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Fitchburg State University
Presidential Search
C/O WittKieffer

Dear Members of the Search Committee,

It is an honor to apply for the position of President of Fitchburg State University (FSU). As this letter will demonstrate, I possess the qualifications, experience, and personal attributes necessary to continue the positive trajectory already in motion at the institution. Reading my curriculum vitae, you will find that over the course of my career I have been fortunate to hold leadership positions at several universities and have an established record of success. I currently serve as Executive Vice President and Provost at Bridgewater State University (BSU), the largest of the state universities in Massachusetts. While my focus as provost has been to advance academic excellence and student success, I also have, by virtue of my extensive executive responsibilities, acquired wide-ranging experience across all areas of the institution.

FSU and BSU share a common DNA: both were founded as Normal Schools dedicated to the preparation of teachers; both have developed into vibrant regional universities advancing the liberal arts and professional academic programs; and both share a deep commitment to serving the public good through affordable, high-quality education, a commitment that endures and evolves even during challenging times. In an era when higher education is under threat from enrollment declines, affordability and student debt concerns, mergers and closures, ambivalence over the very value of a college degree, and the proliferation of alternatives to college, it is imperative that we keep students – and the doors that higher education can open for them – at the very center of all that we do. This guiding principle will help ensure that FSU, BSU, and all similarly situated public higher educational institutions successfully navigate this complex environment and thrive in the future.

My Personal Connection to this Opportunity

In my review of the *Presidential Profile* and other sources of information, I found myself inspired by the mission, vision, and core values of FSU, and excited at the prospect of working with the entire university and surrounding communities to transform lives and contribute to the prosperity of Fitchburg, North Central Massachusetts, and beyond. As a first-generation college student and immigrant raised by a single mother, I am a product of the powerful ability of public higher education to transform lives. It took me five years to obtain my undergraduate degree. Throughout that time, I worked night shifts at a 7-Eleven, parked cars, worked in a department store as a loss prevention officer, doing what I could to pay for my education and help at home. I

never really imagined that I would go to graduate school, let alone become a professor. And when I became a professor, at no point did I ever imagine that I would apply to become the president of a university like FSU. I submit this application with deep humility and the knowledge that I would not be in this position without the support of mentors, colleagues, and loved ones. Public higher education positively impacted my social mobility and shaped my entire life. I am deeply passionate about collaborating with everyone at Fitchburg State University to extend that same opportunity to others.

A Leadership Agenda

In what follows, I will respond to the *Profile* and share some preliminary thoughts on how I would approach the leadership agenda for the university. I have been fortunate to serve in close partnership with the president of BSU, setting our own institutional agenda to ensure our collective aspirations are realized. Those experiences and others I have gained throughout my 27-year career have shaped my relational and strategic approach to leadership in higher education.

(i) An Education that Blends the Liberal Arts and Professional Programs

British sociologist David Downes once described criminology as a rendezvous discipline with origins in “law, philosophy, penal and legal reform, psychiatry, criminal anthropology, sociology, political economy, and administration” (British Society of Criminology). As an undergraduate student, I was fortunate to be exposed to this expansive understanding of crime and justice, one grounded in the liberal arts and sciences and concerned with the values embedded within the various professions of the criminal justice system. Over time, I have come to fully appreciate how that comprehensive education shaped both my career and my outlook on life. As a teacher-scholar positioned at the nexus between political science and sociology, I examined the politics of crime control, the use of state power to marginalize and criminalize populations defined as threats to the social order, and the history of criminological thought. A “blended” education helps its graduates obtain the skills and habits of mind that will prepare them for their post-graduate lives and become engaged global citizens. It is our privilege to not only help students grow in meaningful ways, but to also enable them to confidently address the major issues confronting our world.

As an institution, FSU has a unique role to play in asserting and amplifying the implicit value of a comprehensive education. Recent developments indicate that FSU is also at the forefront of reimagining the value of a public regional comprehensive university for the 21st century (e.g., through robust and meaningful partnerships with the host city of Fitchburg, through a strategic plan that emphasizes educational justice, and through the creation of new academic programs responsive to the needs of diverse student populations, etc.). That university elevates a form of education that leads to individual flourishing and career preparedness. It provides students and the public with an unambiguous return on their investment in public higher education.

(ii) *Enrollment Management: A Cascade of Opportunities and Challenges*

Like most public universities in New England, FSU has experienced a decline in overall enrollment in recent years. In fall 2018, the university served 7199 students (Factbook). This past fall, 6440 students were enrolled at the university (University Facts and Figures). Much of that decline is explained by a drop in the number of undergraduate students; however, an increase in the number of graduate students during the same period has offset the impact of that decline. As someone familiar with the differences between the “day contract” and the Division of Graduate and Continuing Education (DGCE) contract, FSU’s changing student profile has implications for how faculty work is organized, for the types of services required to meet student needs, and for the very essence of the university. In responding to the immediate enrollment challenge, it is important for the entire campus to have opportunities to reflect on these larger issues, placing the mission of the university at the very center of those deliberations. Against this complex backdrop, it is a very positive sign that enrollment has stabilized over the past year.

BSU has also recently stabilized enrollment declines made worse by the global pandemic, implementing strategic enrollment action plans with the help of higher education consultants. Our focus is on proactively countering the long-predicted reduction in the number of high school graduates nationwide and especially in the Northeast and Midwest. Responding to this reality is now a central preoccupation of most colleges and universities. We are in a highly competitive educational environment that will become even more so as we navigate the enrollment cliff beginning in 2025.

The enrollment picture described above has led to a re-examination of many institutional assumptions, policies, and practices. During my six-year tenure as co-chair of our university-wide Strategic Enrollment Management Group I encouraged this sort of critical analysis. For example, discussions have led to questions about whether the university is adequately serving all potential students (recruitment) and to concerns over whether current students are receiving what they require to succeed (retention, persistence, attainment). At BSU I have led the effort to realign and reframe academic programs to workforce needs in key sectors of the economy (e.g., health sciences, childhood studies, cybersecurity, engineering, public relations). At the same time, I have been responsive to enrollment trends found in specific disciplines, particularly those in the liberal arts and sciences most challenged by national declines. Resources have been allocated to the cultivation of new program and non-credit opportunities as well as for the revitalization of existing offerings.

As a former dean of the College of Graduate Studies and an architect of the College of Continuing Studies, I have also led the creation of new academic programs in those spheres. The number of graduate degree-seeking students is on an upward trajectory. The same is true for Continuing Studies where enrollment has grown significantly through the development of new online degree completion programs, hybrid offerings, early college opportunities, and a popular senior college. We have been intentional in our efforts to meet the needs of all learners (including post-traditional students and students with some college but no degree) and historically underserved populations.

Intense focus on student retention via the analysis of disaggregated data to develop

effective student success and equity interventions is a critical part of our enrollment management strategy. Further positive developments cascading from the concern over enrollment include an overhaul of institutional aid to students, diversification of academic program marketing strategies, revisions to admissions and recruitment activities aligned with demographic trends, changes to student life programming, the creation of an international student recruitment strategy, and investments in general and targeted student supports.

This enrollment story is one that demonstrates how an institution can obtain a measure of control over challenging forces through innovative leadership and a shared sense of purpose. There is clearly the same spirit and willingness to act at FSU. In addition to the initiatives mentioned earlier, I believe the university has an opportunity to strengthen transfer pathways, deepen the commitment to education justice and environmental stewardship, attract out-of-state and international students, and more intentionally project FSU's distinctive mission of leadership, service, lifelong learning, and civic and global responsibility. The preparation of teachers to serve the Commonwealth must also remain at the very core of the Fitchburg State identity.

In my role as provost, I have led efforts to improve retention, persistence, and attainment based on quantitative and qualitative data and the implementation of best practice models at scale. Those of us in public higher education understand that eliminating institutional equity gaps requires ongoing hard work, creativity, experimentation, and resources. I am committed to expanding and deepening this work. The *Profile* states that FSU's next president is expected "to continue to explore and expand new offerings and serve diverse student populations." Enrollment management can and should be conceptualized in a manner that connects to several areas, including academic excellence, inclusive student success, recruitment and retention, and community engagement. Using this approach, I have found ways for every member of the university community to contribute to this work. We have gained so much from the involvement of so many. It has also united us in a way that clearly supports and advances our mission.

(iii) Financial Sustainability and Resource Acquisition

I am aware of the Financial Sustainability Task Force (FSTF) and the detailed reports produced by the various working groups. As a proactive body, the FSTF is reflective of the current fiscal and policy reality confronting most if not all public higher educational institutions in the state. The inclusive and wide-ranging process aimed at identifying efficiencies and opportunities for resource growth has produced a variety of tactics and strategies to pursue within a budgetary framework that is appropriately fiscally conservative. This effort is critical at a time of budgetary shortfalls due to enrollment decline, costs associated with implementing collective bargaining agreements, appropriations not keeping pace with campus needs, shrinking reserves, and, most importantly, the need to keep the institution affordable. Since budgets reflect the values of an organization, they should always remain clearly visible to both internal and external audiences.

In my view, FSU has every reason to be optimistic about securing the resources that will enable it to continue to flourish in the future. I have already described how the university can reframe the current enrollment challenge as an opportunity to re-examine a variety of existing

assumptions and practices. Similarly, the clear goal of growing the local resource base in support of the mission can serve to galvanize the FSU community. At BSU, I have worked closely with the Office of Alumni and Development to increase the capital vital to the institution's continuous improvement, growth, and transformation around three priorities: student success, equity, and opportunity. This effort has been critical to the university's goal of maintaining affordability (through financial aid, paid internships, and scholarships), while also investing resources in providing health and wellness services, meeting space and facility needs, and expanding professional development opportunities for faculty, staff, and administrators.

Over the past three years, my colleagues and I obtained gifts in support of our aviation program, an apprenticeship program in the College of Science and Mathematics, a highly successful Peer-Assisted Learner internship program, and to broaden student participation in a range of high-impact practices. As a result of my work with the president as well as the Office of Alumni and Development, deans, and faculty, we recently received \$5 million in gifts to support students in our School of Social Work and announced a new endowed professorship in Civics Education (\$1.5 million). The latter is a portion of an \$8 million gift that I partnered with the president to secure. We also collaborated to create an endowed chair in Free Speech and Expression (\$2 million). I have deepened our divisional engagement in Giving Day and worked to ensure that we are effective, respectful, and responsive stewards of our donors wishes.

Making the case to all constituencies about why giving to FSU is valuable for students and the long-term health of the institution is something I would feel privileged to do. Helping to grow the endowment, valued at \$23.3 million in June 2023 (University Facts and Figures), is just one important element of a broader strategy to ensure the financial stability of the university. The development of new revenue streams, pursuing strategic partnerships and sound investments, obtaining grants and sponsored funding, and leveraging returns on auxiliary services in ways that are consistent with the public mission of the university are all areas I would prioritize as president.

(iv) Innovation

During my tenure as provost, I have worked with colleagues to design an Academic Innovation Initiative to generate new and creative ideas in support of priorities outlined in our divisional strategic plan. The internally funded initiative, carried out by the Office of the Provost, features “catalyst” (short-term) and “program” (year-long) grants. Much like the FSU Innovation Fund, the larger objective is to foster the development of an innovation culture. To date, the initiative has generated a makerspace, new certificate and degree completion programs for post-traditional learners, an interdisciplinary curriculum based on the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, a career readiness program for business majors, and retention-centered programming in Mathematics and English.

These outcomes demonstrate that incentivizing faculty and staff to collaborate and incubate ideas tied to new academic programs, retention, and experiential learning lead to significant gains for the institution when accompanied by high levels of autonomy and supportive guidance. We have made academic program development more user-friendly and predictable for faculty through our Program Development Approval Process (PDAP). It requires

the submission of a “quick idea” form, which triggers an initial assessment and review of the program idea. Once a market analysis is completed, quick ideas are supported or revised and resubmitted. At this stage faculty may be provided with institutional resources as they work towards generating a program proposal for consideration through the shared governance process in advance of submission to the state.

PDAP has become a popular innovation at BSU. In the seven years prior to my appointment as provost, one new academic program had been approved by the Massachusetts Department of Higher Education. BSU is now averaging one new academic program approval per year (see p.2, CV) in addition to the over 60 programs that have been revised and revitalized since 2016. I would welcome the opportunity to partner with the provost, faculty, academic leadership, and students at FSU to ensure that the academic mission and commitment to excellence remain central to the life of the university.

(v) Student Success

When I was an undergraduate student, I commuted to campus, took my classes, studied when I had time to, worked, and repeated that cycle until I fulfilled my degree requirements. I was intimidated by the university environment and felt quite isolated. It was not until the final seminar class at the end of my program that a professor took an interest in hearing about my post-graduation plans. At that point in time, I was considering becoming a member of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. But that professor, Dr. Ezzat Fattah (someone I later learned was one of the most influential criminologists in Canada), convinced me to consider graduate school. Professor Fattah took the time to help me with every step of the application process. He changed my life.

One of the best predictors of student success is a positive relationship with a faculty mentor. That has not changed since I was an undergraduate. What has changed, however, is the explicit commitment that public colleges and universities have made to the success of *all* students. That commitment means that our institutions must interrogate every policy and practice to determine whether any of them create unnecessary barriers for students. It also requires our institutions to be equitable: each student is entitled to receive the support and resources necessary to achieve their educational goals.

I have worked to ensure that principles of equity underpin all that we do at BSU. Our many student support and intervention strategies led to a transformation in the work of our Academic Achievement Center. By using technology solutions, expanding support services, and engaging in policy review and development, we continue to make progress on retention, persistence, and graduation metrics at a time when students are experiencing an array of life challenges, including those related to mental health, which can so easily cause them to stopout. This is especially true for first generation students, low-income students, and students of color. Our focus on equity is also connected to how we think about the distribution of opportunities for students. I make certain that we are intentional in providing equitable access to opportunities such as undergraduate research, study away, the honors program, placements, internships, and student assistantships. Finally, as is the case with all areas of the university, we utilize a robust

data warehouse to help identify and address institutional performance gaps and other factors that may impede student success.

Public universities have a special obligation to continually scan the environment to discover and evaluate innovative practices that can serve students. This year, at my recommendation, BSU joined the inaugural cohort of colleges and universities taking part in the *Transforming the Foundational Postsecondary Experience* offered through the Gardner Institute and supported in part by the Ascendium Education Group, The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the ECMC Foundation, and The Kresge Foundation. The goal of this five-year engagement is to review and align our many ongoing efforts in support of student success and design a path for our students' foundational years at BSU. If selected to serve as president of FSU, I would encourage similar opportunities to learn together and to distinguish the university as a national student success leader.

(vi) *Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging (DEIB)*

In my role as Executive Vice President, I lead the implementation of recommendations from the *Special Presidential Task Force on Racial Justice* (May 2021). At the request of the President and Chair of the Board of Trustees, I worked closely with members to create a Board committee on Racial Justice and Equity. We are committed to infusing equity-mindedness in all aspects of Board governance. At the campus level, I established a twenty-six-member Racial Justice and Equity Council and a Student Advisory Group to advance this work. I also coordinate university-wide implementation efforts through cabinet and publish *Action: Racial Justice and Equity at BSU*, an online magazine that shares news on diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives and activities.

In 2021 I learned of and advocated for the university to become one of the founding members of the New England Board of Higher Education's "North Star Collective," a series of initiatives to support Black, Indigenous, and People of Color faculty. That same year the "Women of Color in the Academy" was brought to my attention. BSU joined this consortium housed at Northeastern University as a way for faculty to meet their peers and participate in a variety of programs, events, and conferences. In 2022 the university was awarded a multi-year National Science Foundation grant to support the recruitment, retention, and success of diverse faculty in STEM disciplines. Much of my DEIB work has focused on inclusive student success, hiring, curriculum development, teaching and learning support, and professional development for faculty and staff. Prominent higher education leaders like Tia Brown McNair (Vice President, AAC&U) and Freeman Hrabowski (President Emeritus, University of Maryland, Baltimore County) have spoken at Bridgewater State University under the auspices of the Provost's Conversation Series. These engagements have helped to situate our DEIB efforts in a national context.

The attention to diversity, equity, and inclusion is also found in our commitment to students with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities, to neurodiverse students, to LGBTQIA+ students, to veterans, and to indigenous peoples. I am proud to provide this leadership at BSU and my goal is to do the same at FSU with its clear dedication to equity and inclusive excellence.

(vii) Community and Regional Engagement

My experience working with community leaders, legislators, policy officials, alumni, external organizations, higher educational institutions, K-12 schools, etc., has reinforced for me how important a network of allies, supporters, and facilitators is to the success of an institution. Leading such a network helped bring a cutting-edge photonics engineering lab to BSU in collaboration with the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Worcester Polytechnic Institute, and Stonehill College. Networks also figured prominently in the awarding of a \$32 million state grant to renovate the College of Education and Health Sciences for generations of future students, and how we were selected to be the site for a cybersecurity range and security operations center, facilities designed to educate and protect the campus community and region.

Should I be selected to serve as your president, I will bring my energy, enthusiasm, and total commitment to external relations. As a relational leader and ambassador-in-chief for FSU, I will steadfastly advance the interests of the university and continue to cultivate partnerships at local, regional, and statewide levels. A recent study conducted by researchers at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign described public regional universities as “the backbone” of the U.S. higher education system. They “increase high school graduation rates and other metrics of economic and social well-being such as employment, household income, marriage and geographic mobility” (Howard and Weinstein, IZA Institute for Labor Economics, 2022). Working with the entire Fitchburg State community, I will ensure that the university continues to contribute to the educational, economic, cultural, and civic life of the region.

(viii) A Dedication to Shared Governance

I spent the first half of my career as a faculty member before becoming an administrator. That career path has helped me to fully appreciate the role and function of shared governance. In my experience, the health of an institution of higher education is almost always directly related to the health of shared governance. All stakeholders in the university must not only perceive a genuine commitment to shared governance; they must also be able to point to examples of how it is demonstrated. As Executive Vice President and Provost, I work closely with all employee groups and students to help make the best decisions possible as we guide the largest division of the university. I also meet regularly with the union leadership to discuss issues of concern and have an open line of communication to informally resolve issues that surface. As president, I will demonstrate my respect for the traditions of FSU, for collective bargaining, and for the structures and processes that enable the entire campus community to take an active role in the decisions that affect the university.

Respect for the Past, Ready for the Future

Since 1894, Fitchburg State University has educated the people of Massachusetts to be well-rounded, contributing members of society. As a premiere public regional comprehensive university, it has improved the lives of countless individuals, families, and communities throughout the Northeast. In 2024, FSU will select a new president at an important moment for the university and for all higher education. I would like to present myself as a candidate who can hit the ground running as your president. Over the past decade, I have come to understand the

unique attributes of the state university system, have built strong relationships across the Commonwealth, have been actively involved in addressing the issues of the day and the challenges of the future, and have established myself as a known, trusted, and collaborative leader who is passionate about our mission.

During my career, I have observed that the institutions most able to confidently rise to meet the next challenge or achieve an important goal have leaders who understand, respect, and value the contributions of the entire university community while also being mindful of its foundational principles. It is the interplay between community and mission that motivates, energizes, and helps to define whether a university successfully adapts to the increasingly competitive and complex landscape of higher education. That very interplay also animates my own approach to leadership. In the coming months and years, FSU will need to continue to be imaginative, flexible, and nimble.

This letter has outlined a series of themes that together form a leadership agenda for Fitchburg State University, one that also requires an understanding of everything from artificial intelligence and public health to free speech and climate change. If selected to serve as president, I will provide creative, compassionate, and authentic leadership aimed at ensuring that FSU continues to thrive in the future. I will work with all of you – the FSU Board of Trustees, the Board of Higher Education, the Department of Higher Education, community leaders, elected leaders, alumni, students, faculty, and staff – to build on your recent successes and do so with kindness, accountability, and integrity.

I would welcome the opportunity to meet with you. Thank you for your consideration of my application.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Karim Ismaili', with a large, stylized flourish at the end.

Karim Ismaili, Ph.D.
(he/him/his)