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Presidential Search Committee  
Louisburg College

Dear Friends:

Louisburg College is doing some of the most important work in the world. You are educating young people so that they can discover opportunities and be of benefit to others. Education is the means by which we become fully human and create a better world.

I recently became aware that you are searching for a new president. I have read your institutional profile with great care, giving thoughtful consideration the qualities you seek. I resonate deeply with the mission, purpose, and values that Louisburg College embodies. I treasure helping students learn how to learn and to make their opportunities grow. I believe there is a strong possibility that I may be an excellent fit for your leadership needs. I am honored to offer my materials for your consideration.

When President Philip P. Kerstetter invited me to join his team at the University of Mount Olive, I was honored to accept his offer because he and I have a strong working relationship which we developed at Kansas Wesleyan University, a United Methodist liberal arts college. President Kerstetter likes using me as a utility infielder, helping him with a variety of university projects. Shortly before my arrival, he needed to make a change in the leadership of the university's dysfunctional institutional advancement team. He asked if I would accept this challenge. As a team player, I was delighted to do so. I discovered the advancement team to be a group of separate, isolated individuals with an abundance of potential. In leading the advancement team, I sought to transform them into a community of people of unconditional value committed to finding effective ways in which we could collaborate as a unified whole. Together, we planned and implemented a \$20 million capital campaign, exceeded our goal, restored and re-built relationships with our donor base, including church members and alumni who felt alienated from the University. At the same time, we increased our donor base, increased giving to the annual fund by 38%, and expanded alumni relations.

After we passed the \$20 million mark, President Kerstetter asked if I would become dean of the chapel, with an eye to strengthening church relations. In this position, I developed a Center for Church Leadership, which, in collaboration with denominational leaders, serves educational needs of the University's founding church.

President Kerstetter then wanted to make changes in the ways in which our department of religion was functioning. He wanted to see more vital connections between the department and the University on the one hand, and our founding church on the other. To this end, he asked if I would serve as the Barrow Chair for Biblical Studies, the only endowed chair in the University. I assumed this post on August 1, 2016. In addition to a fulltime teaching load, which I thoroughly enjoy, President Kerstetter has asked me to lead the department of religion in the development of the Barrow Center for Faith and Life, for the purpose of better serving the spiritual needs of the University. My colleagues and I are actively engaged in developing the Center. As a part of the Center, I designed and wrote a grant proposal, which we submitted to the Lilly Endowment, for the development of a youth institute for the study of theology. The purpose of the institute is to engage young people in theological education, challenge them to listen for the call of God in their lives, and to consider service in the church as either a lay leader or clergy person. The Lilly Endowment awarded us \$269,000, and we launched the institute, *The Challenge: Exploring God's Call*, in the summer of 2016.

My approach to leadership at both Kansas Wesleyan and the University of Mount Olive involves a forward-looking orientation that inspires both internal and external constituencies by treating people with deep respect, helping people to be their best, and leading people to understand and embrace the possibilities we can achieve by working together and pulling for the whole. Louisburg College enjoys an extraordinary opportunity to develop educational opportunities that are of benefit to students, church, and the greater community.

To be effective, it is essential that a president involve the entire college community in renewing its identity, discovering its strengths, and then looking to the larger community for the most important places to serve and to make an impact for the betterment of the world and our common life together. When a president treasures the institution and the people, embracing the community with enthusiasm, kindness, and respect, the College can fulfill its mission of helping opportunities grow in the lives of students so that they can be of benefit both to themselves and to others. Should I have the honor of serving as your president, I would not expect to impose a strategic vision from on high. I would instead expect to create an enthusiastic, collaborative, creative climate in which identity and direction emerge and unfold among us.

I do, however, have educational convictions that form my leadership. These convictions involve five foci:

Community and creativity: Education works best as a cooperative adventure through which the entire educational community embodies a climate that promotes creativity and innovation, and actively explores the vital connections between faith, learning, and vocational preparation. Education is successful when graduates enjoy the capacity for developing community, engaging their own creativity, and serving others as they commence life in the world as alumni of the college. It is essential that the president of the College cultivate a community of collaboration in which the creative work of education can unfold.

The meaning of life: Meaning has to do with both purpose and connections. Education works best when students have the opportunity to study literature and art with an eye to asking, what is life for, and what is *my* life for? How are we connected as human beings? When we strengthen those connections, what kinds of actions can we take together that will improve life for others? The liberal arts help us understand and make meaningful connections, for they involve liberation from the ignorance through the arts of education. The books of great literature, including Homer, the Bible,

Virgil, Dante, Shakespeare, Milton, Melville, Faulkner, O'Connor, and Allende (to name but a few) serve as invaluable works in which students can explore the mystery of meaning that their own lives can embody.

Service in the world: Education is most effective when students take responsibility for connecting classroom learning to serving the benefit of others. This may include service learning and internships where both students and supervisors understand the mutual benefits of education implemented for the strengthening of the greater community. It may also involve drawing the entire academic community together in order to interact with the Louisburg community for the greater good.

Practical wisdom: Education works best when the community embraces a climate which engages students in the exploration of practical wisdom. This includes connecting insights from the classroom and co-curricular activities to the challenges students face. It also involves supporting students as they learn to reflect on their own experience, including mistakes, to develop spiritual insight and the capacity to live more wisely.

Development of faith: Education works best when students are given the opportunity to explore the most effective ways to know and interact with God, connecting their faith to both classroom learning and life in the world. For Louisburg College, this might include an ongoing exploration of the treasures of the United Methodist heritage and the kind of creativity and energy that gave birth to the Methodist movement.

I believe this kind of educational experience to be essential for the development of vital communities in a world in which polarization has become both severe and paralyzing, provoking greater hostility, gridlock, and alienation.

To make this kind of educational experience a reality and to improve student retention, there are several simple, high leverage actions the college community can take to enhance the student's learning. It is essential that students know that we treasure them and believe in them. Students need to know that we want them to succeed. It is also essential that we help students set high educational goals and help them design clear pathways to the completion of goals. Students then need our help in keeping on task so that they make daily progress. Students can thrive when we both challenge and support them. Finally, students can best thrive when we lead them to explore ways in which they can use their education to benefit of others. Higher education is pivotal for their success as human beings and for creating a better world.

As the College turns to marketing its educational experience and increasing enrollments, it is essential that we embrace our educational identity with mutual enthusiasm and openly celebrate the accomplishments of students and alumni who are already living in fulfillment of this educational vision. The College can also explore the most vital ways it can serve needs of the immediate local community as well as the region. At the University of Mount Olive, we have recently done this by adding programs in graduate education, nursing, agricultural production, and analytics, while strengthening our programs in criminal justice, education, healthcare management, agri-business, agricultural education, religion, art, and music. We have added and strengthened programs as a result of our collaborative relationships with the civic and business leadership of the region of eastern North Carolina. I would expect to initiate a similar process with the region that Louisburg College serves. This would involve engaging both internal and external constituencies for their counsel and insight.

The open commitment of the college to serve the region goes hand-in-hand with developing philanthropic support. Here, the president plays a pivotal role. The willingness of individuals, congregations, businesses, and corporations to give to a college is directly related to their understanding of the contribution the College makes to the well-being of the community and the respect that the College conveys. When the president engages the church, alumni and community leaders with respect, people develop a sense of “our being in this together.” This creates a climate of optimism and hope in which the president can invite people to support the College through their financial gifts. This is the kind of president I intend to be.

What kinds of skill-sets would I bring to Louisburg College? I have the practical knowledge base and perspective of an administrator, a faculty member, and a fundraiser. I have skills for developing fully collaborative working relationships. I am strong with fundraising and the wise use of resources. I value building positive, collaborative relationships of all kinds, including working relationships. I have a facility for recognizing the commonalities within disparate parts and interests. I treasure diversity and bringing all parties into the community and to the table. I aspire to be a kind, thoughtful listener, and I do so by caring about the people in front of me and what they actually think and feel. I have strength with exploring and envisioning new programs and markets. I have experience with both traditional and adult education. I have a familiarity and deep appreciation for eastern North Carolina. I have a track record of building morale. I have experience hiring and supervising senior administrative leaders. I work effectively with volunteer boards, most recently, the foundation board of the University of Mount Olive. I am comfortable raising visibility, challenging people to become stakeholders. I am good with strategic questions and am a careful listener who treasures both individuals and the community, fostering genuine collegiality. I cultivate trust by working at being open with my own communication and trusting members of the team. I try to be my best self and to respond to the best in others. When there are problems, I get the problems on the table and resolve them directly so that everyone can do their work effectively. After casting the vision, I set concrete goals and then divide the goals into steps and follow the steps to completion. I am an enthusiastic cheerleader who creates a hopeful, joyous climate in which people can work as a team and pull for the whole. The feedback I receive from others indicates that I have strong speaking skills with groups of all sizes. I am on the road many weekends speaking on behalf of the University. I meet people easily and enjoy restoring broken relationships. I am skilled at understanding the larger story and sharing it with stakeholders in a compelling way—both to individuals and to large groups. I understand the role of the president in advancement. I am open to criticism and take responsibility for my mistakes and effect change.

It is in view of my background that I think I may be a strong candidate for the presidency of Louisburg College. My skill set includes classroom teaching. I continue to engage in applied research. I have experience with both institutional finance and fund-raising. I consistently promote diversity, inclusion, and equal opportunity, and I do so with love and enthusiasm. Student recruitment is second nature to me. And I regard ties between the College and the United Methodist Church as essential sources of educational creativity and life. I have broad inter-cultural experience and competency. And others regard my public presentation to be outstanding.

I also have the deepest of respect for and support of the symbiosis of faculty, students, staff, directors, and alumni. I interact with and listen to all as often as I can. My wife Nancy and I host dinners that include students, faculty, staff, alumni, several times each month.

What I have written above is not exhaustive, though I hope it has not been an exhausting read! Suffice it to say that if the search committee does select me to be one of your candidates, I shall count it a joy to meet you and to envision how we might work together to continue to develop the great educational heritage of Louisburg College. And should I to have the honor of serving as your president, I will pledge to lead you with prayerfulness, humility, honesty, humor, joy, openness, vision, energy, kindness, and heartfelt warmth. The task of serving a College with such an important calling requires nothing less. I wish you God's blessing and the very best as you select your next president.

Sincerely yours,

John N. Blackwell, Ph.D.