

Bernard J. Savarese

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Search Committee for the President of North Dakota State University
c/o Lisa Ryan
1340 Administration Ave
Fargo, ND 58102

Dear Search Committee members,

I am writing to express my sincere and enthusiastic interest in the presidency of North Dakota State University (NDSU). I have been honored to provide executive leadership at the University of Tennessee (UT) since 2021, and previously at New York University (NYU) and The Ohio State University (OSU) with increasing responsibility across Academic Affairs, Research and National Laboratories, Student Success, the First-Year Experience, Enrollment Management, Institutional Effectiveness, and Workforce Pathways. At each institution, my leadership has been grounded in integrity, trust, and collaboration, while I guided strategic initiatives spanning the curricular and co-curricular experience. These efforts led to increases in access and affordability, improved academic and student outcomes, record growth in research expenditures, and deepened community and industry partnerships. Ultimately, this work has helped each institution deliver on the critical promise of higher education for its students, families, and the regions that depend on them to drive economic growth. This role would allow me to leverage those skills and experiences to accelerate NDSU's forward momentum at a time when it is poised to be the land-grant university of the future.

After carefully reading the leadership profile, I am particularly drawn to this role because I see deep alignment between my experiences and values, and the opportunities at NDSU. I believe NDSU has the ability, and obligation, to play a transformative role in the lives of its students and the citizens of the state. Under the bold leadership of President Cook, NDSU amassed critical forward momentum, positioning itself as an innovative and student-centered land-grant university prepared to meet the emerging needs of North Dakotans. Building on this momentum, the next president must remain laser focused on enhancing student success, expanding ground-breaking research, and fostering innovative partnerships that drive economic growth. With an emphasis on building trust, empowering teams, and clarifying goals, I would ensure the university continues to accelerate on this trajectory. I have spent my career advancing these same goals at large, complex institutions because I believe land-grant, research universities are uniquely positioned to deliver the experiences, discoveries, and pathways to prosperity that improve lives. These community-centered aspirations have been my north star, and I would be honored to help NDSU deliver on the promise of higher education for its students, North Dakotans, and the world.

I would be remiss if I did not also speak to my desire to return to a land-grant university campus with a student-centered mission. My time as both a student and a university leader at Ohio State University – a fellow 1862 land-grant university – was transformational. For those who have not worked at a land-grant institution, it can be hard to understand how the energy and connection to the people of the state serve as a multiplier for good. While this unique combination of pressure and possibility is not for everyone, I miss it more every day. I also miss the passion and determination I saw in my students whose drive was deeply connected to family, community, and something bigger than themselves. College was not about an untethered “way out,” but a connected “way up.” College was also my “way up.” My siblings and I were raised by our father and grandfather in an Eastern Ohio steel town. We did not have much, but thanks to their belief in me, and programs like the Pell Grant, Federal Work Study, and financial aid for low-income, high-ability students, I was able to attend my state's land-grant university. That experience changed my life

and the trajectory of my family. NDSU does the same for its students every day and I am drawn to this role because of the deep connection I feel to its mission and the energy and possibility of the state it calls home.

Building Trust and Advancing Shared Goals

I have spent my career working at the intersection of academic affairs and the student experience, leveraging trusted relationships and building the necessary bridges across typically siloed areas of the university. What I have come to understand is that our students, faculty members, and community partners do not care about org charts or reporting structures; they care about how well we do or do not deliver results. I have taken that charge and led initiatives that span the academic enterprise. This work is inherently complex, and leaders can fall prey to zero sum thinking. In these moments, my teams have heard me say again and again that trust is our capital; it is the currency that opens the door to collaboration and allows us to accomplish more together than we ever could alone. I have been successful nurturing trust and leading change because I work to clearly articulate shared goals, demonstrate a deep commit to transparency, and make space to truly listen. By following these principles, I have been able to advance complex efforts that require deep partnerships.

Students First: Advancing Enrollment and Student Success

Growing enrollment and prioritizing success for *all* students has been at the heart of my work. Due to my success in transforming the first-year experience and driving record first-year retention at Ohio State, I was asked to take on new responsibilities and create a more seamless experience for all students. This included increasing access through innovative scholarship and yield efforts, expanding the university's summer bridge and pre-enrollment programs, establishing a comprehensive support model for transfer students, and developing a novel second-year experience program. In 2014, the provost asked me to convene the Standing Committee on Student Success and Retention, working closely with the leaders of enrollment management, student affairs, and undergraduate education. This effort resulted in 11 strategic initiatives designed to close achievement gaps and the university achieving a record first-year retention rate of 95% in the Fall of 2017.

Given the success of our work at Ohio State, I was recruited to serve as New York University's inaugural chief student success officer. My charge was to address a persistent set of challenges stemming from the university's decentralized structure and a culture that did not center the student experience. Positioned centrally under the Provost, I worked closely with deans, faculty and student leaders, and administrative colleagues to integrate and personalize the student experience across colleges, schools, and campuses. I launched a new Division of Student Success that combined existing units, while also creating new ones such as the Center for Student Success Insights. The latter provided leaders with timely and personalized analyses, research, and assessment to drive actionable results. I was also asked to convene NYU's first Student Success Steering Committee and tackle systemic challenges to student success. Collectively, this led to record student outcomes including a 94.4% first-year retention rate and an 88.4% six-year graduation rate in 2020.

Similarly, I am proud of the record outcomes we have seen across student success and enrollment at the University of Tennessee. Since becoming Vice President and Chief Academic Officer, we have experienced a 20.2% increase in enrollment, a 4.5% increase in first-year retention, and a 10.2% increase in our four-year graduation rate. I have led systemwide efforts including our first strategic enrollment council, which has increased the number of educational pathways, with a special emphasis on community college transfer students, working learners, and industry and workforce partnerships. Additional highlights include the expansion of the Tennessee Transfer Pathways program that reduces barriers to entry, new systemwide policies to increase the use of credit for prior learning and competency-based education, and the launch of Work2Learn TN – a work and apprenticeship-based learning program created in partnership with Tennessee employers. Increasing the number of fully online students is another strategic goal for the university as we aim to grow from 6,800 to over 17,000 online students by 2030. A key first step was the creation of the *Vols Online* partnership between our Knoxville campus and Arizona State University. Already in year two, it is

helping us scale at a pace we could not do alone, while learning from an industry leader. Collectively, these efforts will help us reengage the more than 900,000 Tennesseans with some college but no degree.

Expanding Educational Access and Affordability

One of the cornerstones of our enrollment and student success efforts at the University of Tennessee has been an unwavering commitment to expanding educational access and affordability. Since 2021, I have directed the university's UT Promise program - providing Tennesseans with free tuition and fees to any UT campus if they meet our income threshold. In 2023, I led the university's effort to increase the income threshold from \$50,000 to \$75,000 and I am currently overseeing the effort to increase the threshold again, this time to \$100,000, for the upcoming enrollment cycle. Each evolution of the threshold has been done with careful financial modeling and in deep partnership with campus colleagues. Further, I partnered to successfully advocate for the expansion of the HOPE Scholarship – Tennessee's merit-based, lottery funded scholarship that provides awardees with \$4,500 for their freshmen and sophomore years and \$5,700 for their junior and senior years. Together, these programs have helped us achieve record rates of students who graduate debt free (55%) and reduced the average student debt to less than \$23,000.

My office also provides statewide leadership for initiatives that advance access and affordability in alignment with workforce needs. A key example is the Tennessee Grow Your Own Center – led by my team from 2022 through 2025 after receiving a \$20 million grant from the state of Tennessee. Tennessee was the first state in the U.S. to establish a permanent, federally registered teacher apprenticeship program, and now leads the nation in the production of teachers via no-cost apprenticeship degrees. The Center has become a national model, and we are exploring ways to apply the model to areas such as health care and manufacturing.

Driving Academic Excellence

As outlined in the Morrill Act of 1862, land-grant universities have the unique charge of providing a practical and accessible education while also ensuring knowledge and discoveries are shared with the citizens of the state. This virtuous cycle begins with supporting high-quality teaching, curricular innovation, and faculty development. At New York University, my team engaged in partnerships with department chairs and faculty leaders to strategically redesign courses with high rates of failing grades and/or withdrawal (i.e., high DFW rates). This multi-year effort positively impacted more than a dozen “stumbling block courses” through evidence-based practices. In the end, we not only improved student learning and course outcomes in the targeted courses, but participating departments shared how faculty participation led to new strategies that were applied and scaled beyond the targeted courses, leading to real gains in persistence and graduation rates.

At the University of Tennessee, my division leads regular engagements with academic leaders through statewide summits every fall and spring. The summits bring together deans, department chairs, and school leaders to engage in shared learning and on-going professional development. We also convene faculty and academic leaders for multi-day conferences on the scholarship of teaching and learning to advance innovative, evidence-based practices in the classroom, including the use of artificial intelligence (AI). To broaden engagements, my team hosts a monthly online series titled, “Elevated Leadership: A Virtual Series for Academic Excellence,” connecting our faculty with thought leaders in teaching, research, and academic innovation. I have also been proud to lead a more holistic approach to faculty support through the hiring of the university's first Chief Wellness Officer (CWO) in 2024. Reporting to my division, the CWO has broad oversight and is helping to expand services and support for faculty, staff, and students alike. I would welcome the opportunity to champion high-quality teaching that serves to prepare all learners for life after NDSU.

A final component of academic excellence is a university's commitment to shared governance and academic freedom. I have championed both during my time as VP and Chief Academic Officer at the University of Tennessee. The President and I convene the University Faculty Council each month, taking time to listen,

engage in dialogue, and share timely updates. We also work with council members to collect feedback on topics ranging from university policy and government relations to student success and research. These critical conversations have gone on to inform a new artificial intelligence policy, our 2030 strategic planning efforts, new academic programs aligned to workforce needs, and enrollment and infrastructure planning. When it comes to supporting academic freedom, I regularly engage with my government relations colleagues and our state's legislative leaders on topics including the important role of tenure and our post-tenure review process, as well as how the university is successfully navigating new state laws at the intersection of academic affairs and intellectual diversity. I am proud that we have been able to work together, build trust, and find positive ways forward at a time when that seems less and less common at peer institutions across the country.

Elevating the Land-Grant Mission

At the University of Tennessee, elevating the land-grant mission is at the heart of what we do. Through our statewide Institute of Agriculture, we have a presence in all 95 counties via our Extension offices and AgResearch and Education Centers. When combined with our Herbert College of Agriculture, College of Veterinary Medicine, and 4-H Youth Development Centers, the university is working to deliver practical knowledge, educational outreach, and ongoing support that improves lives and communities every day. In my role as Chief Academic Officer, I play a key part in supporting and advancing our Institute of Agriculture. I work closely with institute leaders to support curricular innovations such as new programs in precision agriculture, and drive partnerships with the Tennessee Department of Labor and Workforce Development to leverage extension offices as we aim to reach more working learners who could benefit from completing in-demand credentials. I also work closely with our office of government relations to champion investments in agriculture, extension, and statewide service. Examples include securing over \$40 million for 4-H Camp enhancements and significant capital investments for UT's College of Veterinary Medicine. I was also proud to chair the search for the Herbert College of Agriculture's new dean in 2025. Listening to and working with key stakeholders from students and faculty to the Commissioner of Agriculture, the Tennessee Farm Bureau, and other statewide association was key to the success of that search. Championing NDSU's land grant mission would be just as central if I had the opportunity to be your next president.

Placing Research at the Forefront

Attaining R1 research status is not easy to achieve or hold on to. The University of Tennessee Health Science Center recently joined UT Knoxville when it reached the R1 milestone last February. Our Chattanooga campus is also close to reaching R2 status as my team supports their development of new graduate programs in engineering and natural sciences and provides targeted funding to retain top talent in areas such as quantum science and urban informatics. As we make these investments and prioritize new programs, we know it is about more than simply reaching or maintaining a milestone. Advancing research efforts signals that we are committed to being one of the rare institutions that places a premium on expanding discovery and new knowledge. Doing so not only helps us attract top talent and better compete for critical grants and contracts, but it also ensures we are able to deliver on our social contract as a land-grant institution.

Beyond campus-based research, my team and I have the privilege of overseeing the university's relationships with Oak Ridge National Laboratory (ORNL), the U.S. Department of Energy, and the Battelle Memorial Institute on matters related to the UT-Battelle management and operations contract for ORNL. One of our central areas of focus is ensuring each campus benefits in its own unique way from this opportunity as we work to better connect faculty and graduate students with the innovative work happening at the lab.

Beyond the more visible aspects of what it means to be an R1 institution are key elements that must be present to create and sustain a healthy, compliant, and thriving research infrastructure. My team leads the university's effort to advance research security, enhance and streamline research administration, and develop clear and effective research policies, while not creating friction that can stifle collaboration or innovation.

Over the past two years we successfully launched a systemwide research security council and engaged in a security audit with Fischer and Associates to ensure we continue to minimize risk given increased expectations from state and federal partners. We have developed multiple new or updated research security policies to support an enhanced compliance posture. Finally, we are halfway through the implementation of the Huron Research Suite – a cloud-based set of modules and solutions designed to modernize our research administration enterprise. While this tool will be helpful, we are also convening communities of practice to ensure business processes evolve concurrent with the software solutions. These activities have been central to our ability to grow research expenditures, control costs, and minimize unnecessary security risks.

Strategic, Forward-Thinking Leadership

I was honored when the President and Board of Trustees asked me to lead UT's 2030 strategic planning process. My charge was not to simply refresh the old plan, but to lead broad stakeholder engagement and chart a new and distinctive path forward. Our early engagements included the Governor's team, legislative leaders, state commissioners, local chambers of commerce, leaders in agriculture, and our K-12 partners. At the campuses, we engaged cabinets members, deans, faculty, and student leaders. This process illuminated new pillars and priority areas for our 2030 plan, including "Fueling the Workforce of Tennessee," "Enabling Infrastructure Modernization," and an emphasis on "Developing Talent to Advance our Mission." These new pillars complement traditional areas of academic and research excellence and community engagement. Approved by our Board of Trustees in February, I am now charged with overseeing the implementation of the plan and ensuring we exceed our ambitious goals of enrolling 85,000 students, surpassing \$730 million in research expenditures, and helping 64% of our students graduate debt free.

Strategic, forward-thinking leadership goes beyond strategic planning. It also takes the form of advancing strategic partnerships that ensure long-term viability. The relationship between the University of Tennessee and our state's leaders has not been this positive in well over a generation. There is no doubt this starts at the top with our President who leads by example and is a role model for transparency, listening to understand, and communicating the economic value of the university. Being able to learn from and partner with the President in advancing the university's message has been a real honor. I am trusted to represent the university with key state partners including the Tennessee Higher Education Commission, the Tennessee Board of Regents, the Tennessee Departments of Education and Labor and Workforce Development, and key legislative leaders. Because of the university's trusted relationships, we have seen not only record support for new academic programs, but record investments in infrastructure, the university's funding formula, and research centers and institutes. While there has been much to celebrate, this work is never done. Our students, families, and communities expect that we are actively centering and advocating for their needs.

Cultivating Philanthropy and Partnerships

At the University of Tennessee, we are on pace to more than double our endowment by the end of the decade and surpass our goal of \$2.5 billion. While I have enjoyed working alongside our President, advancement colleagues, and campus leaders to cultivate and steward alumni and friends of the university, I have been even more central to my alma mater's advancement efforts. Since 2019, I have served as a board member, and most recently the Board Chair, of the Ohio State University Alumni Association. The Association is both a 501c3 and a reporting unit to Ohio State's vice president for advancement and external affairs and is charged with leading philanthropic engagement efforts for the university. During my time as Board Chair, I worked closely with the president of the Association, the vice president for advancement, and president of the university on its latest campaign – *The Ohio State University Time and Change Campaign*. A unique aspect of the campaign was the goal of engaging more than 750,000 unique donors on the path to raising \$4 billion. I am proud to say that when the campaign ended late last year, we engaged more than 814,000 unique donors and exceeded our goal by raising \$5.4 billion. Working alongside university leadership to develop strategy and engage key donors was a real privilege as the funds raised are actively supporting

students and scholarships (\$931 million), research (\$2.1 billion), and capital projects (\$675 million) among other key priorities. In total, this was the largest and most successful campaign in university history.

The Central Role of Athletics

Athletics has played a central role in both my family's and my higher education story. My father, the son of Italian immigrants whose own father only had a middle school education, attended Augustana College on a football scholarship. That opportunity shaped him as a person and a leader and allowed him to return to Eastern Ohio as a high school teacher and coach. Basketball became his calling, and he went on to coach the sport for over 30 years. Growing up on the sidelines gave me a sense of pride and a first-hand understanding of what it meant to sacrifice and be a part of something bigger than yourself.

As I went on to attend and later worked at Ohio State University, I experienced athletics on a different scale. It served as the front porch of the university, shaping the brand and reputation of the campus, and instilling a deep sense of pride and community. At the University of Tennessee, our Knoxville campus saw similar positive effects following the hiring of a new athletic director and key coaches and investments in athletic facilities. As teams continue to excel, there has been a clear, positive impact on the brand and university reputation as evidenced by record student applications, growth in enrollment, and record ticket sales and revenues.

While serving as Ohio State Alumni Association Board Chair, I also worked closely with President Carter and his team as they developed the university's strategic plan – *Education for Citizenship 2035*. In that plan, intercollegiate athletics is listed as a pillar for the first time in university history. The university took a clear stance: it does not have to choose between academics and athletics; it can publicly aspire to excel at both and acknowledge their positive interplay. During a 2024 consulting trip to the University of Miami, then interim president Joe Echevarria and I discussed his desire to publicly place Miami's athletics aspirations alongside its lofty academic and research goals. At NDSU, I believe the same approach is necessary. The university's athletics success is critical to its future. That being said, the athletics landscape is ever evolving with significant pressures related to recruiting, name, image, and likeness (NIL), financial stability and revenue, and, at NDSU, the football program's recent move to the Mountain West Conference. The new president must be ready to lead and drive a sustained commitment to athletic success at one of the most critical moments in the university's storied athletic history. I am ready for that moment.

Attending my state's public, land-grant university changed my life. It provided opportunities I could not have imagined. My professors and mentors saw potential in me when I only saw an 18-year-old kid from a single-parent home in a Rust Belt town. I hope to have the chance to pay that forward and give my all to a university and state that has critical momentum and limitless potential. This is the role of a lifetime, not a steppingstone on the way to something else. If hired, my family and I would be thrilled and honored to join the NDSU, Fargo, and greater North Dakota communities. I am confident my unique combination of leadership experiences and years of work building trusted partnerships will allow me to propel North Dakota State University forward. Through my work, I have demonstrated I can bring together positive and inclusive coalitions, develop high-performing teams, lead actionable strategy, and deliver key outcomes tied to university and state goals. I welcome the opportunity to discuss my experiences with you.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Bernie Savarese". The signature is stylized and written in a cursive script.

Dr. Bernie Savarese