

## Alan L. Smith

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February 14, 2026

Dear Members of the Presidential Search Committee,

I am honored to apply for the role of President of North Dakota State University. NDSU's land-grant mission, focused on providing transformational education and knowledge advancements that enable communities to thrive, has guided my own career across nearly three decades in higher education. It would be a privilege to join your leadership team, faculty and staff, students, alumni, and North Dakota stakeholders in advancing NDSU into its next era of societal impact.

I have spent my career as a faculty member and academic leader at Purdue University, Michigan State University, and Utah State University, Carnegie R1 land-grant institutions that support the well-being and vitality of their respective states. This has offered me insight into the complexity and importance of an institution like North Dakota State University, one that centers the student experience, the advancement of knowledge, innovation, and workforce alignment in ways that strengthen communities. For such an institution to thrive, its leader must embrace and effectively navigate challenges and change through strategic decision-making, enthusiastically and effectively communicate and work with a range of internal and external stakeholders, and be energized by helping others to fully realize their talents and to leverage opportunities. Acknowledging that others are best equipped to judge if I possess these and other important qualities for the President role, I provide examples here of my leadership experiences and accomplishments for your consideration that I believe showcase my values and leadership approach.

I recently completed service as Interim President of Utah State University, a land-grant, R1 institution with its main campus in Logan, Utah, additional statewide campuses, and extension offices in every county of the state. Further information on the size and scope of USU is found within my curriculum vitae. Importantly, though Utah code prevents an interim leader from pursuing the permanent role, I was not asked to serve in the role to keep the proverbial seat warm. The Board of Trustees, State Board of Higher Education, and Higher Education Commissioner charged me with advancing the institution during a period of challenged campus morale and both state and national headwinds for higher education. I achieved this in a way that has set the stage for our new permanent President to succeed.

When I assumed the interim presidency, USU was at an inflection point. The state legislature had just mandated a 10 percent reallocation of our instructional budget and charged USU with piloting statewide general education reform. At the same time, we faced an accreditation review, a major athletic conference transition, a comprehensive budget model evaluation, and multiple leadership vacancies. Combined with federal changes that significantly impacted predictability of research funding inflows, the overlapping pressures could have destabilized the institution.

Instead, we embraced these challenges as opportunities. We restructured academic colleges for more impactful research synergy and to better integrate our developing general education curriculum, secured significant donor funding linked to the restructuring, received strong praise in successfully completing the accreditation process, and effectively managed transition and planning in our athletic department to strengthen our leadership, stakeholder buy-in, and readiness to enter the Pac-12. We made advancements in supporting our lowest paid staff, our budget redesign, and our statewide redesign, setting the stage for the next President to successfully launch USU into its next act. And, just as important, we maintained confidence across the state and within the university community that USU was not retreating in a moment of stress but advancing with purpose.

In navigating this period of significant change, I leaned on centering students, staff, and faculty in our decision-making, focusing on our strategic long-term interests, and drawing on the vast and diverse expertise of our campus and broader community to inform our decisions. I invite you to visit the USU President [website](#) to see examples of how I communicated with our university community about our reallocation process and other developments. My goal was to be transparent, educational, and empathetic while focusing on our long-term strategic positioning and navigating our state political context in constructive ways.

Prior to and following my presidency, I have served as Endowed Dean of the Emma Eccles Jones College of Education and Human Services at USU, a \$110M enterprise spanning education, health, and human services. Early in my tenure, I made the decision to restructure the distribution of indirect cost returns. Though initially unpopular, this allowed us to expand research infrastructure, increase grant-writing support, and provide seed funding for innovative projects. Within four years, our external funding grew from about \$37M to \$52M annually, with additional growth on the horizon thanks to our diversified and impactful funding portfolio.

Equity and fairness have been equally central to my work as Dean. Our decentralized structure had led to inconsistent practices in promotion, tenure, service allocation, and hiring strategy. I have worked with department heads, faculty, and staff to create clear policies, conduct educational sessions, and establish transparent communication channels. These reforms have improved equity across the college and have contributed to stronger hiring, retention, and career development outcomes.

Externally, I have expanded advancement efforts that enabled us to endow new chairs, complete a major nursing program expansion, and launch statewide supports for early-career K–12 teachers. We have invested in communications to raise the college’s visibility, transforming it from a hidden gem into a recognized leader in education and health scholarship. Also, I serve as a resource for school superintendents, state representatives and senators, and the Governor’s Office in addressing a variety of issues tied to our college mission, including K–12 education issues, youth social media use, disability needs, Alzheimer’s Disease and Dementia, and others. These efforts have strengthened relationships with legislators and donors and have showcased the college as a trusted partner in addressing urgent social and educational needs across Utah.

In pursuing these efforts, I apply a leadership philosophy that rests on three principles. First, high-quality process is what yields desired outcomes. Lasting success requires inclusive decision-making, valuing data and expertise, and clear communication. By investing in process, we safeguard not only immediate outcomes but the long-term health of our institutions. Second, leadership is collective. Sustainable progress happens when people at all levels are empowered to contribute meaningfully. An effective leader guides, creates space for diverse perspectives, and ensures that decisions are understood even when not unanimously endorsed. Third, leadership is developmentally informed. Institutions thrive when they recognize and support the growth of individuals, units, and initiatives at every stage. Just as higher education must adapt to new challenges, so too must leaders embrace the evolving needs, talents, and passions of their communities.

These principles have guided me in moments of challenge. In the wake of a high-profile tragedy in Utah that drew national attention, I convened stakeholders to support students, offered forums for civil discourse, and managed communications with compassion and steadiness. By centering high-quality process, collective empowerment, and the needs of our stakeholders, we were laser focused on student well-being, educational opportunity, and free speech in a time of crisis and foregrounded the importance of our land-grant mission. Situations like this underscore that leadership is not only about authority, but also about empathy, resilience, and integrity.

How do my experiences and approach align with the key qualities and priorities for the next NDSU President? As a first-generation college student who was a student-athlete and worked throughout college, as well as a long-time contributor to land-grant institutions over my career, I am strongly committed to making education accessible, promoting student success and wellbeing, and developing our human and other resources in ways that offer top-tier learning experiences and post-graduation outcomes. As an accomplished scholar – one who would add to your faculty among the top 2% most-cited researchers in their fields – I have a strong commitment to creating an ecosystem of research excellence and innovation that fuels discovery and meaningful applications. As an

experienced higher education leader, I embrace strategic and forward-looking decision-making, collaboration and shared governance, and the cultivation of relationships with the many internal and external stakeholders who, in partnership, enable NDSU to offer sustainable and impactful benefits to the citizens of North Dakota and beyond. And, though not from the region myself, my wife's father was raised in Ellendale and most of my career has been spent in the Midwest. I believe this would enable me to develop authentic relationships and be an effective and trusted leader at NDSU. I endeavor to be a servant leader who makes decisions that align with the best interests of the institution while understanding the human and cultural dimensions of those decisions.

Looking ahead, I believe NDSU is an institution on the rise that will lead in many areas. For example, the recent strategic investments in engineering and science, NDeavor, and your innovation district, along with the New Horizon investment by the legislature, will enable NDSU to lead in emerging fields comprising the Fourth Industrial Revolution and ensure that students meaningfully engage with and ultimately find success in the workplaces of the future. Furthermore, integrating this with NDSU's strengths in agriculture, extension, and allied health ensures these advancements are intertwined with community well-being and economic prosperity. North Dakota is unusual in that the state legislature has remained solidly behind higher education during the current political context. If this continues along with NDSU's research enterprise growth, the state could find itself holding an enviable market advantage in the higher education sector moving forward.

Enrollment is a challenge for most higher education institutions, and I see that NDSU is no exception. The recent stabilization of enrollment is encouraging. The research and legislative context I just described, establishing the Honors College, transitioning football to the Mountain West (i.e., FBS competition), and being embedded in a growing metropolitan area could be leveraged to increase enrollment. I also see value in assessing where we might get in the way of student success and retention, be it through our bureaucratic systems, our offerings, our application of financial support, and so forth. My general vision if I were to be selected to lead NDSU would be to build on our research and innovation momentum, further center students as we evaluate how we can better realize our institutional mission, advance our national reputation as a center of discovery and learning excellence, and deepen relationships with our communities, the legislature, alumni, donors and other stakeholders to ensure sustainability of our growth and success.

I do not underestimate the headwinds higher education faces – declining public trust, financial constraints, demographic trends, rapid technological change, and political polarization. Yet I view these not as reasons for retreat but as opportunities for NDSU to lead. With its land-grant foundation, breadth of expertise, tradition of community engagement, and current momentum, NDSU is poised to demonstrate higher education's enduring value by improving lives and fueling innovation.

What excites me most about NDSU is the chance to help shape the next generation of knowledge, industry, and community leaders while advancing the well-being of North Dakota and beyond. By investing in people, cultivating a vibrant intellectual climate, and communicating NDSU's value with clarity and conviction, I believe we can elevate the university's role as a model of innovation, access, and service.

Thank you for considering my application. I would welcome the opportunity to discuss how my leadership experiences, values, and vision align with NDSU's bold ambitions for the future.

Yours sincerely,



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