prioritization.

Engage External Partners in Advancing Shared Goals

Fitchburg State has a long and distinctive history, yet continued creativity around energy performance, nuanced academic programming, expanded recruitment efforts for adult/mid-career graduate students and international students, new revenue-generating partnerships, and intentional fundraising will be especially important in the decade ahead to ensure the campus ecosystem stays balanced. I've done this work at my current institution, but most notable has been the creation of CSU Pueblo's [24-acre solar farm](#). This project reduced campus energy costs and provided refunds and rebates that were out of reach for higher ed just a decade ago. It also meant working closely with surrounding landowners to create consensus around this complex, multi-year project. Better yet, it positioned CSU Pueblo for national accolades and involved partnerships with state offices, including the state's energy office. Streamlining services with partner campuses, and our system has led to new savings, all in service to the public system campuses that are, like Fitchburg State, increasingly tuition-dependent.

Further proof of the ways in which a high-functioning campus works as an ecosystem, is the CSU Pueblo Canvas Credit Union (CCU) partnership I stewarded. Solidified in 2022, this partnership began with the creation of the Canvas Credit Union "Journey" scholarship, an initial 3-year, \$500,000 investment designed to fund study abroad opportunities for first-generation students. As a former faculty member, I led an interdisciplinary study abroad program for eight years, so I know, firsthand, the impact such a gift can have on a student's academic pursuits. However, the long-term plan was something bigger: the establishment of a full-service credit union inside the student center – a win for a campus working to bridge a literal town/gown divide. Although CSU Pueblo's marketing budget is relatively small, partnering with Canvas Credit Union gives us a presence and reach to this member-owned, billion-dollar organization's demographic and target audiences. The partnership motto, "[Making the Pack Stronger](#)," is evident in the variety of on-campus services, CCU's tangible investment in students, and new opportunities to support the financial futures of students, alumni, and employees

The CSU Pueblo and CCU partnership required collaboration across the University and the broader community, including close coordination with the City of Pueblo and the Colorado Office of the State Architect. It involved inclusive engagement with a diverse range of stakeholders, each holding differing and passionate opinions about the project. In the end, just this past fall, CSU Pueblo opened a full-service financial facility that meets the needs of our students, employees, and community. Alumni discounts, matching college savings funds, guaranteed mortgage rates, and more have enhanced life at CSU Pueblo – and will continue to do so for years to come. And, through this complex project, I gained a deeper appreciation for the vital role of financial services in the university experience, and I am enthusiastic about the opportunity to contribute to the continuous improvement of services and support for our students in similar ways at Fitchburg State.

Enhance the Fitchburg State Community

Fitchburg State is dedicated to creating graduates who are engaged citizens ready to contribute to their

families, communities, workplaces, and our world. While this is certainly a positive distinction for a campus situated in a crowded regional higher education marketplace, I believe that the charge for the next president of Fitchburg State must be to elevate the campus profile to a national audience. None of this can be driven by a single person, but an ecosystem of people and places, filled with students, employees, community members, high-profile partners, and donors – across all 50 states and worldwide – could.

I have led the charge to enhance the profile and visibility of CSU Pueblo through a multifaceted approach across my diverse operational and advancement team. This work includes strategic initiatives to support enrollment and fundraising goals by implementing targeted marketing campaigns and establishing new outreach efforts through my leadership of Marketing, Communications, and Community Affairs. Strategic investments in the university's first "sales-focused" events team not only resulted in a 50% increase in catering and external rental revenues, but by attracting high-profile state and national events to campus, we enhanced the university's reputation in the local community and beyond. Additionally, through advancement efforts, I have fostered greater visibility through collaborations with national publications, participation in prominent events, and the cultivation of expanded alumni interactions.

Other innovations included establishing the campus's first downtown presence in Pueblo, [Watertower Place](#). Efforts to engage the Pueblo community began years before Watertower Place. This work culminated in a collaborative partnership just this past fall – one I negotiated between Pueblo Urban Renewal Authority, the Chamber of Commerce, and the university – to take on the management of the community's "Visit Pueblo" downtown welcome center. Since August, the visitor's center, a gateway to southern Colorado and north on the I-25 corridor, is now branded with CSU Pueblo logos and fully staffed by well-trained Admissions counselors and student workers who can recruit for CSU Pueblo *and* sing the praises of this vibrant community.

The work I've done to enhance CSU Pueblo's national profile is reflected in the numerous articles featured in national publications, including [International Business Times](#), [Forbes](#), [Al Dia](#), [USA Today](#). These are just some of the outcomes and accolades I will bring to the presidency of Fitchburg State.

My Journey to Fitchburg State

My personal and professional trajectory has allowed me to live a life of steadfastness and constancy. As your next president, I would add my work ethic, a sense of excitement, my belief in people, and a passion for creating vibrant learning environments to Fitchburg State. Indeed, my own personal story has prepared me for this step.

I grew up in East Texas, in a community on the Arkansas border whose lifeblood was the Red River Army Depot. Political and economic realities of the 1980s changed rural America; the depot, its slogan "Building it as if our lives depend on it...theirs do!" no longer offered a promise of lifetime employment. By the time I left for college in 1990, my hometown was grappling with unemployment and a radical shift away from a manufacturing future. Like so many others, my parents lived paycheck to paycheck, yet they somehow found a way to send me – and later my brothers – to college, in a time without Google, online FAFSAs, or live chat. I entered college the first time, as a "true" freshman, having never set foot on that "far-away" private, liberal arts campus, armed only with my hometown's 'can-do' spirit. It would take another decade and two other college campuses before I completed my first degree; both my younger

brothers would finish before me. At the final stage of my academic journey, it was a regional comprehensive campus that set me on a meaningful personal and professional path.

My own story – from a private 4-year, home to a community college, then finally, to a regional comprehensive – is not unusual, even today. My experiences as a first-generation college student shaped who I became as a person and, later, as a professional. By the time I began a graduate degree, I no longer wondered if I could do it or how I'd finish. People who believed in me, who spent their lifetimes dedicated to the mission of a comprehensive, regionally-located education, prepared me to be focused, agile, and innovative. In 2008, when I was offered a faculty position at CSU Pueblo, a regional comprehensive Hispanic Serving Institution with a mission to serve people and their communities, I was ready. Today, I'm ready for Fitchburg State.

If you have questions or would like additional information, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Respectfully,

Donna Souder Hodge, Ph.D.