

March 13, 2022

University of Oregon
Dean of Arts and Sciences Search Committee
c/o Regan Gough and Phuong Ta, Isaacson Miller

Dear Arts and Sciences Search Committee,

Thank you very much for taking the time to consider my application. I am inspired by the opportunity to contribute to the rich history and upward trajectory of the University of Oregon through the role of Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences. There are many reasons why I have chosen to pursue this leadership opportunity, but the primary motivation is that I seek the opportunity to contribute to the leadership of an institution of higher learning that embraces and celebrates its role in achieving sustainability. Sustainability, in the most holistic sense, is ensuring the peace and wellbeing of all our planet's inhabitants, now and for generations to come. *The foundation of true sustainability is diversity, equity, inclusion* and requires the interdisciplinary potential of the Humanities, Global Studies and Languages, Social Sciences, Natural Sciences. Cutting-edge research and discovery are paramount for sustainability, as is delivering on the promise of higher education. But true commitment to diversity, equity and inclusion must lie at the heart of these missions and I feel that the College of Arts and Sciences and the University of Oregon are uniquely positioned to lead in all dimensions of sustainability. Elements of my vision and contributions to diversity, equity and inclusion are woven throughout this letter of interest and elaborated in the accompanying Diversity Statement.

The role of the Dean of Arts and Sciences at an AAU institution is expansive and consequential, and my professional path has prepared me perfectly to serve in this capacity. Along my path from student, to staff, to faculty, department head, and dean, I have learned effective and compassionate leadership (and the immense value of these qualities in leadership) and this path has positioned me to be able to deploy those strengths in the service of all the students, staff and faculty at the University of Oregon's most comprehensive academic unit. Perhaps most importantly, I have the proven ability to "lead at scale," meaning I know exactly how to apply my strengths to excel in broader and higher level leadership roles. My accomplishments, aspirations and character align with the desired attributes expressed within the leadership profile. More importantly, my strengths which center all dimensions of diversity, equity and inclusion, truly complement the aspirations and opportunities of the University of Oregon. In this letter of intent, I share how I could build on the foundation of excellence that exists within the College of Arts and Sciences, while providing insight into my ability to deliver on this vision and meet the challenges articulated in the leadership profile.

My vision for how to empower and champion a modern and forward-looking interdisciplinary liberal arts education crystallized while serving as the Convener of the Council of Deans at TAMU. In this lead role, I have contributed to the onboarding and guidance of a new interim provost, while coordinating formal and informal meetings among the deans and other members of the upper administration. The timing of this service has been particularly intense as it entailed working closely with our Provost and COO to navigate our university

D. Thomas

through the pandemic and “return to normal” operations over the past few semesters, as well as through the new president’s unique and massive restructuring (an effort that includes the creation of a new College of Arts and Sciences, the centralization of IT, Marketings and Communications, HR, among myriad other changes). Through this service I have had the chance to work closely with and support all the deans, and have helped mentor the new deans who have begun their service or interim terms. Collaboration with my colleagues has reaffirmed my deep appreciation and understanding of all the disciplines represented at TAMU, which is similarly comprehensive as the University of Oregon.

I have over 8 years of academic leadership experience innovating ways to elevate the impact and success of students, staff and faculty. This academic leadership experience includes direct support of a very diverse array of academic disciplines spanning human and social sciences, to the physical sciences, to discipline-based education scholarship and practice. I also have experience supporting the intersection of social sciences and the visual arts. Furthermore, I have had substantial experience creating, leading and sustaining massive research and extension units critical to the AAU mission. This includes responsibility for the TAMU System’s single largest NSF contract - the International Ocean Discovery Program, Texas Sea Grant, and other major international partnerships.

The first steps I would take in translating my experience and expertise to articulating a collective strategy and vision for the College of Arts and Sciences in support of the University of Oregon would be through a comprehensive listening tour. Through visits with the departments and centers, I will learn the goals and aspirations of each, forming the foundation of an all-college strategic planning process similar to the one I led for my current college in 2019:

<https://geosciences.tamu.edu/about/strategic-plan/index.html>

The strategic planning process will employ the SOAR method to identify the collective strengths, opportunities and aspirations of the college, and determine the objectives and strategies for obtaining the results required to elevate the faculty, staff, and students. It absolutely is possible to engage all College of Arts and Sciences stakeholders (including representation from former students and external stakeholders) and the ideating sessions and “listening lunches” that I conducted in 2019 absolutely can be scaled up to work for a far more expansive academic unit. The result is *a collective strategy created through an inherently inclusive process that promotes transparency and community*.

One of the key outcomes of an inclusive, grass-roots strategic planning process is the identification of organic strategies to elevate the faculty within the College of Arts and Sciences. There will be no one-size-fits-all strategy to support and enhance the scholarly impact of all faculty within the college. However, several areas in which I have proven success will emerge from most groups. Increasing access to financial resources to support innovative research and curricular developments. Intentional strategies to cultivate and nominate faculty for major external awards and honors. Professional development opportunities to build toolkits, both technical and interpersonal. Opportunities for “constructive collisions” to bring potential interdisciplinary collaborations to light. Creating a climate in which every individual believes they are empowered to thrive and reach their potential.

The principle that guides my leadership and decision making is that higher education, at its best, is about people. Our role is to develop the potential in each and every student, staff member and faculty member that chooses to study or work at our institution. The skills required to lead the entire academic enterprise must center compassion, empathy, and the willingness to listen and learn to understand, embrace, and

empower the unique contributions of each college and unit. It is imperative to build and sustain trust as well. Compassion, empathy, and engendering trust are among my strengths and values as a leader.

In my current role I have helped build a culture in which we cultivate faculty and staff for major external recognitions through systematic nominations for “stepping stone” honors. Major awards and honors are key metrics when gauging the impact of departmental scholarship, but more importantly serve to celebrate and elevate the external reputation of the entire institution. At least half of the early career faculty that were hired during my tenure now have earned at least one major award/honor, and we have increased the number of major recognitions for more senior faculty and staff by nearly 50%. I also bring a comprehensive strategy for staff and faculty professional development to the role, and many of the programs I innovated at the college level can scale much more broadly.

A hallmark of the best public, AAU institutions is the graceful assimilation of both the research and educational missions. This requires a perpetual commitment to student success and a constant mind toward affirming and enhancing the value of higher education. The most significant innovations I have contributed toward student success are an intentional and integrated focus on careers for each major and the importance of institutionalizing beyond-the-classroom professional development through high impact educational opportunities. One example of this is securing development funding and university support for the creation of the Traci '11 and Curtis Samford '83 Geosciences Career Center. This center is located down the hall from our newly established student recruiting hub, the Geosciences Welcome Center as a highly visual and intentional connection between student recruiting and career placement. It is critical that we continue to innovate programming that ensures that our students are fully able to leverage their degree programs and transportable skills to lead in the workforce. It is incredibly gratifying to see this already in place in CAS within the stunning Tykeson Hall! I also led the development of a peer-mentoring program, that partners successful upperclass students with first-year students in order to enhance retention with a focus on ensuring success in the challenging foundational science and math courses. Such programs also serve to eliminate disparities in first-year retention among underrepresented student groups.

The inclusive strategic planning process is one example of building a truly inclusive community within the CAS for all staff, students and faculty. I also use all professional development programming as opportunities to enhance inclusion, ensuring that staff are supported and recognized as deeply as faculty. I also have built a powerfully inclusive community for Instructional Faculty, and successfully elevated the role and contributions of those filling critical teaching roles outside of the tenure-track. I am an active champion of creating and sustaining a positive and nurturing workplace climate, and I am widely recognized for creating a college in which every student, staff member and faculty member knows they will thrive and reach their potential. As one of my direct reports told me, “You gave this college a heart.”

Perhaps the most important dimension of inclusion is ensuring into and through higher education (for all staff, students and faculty) that are free from barriers for those from minoritized groups. All of us in higher education must lead in ensuring equitable and affordable access to higher education that provides the opportunity to kindle passion and achieve goals. We must lead in empowering everyone to know that our disciplines lead to the very career paths required for sustainability.

Those who truly are committed to racial justice need to act, and to this end I engaged my college in crafting a plan to dismantle racism from our disciplines and from higher education. We spent the summer of 2020 working with all stakeholders — current students, former students, staff and faculty — to craft a plan for eliminating barriers to the success of minoritized groups and building structures in their place to create a

college that attracts talent from all populations and deploys their talents in rewarding careers (<https://geosciences.tamu.edu/diversity-climate/action-plan/index.html>).

Higher education must center racial justice. This effort must go beyond recruiting talent from underrepresented backgrounds, and provide structures that build identity-based communities within the university. I have empowered our Associated Dean for Diversity and Climate to create identity-based student organizations to enhance the sense of community and professional networking among our students from under-represented backgrounds. An intentional commitment to careers is also critical to supporting students from under-represented backgrounds, and to this end I secured the naming endowment and support for our college's own branch of the Career Center. I also transformed the way we search for new faculty, requiring two proven methods for attracting a more diverse applicant pool – advertising searches at open discipline and evaluating applicants' demonstrated commitment to diversity with the same rigor as scholarship and teaching ability. As the Chair of the TAMU President's Council on Climate and Diversity, I lead the annual accountability reporting and evaluation for all units at the university (including the academic and non-academic units) and have used this opportunity to share the best practices exemplified by particular units with the rest of campus. Examples include the implementation of a peer-mentoring program for first year students to enhance first-year retention through a focus on navigating the challenging core curriculum requirements, and the creation of college and department DEI committees.

My college has been operating with an internal system of shared resources for Marketing and Communications, Business and HR support, and IT support/Web support for nearly a decade, and now many of the policies and procedures we employ are helping shape a new university-wide centralization model for support services. It has been very instructive working with campus leaders to assimilate best practices from across the university, and to help identify which services require locally embedded support and which functions truly can be centralized. As with most public institutions of higher education, funding for faculty lines has outpaced the investment in support staff, we have implemented several strategies in order to maximize the support we can provide to students and faculty while preserving sustainable workloads for our staff. But of course, not all demands on staff time and effort can be met, and we have to prioritize requests and services and continuously reassess how we support our staff and how to best serve the teaching and research missions of the college.

External engagement through development has been one of my strengths as a dean, and and this has been one of my favorite parts of the role. One of the most attractive dimensions of the role of Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences is the opportunity to use the strategic planning process to create a holistic Advancement Strategy for development and external relations. Again, higher education is about people, and developing and strengthening relationships among former students and those who seek to support our disciplines to enhance the experience of current and future students is not only immensely rewarding but mission critical. During my tenure as dean I have secured immediate and planned gifts in excess of \$30M. I adopted a different approach to academic philanthropy, one that helped spread the impact of gifts to one department to all the departments by working with donors to endow/support programming that alleviates pressure on the recurring budget. Thus, a major gift targeted toward one department or program actually helps direct funds toward other programs.

External engagement not only requires developing strong relationships with former students and stakeholders, but also working closely with leadership at other institutions, particularly federal agencies and leadership at international institutions, to ensure the long-term vitality and impact of our disciplines. In this

regard, I also have established myself as a leader among peers, coordinating advocacy and support efforts to engage with the National Science Foundation. I also am a highly respected member of my disciplinary community. In recognition of this leadership, I was elected Fellow of the Geological Society of America in 2021.

Another example of how I innovated to elevate the external reputation of our college emerged from our 2019 strategic planning process. Through a combination of desires to elevate faculty research, particularly post-tenure, and to elevate the professional development of those with a demonstrated commitment to diversity and best prepare them for future faculty roles, I created the Geosciences Future Faculty Postdoctoral Fellowship. The best academic programs not only graduate brilliant students and recruit and retain the best faculty, but also are known for a “post-doc culture” and the launching pad for the next generation of faculty superstars. This was a nationally-advertised and highly visible program that attracted exceptional applicants. The most important distinguishing element of this fellowship was the mentoring program intentionally crafted to prepare fellows for the rigors and demands of a faculty position (and how to successfully pursue an academic position).

Financial management and fiscal responsibility are additional strengths I have honed over my years of leadership, with the proven ability to steward and grow resources and allocate them in support of diverse academic and research investments. In particular, I strive for transparency in budget operations and work as collaboratively as possible with unit leadership to ensure equity and trust. I thought it would be valuable to provide the search committee with examples of my leadership and decision making under challenging circumstances. I navigated the challenge of three discrete budget cuts totaling ~\$1,000,000 in recurring funds. I pursued strategies to mitigate these cuts (including the 2020 pandemic cuts) through open conversations with the entire college, beginning with the department/unit impacted most deeply by the cuts. During the second year of cuts, I launched an internal voluntary separation program to mitigate the impact of these cuts on our ability to refill open faculty lines. I announced this program during a town hall meeting in which I presented the entire college budget and the trends that led to the cuts. The successful voluntary separation program allowed us to proceed with promised searches for a tenure-track faculty member in one department and an instructional faculty member in another, both critical to our educational mission. Another example of my ability to strategically reallocate resources was the 5% equity raise that I was able to secure for every Assistant and Associate Professor for FY18 (a year of no merit raises from the university). We achieved this internally with College Executive Committee approval to repurpose an open faculty line for the equity funds in order to start to repair the damaged earning trajectories of our Associate Professors and make up the deficit to the median salaries at our peer institutions. For FY19 I applied available recurring funds to begin addressing this shortfall among our high-performing full professors. These examples provide a glimpse into my ability to lead a successful unit that was perpetually under-resourced (although I am not sure I have ever heard an academic leader indicate that they are “over-resourced”). Doing a lot with little requires strategy and creativity and the ability to raise funds through philanthropic investment.

Thank you once again for your time and consideration,



Administrative Roles and Accomplishments

Administrative Experience:

Dean, College of Geosciences, Texas A&M University

Responsibilities:

Six years leading the college with 86 faculty members, 302 research and administrative staff members, 1,235 students, an operation budget of \$17 million, external research expenditures of \$70M/year, and endowment of \$40 million. Includes oversight of 4 academic departments and two interdisciplinary degree programs, and hosts two major federally-funded research units: the International Ocean Discovery Program (IODP) and Texas Sea Grant.

Accomplishment Highlights

External Engagement

- Raised over \$30M in immediate and planned gifts during my tenure as Dean
- Developed a philanthropic funding model for renovation, maintenance and improvement of educational and research spaces (2017) and through this have secured \$5M in private and corporate giving, establishing the Trimble Technology Lab, the Hughes Microscopy Center, and the Samford Geosciences Career Center
- Developed a strategy to direct philanthropic investment toward reducing pressure on our recurring budget to support critical student success programming
- Transformed our advisory board to a council of action, greatly enhancing networking opportunities for our current students and broadening our philanthropic network
- Created the College of Geosciences Distinguished Alumni Awards to enhance engagement with our former students and celebrate excellence in our disciplines: <https://geosciences.tamu.edu/awards-recognition/geosciences-distinguished-achievements/index.html>
- Overhauled the frequency and quality of external communications with our *Impact* publication: <https://geonews.tamu.edu/newsletters/impact-newsletter/index.html>
- Implemented hands-on cultivation and stewardship practices, including the use of a field-pass for pregame activities during home football Saturdays, and stewardship newsletters for our named facilities

Empowered Exceptional Research

- Conceived and launched a highly competitive and visible post-doctoral fellowship program, Geosciences Future Faculty Postdoctoral Fellows, to elevate the scholarly reputation of our college

- Provided critical support for the successful accomplishment-based renewal of the International Ocean Discovery Program award from NSF (\$50M per year, TAMU's largest federally funded project)
- Supported the Dean's Interdisciplinary Proposal seed funding program to incentivize major collaborations (requiring external proposal submission within 12 months of internal funding) – over 20 new proposals resulted to date

Academic Innovations

- Established the Traci '11 and Curtis Samford '83 Geosciences Career Center through a major gift as a satellite of the TAMU Career Center to provide critical out-of-the-classroom professional development for our students within our own buildings (2020) and onboarded the first-ever Geosciences Career Services director (2021)
- Empowered the launch of the college's first online professional degree program in 2016 with two new tracks launched in 2019
- Established the peer mentors program to enhance retention and success of first year students, particularly those who are first-generation in college or derive from underrepresented groups (2019)
- Established the new College of Geosciences Welcome Center to elevate recruiting of diverse students into our disciplines (2020)

Diversity, Inclusion and Respect

- Created the first-ever DEI Action plan (2020) to combat racism in the geosciences and higher education: <https://geosciences.tamu.edu/diversity-climate/action-plan/index.html>
- Built the foundation of inclusion and respect through the college-wide strategic planning process (2019): <https://geosciences.tamu.edu/about/strategic-plan/index.html>
- Established the new Geosciences Future Faculty Postdoctoral Fellowship program (2019) with the goal of leading in enhancing the diversity of tenure-track faculty in our disciplines, and serving as the first STEM college at TAMU to engage in the ACES Fellows program (2020): <https://geosciences.tamu.edu/about/employment-opportunities/aces.html>
- Created the College Diversity Committee (2018) and empowered them to create the first-ever plan for Dismantling Racism from the Geosciences and Higher Education. The stakeholder conversations spanning Summer 2020 immediately have led to the elimination of the GRE in our graduate admissions process and to the creation of a comprehensive ombuds structure and reporting outlets, including our adaptation of the "Cup of Coffee Conversations" employed by the TAMU College of Medicine

- Implemented a college-wide faculty search policy employing the best practice of advertising open positions as open discipline in order to enhance the diversity of our applicant pools (2019)
- Host regular college-wide town hall conversations to improve communications and continually reaffirm the importance of every member of our college family
- Innovative professional development programming for our staff and faculty, spanning academic productivity coaching to cohort leadership development training.

Department Head, Department of Oceanography, 2013 to July 2016 (Sept. 2013 to June 2015 as interim, and subsequently as permanent)

Accomplishments: transformed morale through transparent and positive communications and effective collaborations with the dean and other department heads; laid the foundation for the establishment of the first undergraduate degree within the department and convincing faculty of the value of developing and launching a bachelor's degree for the first time in the nearly 70 year history of the department.

Assistant Department Head, Department of Oceanography, 2011 to 2013)

Accomplishments: Overhauled the departmental degree program assessment data collection and reporting, imparted transparency to classroom teaching assignments

Diversity Statement

Higher education must center racial justice, equity of opportunity, inclusion of talent and perspective from every member of our society, and embrace the diversity of our planet. We must simultaneously attract and support students from diverse backgrounds, develop the next generation of leaders both for academia and the broader workforce that have a demonstrated commitment to diversity, equity, inclusion and justice, and attract and support the very best staff and faculty capable of serving as mentors and role models for our diverse student body.

As the Chair of the TAMU President's Council on Climate and Diversity, I lead the annual accountability reporting and evaluation for all units at the university (including the academic and non-academic units) and have used this opportunity to share the best practices exemplified by particular units with the rest of campus. Examples include the implementation of a peer-mentoring program for first year students to enhance first-year retention through a focus on navigating the challenging core curriculum requirements, and the creation of college and department DEI committees.

It is critical that we provide structures that build identity-based communities within the university. I have empowered our Associated Dean for Diversity and Climate to create identity-based student organizations to enhance the sense of community and professional networking among our students from under-represented backgrounds. We are providing financial support to these organizations to ensure their long-term viability as our college merges into the new College of Arts and Sciences.

I successfully advocated to be the first STEM college at TAMU to participate in the university's ACES Program (opening the door for all colleges), a faculty pipeline hiring program administered by our Office for Diversity and Climate:

<https://diversity.tamu.edu/Home/Accountability,-Climate,-Equity,-and-Scholarship-F>

We onboarded our first two Fellows in Fall 2021 and are completing the search for our next two fellows. Engaging in this process transformed the way we search for new faculty, and I instituted college-wide search requirements based on proven methods for attracting a more diverse applicant pool – advertising searches at open discipline and evaluating applicants' demonstrated commitment to diversity with the same rigor as scholarship and teaching ability. Our first round of searches applying both requirements is concluding (six positions) and we are poised to dramatically move the needle for our faculty diversity.