

January 15, 2019

**Executive Vice President and Provost
Sul Ross State University**

c/o Rick Artman and Lisa Rosenberg
Academic Search

To the Head of the EVC and Provost Search Committee:

This letter responds to your position announcement for the position of Executive Vice President and Provost at Sul Ross State University. I have been an administrator and a faculty member for over thirty years, and I feel my background and experience closely matches the candidate profile you have published and the strategic plan you have created (“Strategies for the Second Century,” 2017-2022). My previous tenure as dean, associate provost, and provost gives me experience in the specific areas in the Strategic Plan that you have identified as necessary for your current institutional needs, namely, in developing academic and support programming; perceiving the needs of multiple teaching sites; supporting research and artistic excellence; expanding online and distance education; instituting a model for increased participation in International Studies; embracing campus diversity in all its forms; transferring a deep background in retention into the Sul Ross context; and promoting closer relationships between the institution and the community/region (as well as among members of the Legislature) in an attempt to maintain fiscal health. Finally, as indicated in your “Invitation to Leadership,” I am someone who is fluent in Spanish, having lived and studied on the border (in Texas and California) most of my life and having served three Hispanic-serving institutions.

Experience and Leadership as Executive Administrator

Service has always been central to my leadership roles. At Texas A&M International University, the University of Louisiana at Monroe, and at the University of Houston-Victoria, I was given charges very similar to the ones you have developed in your institutional documents. I am very attracted to your description in the position announcement of an institution whose “culture is that of a land grant college, its price is that of a public college, its resource base is tuition dependent similar to that of a private institution, and its teaching and learning environment is like that of a small liberal arts college with an emphasis on personal attention and student success.” Those institutional characteristics speak to me as someone who was raised in a rural environment, went to a small liberal arts college, and carried those educational values with him throughout his career, especially pertinent for those students who might otherwise never go to college and be exposed to them.

Having worked for four institutions, including a community college, I have accumulated a great deal of experience in programs and facilities. As Provost and VPAA at the University of Houston-Victoria, I had the responsibility for coordinating two distinct operations, not unlike those SRSU manages including the main campus in Alpine and the upper-level teaching sites of Río Grande College in Eagle Pass, Uvalde, and Del Río. Both UHV and TAMU were upper-level institutions before they became four-year institutions, so I have considerable experience with

the kinds of programming you have had to manage and direct at Río Grande College. A provost must be aware, therefore, of how fairness and equity must be part of any discussion, so that no group of faculty members, in any location, feels neglected or ignored. I frequently juggled the needs of multiple sites. UHV's Houston operations were principally online and at the graduate level; the Victoria operation was designed as a "destination" campus for undergraduates. This situation automatically created dissonance since the needs of adult student commuters in an "urban" setting are very different from those "college town" students in a more rural and residential setting. Further, as the lead administrator over Student Affairs, the Library, Sponsored Programs, Institutional Research, Institutional Effectiveness, and International Programs, I also understood how the complexity of the institution demanded a global perspective and an even-handed approach to problem solving.

As a dean, I was also keenly aware of how faculty interests diverged in the sixteen departments I managed. Furthermore, I was in charge of many of the college's eleven buildings, including a visual and performing arts complex, which included three theaters and a music hall, a large number of teaching and research laboratories in two different buildings devoted to the natural sciences (biology, chemistry, physics, and atmospheric science), a museum of natural history, a public radio station, a child care center, mass communications studios, general classroom buildings, and two farms (Arts and Sciences had an agribusiness degree). My experience with the latter, in fact, is another reason I'm interested in your institution, given your College of Agricultural and Natural Science, which includes the departments of Animal Science and Natural Resource Management. You seem to have developed programs in those areas that are tremendously important for the region and the State (I would hope this means I can break out my boots). But since your Strategic Plan and position announcement mention "artistic endeavor" and the arts several times, I would also note my life-long commitment to the arts and my management of several arts areas that your institution has also supported, including studio art, musical ensembles (including jazz band and musical theater), and dramatic theater (I noticed, for example, *Macbeth* was among the year's play schedule. I actually taught *Macbeth* this past year, and it would have been enhanced with the addition of a live performance, something that is unavailable at the present time at UHV). At all events, I hope the above descriptions give you a preliminary feel for the breadth of my institutional experience and intellectual interests and why I believe my background matches your stated preferences in several areas, notably in Goal 1, Objective 4.

Programs, Faculty, Faculty Support Systems

Under Objectives 1 and 2 of Goal 1, you cite the desire for someone who can promote growth in academic, research, and artistic excellence, as well as someone who can shepherd curricular programs that leverage the extant talent in the campus community. More concretely, I have experience with the creation of new programs with the faculty who are already available and cognizant of the history of the institution. At UHV, I advocated for and guided several degrees through the necessary levels of review, up through the Board of Regents and the THECB, both graduate and undergraduate, including UHV's online RN-to-BSN, the M.Ed in Educational Technology, the MFA in Creative Writing, the MS in Professional Science (biomedical), the BS in Political Science, the BS in Kinesiology, and the BS in Health Studies, as well as BAAS concentrations in economics, international business, and petroleum technology.

To complement these efforts, however, I also tried to assist with the creation of grants resources that would begin to bring in research dollars to the institution. When I arrived at UHV in 2012, UHV had the lowest level of research expenditures in the State for public institutions. When I put additional personnel into the Office of Sponsored Programs, we increased expenditures by 200% because by providing additional assistance at the front end of grant production, assisting faculty with the writing of grants and budgets, we had many more submissions to funding agencies and foundations. Given the competitiveness of grants in this era of funding for higher education, balancing the front end of grant production and the back end of grant oversight is essential. As a result of these changes, we received our first Department of Defense grant, and we also received a million-dollar grant to train teachers to confront issues of students on the autism spectrum. These awards certainly added to the prestige of the institution, and ongoing commitments to extramural funding encourage prospective faculty to consider coming to institutions like UHV or SRSU, if he or she feels that research is a valuable and supported part of campus life. Finally, the institution needs to provide travel and other professional monies, internal research grants that can be used to leverage other federal and State monies, and development leaves, with a faculty-supervised process, that assist faculty members across the disciplines with resources to pursue larger-scale projects. To that end, at two institutions, I created mini-grant programs, which established a faculty review process for these funds, and which were intended as leverage for additional publications, research, equipment (at ULM, for instance, one faculty member purchased a flute with mini-grant funds). These programs recognized the diversity of faculty activity and did not privilege one type of professional activity over the other.

Student Success, Delivery Models, High Impact Practices

Goal 2, Objective 2 highlights a commitment to student learning. Nothing could be more paramount than student success, and I have had broad experience in this important area. As both dean and provost, I interfaced regularly with those units charged with academic support systems that engage students. At UHV, I had managerial control of Student Affairs for two years, and I was involved with the activities directed by Student Life; indeed, our Quality Enhancement Plan, which created residential learning communities, had, as its principal aim, the integration of living and learning. We did not want students to feel as if learning somehow stopped at the doors of their residence halls. We wanted to extend the learning experience into their everyday lives, and this involved creating teams (which included faculty student success coaches, Student Life staff, and librarians) to assist each student with this QEP objective. At TAMIU, I was also co-chair of a self-study for the John Gardner Institute, in which we also studied the first year of college and implemented learning communities for students, in order to create deeper connections for them as they confronted the difficulties of their coursework. I notice that in Objective 2, Strategy 3 you are committed to sophomore retention as well, a notable insight since the John Gardner Institute now has sophomore-level review as part of its nine-dimensions analysis. In the industry, it's not all about freshmen retention any longer.

At both UHV and at TAMIU, I had managerial oversight role for the library. In late Spring 2019, UHV will open an interactive learning commons, which I had pushed for as provost, because it constructs a new library facility though in an untraditional format. The majority of the books will be off site, but UHV also plans on interactive pods, lecture capture studios, and

the embedding of library functions within the Commons/Student Center. We envision traffic moving continually from one area to another, enhancing usage in both Student Center public spaces and library spaces. Millennials are intensely social, and we hope this new arrangement will promote greater learning, retention, growth, and enjoyment. These are but a few examples from my personal experience that attest to the need for the provost to be involved in a productive relationship with Student Affairs. Retention and graduation rates will depend on a positive relationship between Academic and Student Affairs. We must work together to ensure that students remain in their courses, excel in and graduate from their programs, and launch into successful careers. Having read your 2018 NSSE report on high-impact practices, which, granted is the students' *perception* of what is available rather than what is, in fact, available, I still perceive the need for some discussion between the two administrative about increasing the visibility of certain high-impact practices in the students' college careers, notably for the seniors, such as service-learning projects, individual research with faculty members, and study-abroad opportunities. Increasing these cross-campus discussions and learning opportunities—effectively un siloing the academic enterprise—will not only retain students at higher rates but will increase four- and six-year graduation rates, something legislators and System officials are keen on enhancing for all the institutions for which they retain responsibility.

To understand the needs of students and faculty, a provost should also be an experienced hand in the classroom. When I returned to teaching in the fall 2016 semester, I began to internalize the complexities of online teaching. I never had to do this personally as Provost, though I certainly had to support the more than 70 degree programs UHV had, most of which are available online, so I was delighted to have the opportunity to learn this important delivery mode. As many fields begin to exploit technological innovations and move operations online, I realized more fully the needs for instructional support, faculty training, for quality control, including support for systems that maintain security measures. The Provost has to be intimately aware of the new online techniques and applications available in order to steer the instruction at the institution and to make appropriate recommendations to the president about the direction of its programs, with regard to technological innovation. The quality of student learning depends on such knowledge. I have taught many online courses since 2016, and I know understand more completely the experience (and issues) that faculty have in this delivery mode, especially in making the student experience as vibrant and illuminating as they are in the more traditional face-to-face formats. So, to that end, I have employed brief Panopto lecture-capture videos, easily produced at my desk, which inserted my personality and ideas into the course, transforming difficult material in linguistics, rhetoric, and advanced grammar into more easily managed and digestible bites (in fact, this is precisely the strategy that large online delivery corporations like Academic Partnerships use, and which UHV will employ in the fall since we have signed a contract with AP). This is an example of personal growth in teaching that enabled me to interact with online students more readily and frequently, but such a process also made me aware of the many academic and non-academic issues that encompass Student Success in online formats. Making all delivery modes responsive to student need, background, and experience is, of course, fraught with obstacles, but we must confront the exigencies of alternative delivery modes carefully and, given the competition in higher education, expeditiously.

External Relationships, Partnerships, Internationals

Because the Office of the Provost has ties with all legislators' offices, System officials, community leaders, civic non-profits, and business, the Provost will have to regularly visit community partners to learn what s/he can learn about what they expect from graduates, what fields of endeavor are perhaps opening up, and what issues the University faces with a community for whom higher education may be marginally obscure. I presently serve on the Victoria Education and Business Coalition and have served on a Chamber of Commerce subcommittee that considered education issues for the city. In these venues, the provost has to communicate complex academic issues to constituents who may know little about academic processes but recognize their value and need to know how the University can fit into the life of the community. Without the support of the community at large, it becomes difficult to manage change. This desired connection to community is why I have gotten to know city officials like the mayor and the city manager, why I have agreed to be on local boards like the Victoria Business and Education Coalition (VBEC), and why I have regularly attended meetings with the Victoria Economic Development Corporation (VEDC), not only to hear about the latest news in Victoria's economy, but as well to explain how the University is part of that picture, how a strong and supported UH Victoria becomes an economic driver for the city and the Coastal Bend region. Similarly, given your commitment to the economy in such entities as the Big Bend Region Minority and SBDC, I feel that the new EVC and Provost will have to be equally engaged with the community and region, such as with the City of Alpine Vision Plan and the West Texas Economic Development District.

Furthermore, I also have many friends in academic administration throughout the State, which is, in part, why I was elected President of the Texas Council of Academic Affairs Officers a few years back. These connections can assist a Provost in getting information about programs SRSU may wish to establish, continue, or reinvent, depending on what is happening throughout the State and the Legislature. I have also worked with many community colleges on 2+2 agreements and on facilities sharing, such as office space with Houston Community College and program faculty and space with Victoria College. We need to ensure that our working relationships with community colleges are productive, for there are many transfer students, especially those from underserved populations, who attend the community college and then stop with a two-year credential or one-year certificate. Given your history with community colleges and transfer students, you well know how important it is to maintain productive relationships with these institutions.

Strategic Planning and Accreditation

While I was delighted to see how well you did in your recent SACSCOC reaffirmation, regional accreditation is an ongoing, arduous task. Fortunately, I have a lengthy history with SACSCOC. I was liaison at both TAMIU and UHV; I was the QEP draftsman and editor for three quality enhancement plans, including those at TAMIU, ULM, and UHV; and I most recently was the external consultant for the biggest System institution, University of Houston-Main Campus, where they paid me to review and make recommendations for both their compliance certification and Quality Enhancement Plan. I have also been an on-site and off-site reviewer for several institutions in the compliance certification piece of the reaffirmation process.

Additionally, I not only have deep knowledge of SACSCOC, but more than a passing acquaintance with other national accreditations, including CCNE, AACSB, CSWE, CACREP, NASAD, NASM and ABET. While SRSU appears to have CCNE accreditation at this time, accreditation processes have become increasingly important gauges of performance and achievement, and with rising tuition rates and the need for expanding enrollment, potential students, at both the graduate and undergraduate levels, are becoming more aware of accreditation and its potential impact on future employment. Further, accreditation as a proof of quality is also an easy sell to legislators who weigh options in forcing colleges and universities to demonstrate the value of their degree programs; in particular, this becomes vital information for an institution if performance-based funding takes up a greater percentage of the budget. The new academic leader at SRSU will need to have some experience with these matters, inasmuch as they may become vital to the quality, prestige, marketing, and funding of academic programs. Of course, in all cases, the faculty must decide whether or not they a national accreditation is warranted, but I would support all efforts to make programs competitive and nationally recognized.

The First Sixty Days

If I were selected as the new academic leader for SRSU, I would probably emphasize a few possibilities within the first two months. Clearly, the following are very broad tactics since I have not yet spoken with the faculty or staff, and strategies always shift once a new leader is “on the ground.” Nevertheless, three important resolutions come to mind:

- Spend a month talking with faculty, students, staff, administrators, and community members about the future of SRSU. I need to get to know people where they live, in their creative spaces, offices, and familiar haunts, before I can provide a truly informed opinion about what to do or how to proceed. I need to internalize the dynamics of the campus, community, and region, or it will not be possible to assist SRSU with its laudable and ambitious plans.
- Create a preliminary Academic Master Plan. With the input of many constituencies, formulate a document that aligns with the Strategic Plan and more concretely indicates how Academic Affairs will proceed in complying with the goals and objectives that the institution has already established. This will include any new programming, degrees and concentration that the faculty feel might bring in more students and assist with student retention.
- Visit all teaching sites, probably more than once, in order to perceive what is necessary to unite the teaching and research faculty so that all “site” activities contribute to the completion of the strategic initiatives. Align the Academic Master Plan with Enrollment Management. We ALL contribute to the health of the institution. All must be listened to and given a fair and equitable hearing.
- Build Consensus. Nothing obstructs progress like the perception that decisions are made in a top-down manner. We may not always agree—this is higher education after

all—but we can agree to try some things, evaluate the results, and then alter the path when necessary. This is not an “I-told-you-so” world; it is a world where we must work together to create the campus culture we want and deserve.

I feel compelled, at this point, to mention why I am no longer Provost at UHV. Dr. Vic Morgan, who was named interim president for two years but was made permanent by the Chancellor in the spring of 2016, decided he wanted to pursue a change in the provost’s office. While Dr. Morgan is now retired, and Dr. Bob Glenn has been named the new permanent president, at that moment Dr. Morgan decided to appoint Dr. David Cockrum as Interim Provost, a position he holds until the end of the Spring 2019 semester. Given the situation, I voluntarily stepped back to faculty as graciously as possible to avoid any unpleasantness or difficulty for the institution, which had undergone a great deal of change over the past decade. I do not think Dr. Morgan’s decision had anything to do with my leadership or achievements since I accomplished a great deal during my tenure (e.g. SACSCOC reaffirmation, ten new undergraduate and graduate programs, a new international studies office, the turnaround and reorganization of the School of Education, a new lecture series), but sometimes new presidents simply want their own provosts, and not the ones they inherit. They have to be comfortable with their academic leaders. I get that and was all too happy to return to teaching, which is, after all, the reason I got into the profession in the first place. But after looking at your position announcement, I am hopeful that my years of experience as a professor and as an administrator might be useful to you, as you move into the next phase of your history with a new academic leader.

Finally, I am actually a small-town boy. I come from Valley Center, CA, a town that in the 1960s was about a third the size of Alpine. There were still orange groves and avocados. My mother was in charge of the horse group in 4H. We raised cows, chickens, and sheep. We raced thoroughbred horses across the Mexican border in Tijuana. I only mention these personal factoids because I understand the rurality of Alpine, and I am comfortable with it. Indeed, all the campuses with which I have had the pleasure of working extended their reach into rural areas. Victoria serves about seven rural counties. Monroe had reach over multiple rural parishes in Northeast Louisiana, and Laredo, in the 1980s, was a sleepy town, not the 250,000 small city it is today. For me, this is an exciting opportunity because I have always had a profound and abiding affection for and attraction to institutions that attempt to meet the needs of underserved populations (particularly in rural areas), that support the highest academic achievements within the institution’s resource parameters, and that look to their rightful place of leadership in the future of higher education. And SRSU fits that profile. I would very much like to be part of your team and would welcome a discussion on the matter.

Sincerely yours,

Jeffrey Cass
Professor of English
Faculty Senate President
University of Houston-Victoria