

May 8, 2017

Dear search committee members,

Please accept the essay below as my letter of application to serve as President of Texas Southmost College. Thank you, in advance, for your consideration.

I approach my work as a leader with an appreciation for history and culture. I know that we, as individuals, leaders, community members, are both products and producers of history and culture. As products of history, events in the past shaped us, constrained us, but in many ways, gave us meaning and opportunity. As producers of history, our actions influence and can change what the future may be. Like history, culture shapes who we are and gives us meaning. We are not only products of culture, but also producers of it. These simple ideas, speak the story of Texas Southmost College and, concomitantly, point toward opportunities that lie ahead.

The type of historical and cultural dynamics that gave rise to the formation of Texas Southmost College, in many ways, remains with us today. We are confronted with challenges related to economic and educational opportunity, health, and the environment. I believe a distinctive college, like Texas Southmost College, is an essential resource to address such challenges and propel the community of Brownsville into sustained prosperity.

As I have studied the college, I see a clear intention of equipping students with the intellectual, social, and cultural resources to be innovators and change agents for the region and the nation. In the remaining sections of this letter, I hope to describe how my training and experience position me to effectively serve the faculty, staff, and students of Texas Southmost College and the community of Brownsville during this pivotal chapter in the region's history.

For the past two decades, I have served as professor, administrator, and national consultant — all with a focus on increasing the capacity of

colleges to better serve and educate students and communities. As a professor, I direct the doctoral program in educational leadership at California State University San Marcos. In addition to my administrative, teaching, and scholarly activities, I am collaborating with K-12 school districts, community colleges, local non-profits, hospitals, city, county, and state government on a regional collective impact initiative (Kania & Kramer, 2014) that will significantly increase the number of students who are college-ready and prepared to be successful in completing their degree programs. Using GIS (Geographic Information Systems) mapping, our key indicators target current educational, health, and social conditions, such as math, reading, and writing achievement scores, high school graduation rates, college participation and completion rates, poverty rates, employment rates, obesity rates, rates for diabetes, child abuse and neglect, domestic violence, and substance abuse. Our intention is that this work will lead to better and sustained social conditions for San Diego County and serve as a model of the state and nation.

Previously, I served as Associate Vice President for Academic Affairs at Our Lady of the Lake University (OLLU), a predominantly Hispanic-serving institution. Within this role, I guided, managed, and directed the areas of academic effectiveness and student success, including the assessment of learning outcomes, regional accreditation, general education, faculty development, and professional development for deans and department chairs. I also guided the implementation and assessment of our institution-wide student success initiative.

While at OLLU, I guided and collaboratively designed the institutional and programmatic responses to our regional and national accreditation associations. To meet, and I would argue exceed, our accreditation standards for the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS), I worked with our deans, department chairs, and faculty in designing sophisticated program learning outcome assessment plans that increased and enhanced the learning achieved by our students in each academic program, as well as through our face-to-face, hybrid, and fully online delivery systems.

Concomitantly, I led and guided our Academic Program Review Committee in redesigning the guidelines, criteria, and processes for Academic Program Review. This included facilitating college-wide discussions and reflection on what we (and others) mean by high quality and distinctive academic programs. The redesign of our Academic Program Review guidelines and key performance indicators also were driven by a need for appropriate data to inform our decisions about establishing new or redesigning existing academic programs. I also

guided the development of three new academic programs.

The heart and character of every college is represented in its general education program. At OLLU, I led two committees: our General Education Learning Outcome Assessment Committee and our Strategic Planning Taskforce on General Education Redesign. Within our General Education Learning Outcome Assessment Committee, we put in place a new assessment system that allowed us to complete a full-cycle of assessment within a two-year period. Our Strategic Planning Taskforce on General Education Redesign accomplished two important tasks: (a) clarified a university-wide message of what it means to be a distinctive institution of higher education in the 21st century, and (b) developed a proposal for competency-based assessment.

In addition, I founded, designed, and facilitated a new Faculty Leadership Academy (FLA). The purpose of the FLA was to prepare the next generation of faculty leaders who have mastered learning outcome assessment, academic program and curricular design, and faculty governance within the context of innovation and design thinking (dschool.stanford.edu). The products of the FLA included the design of undergraduate programs in Biomathematics and Chemical Biology, as well as evidence-based pedagogical practices for college algebra and English.

As a scholar in the field of higher education and guided by a personal mission to increase student success for all students, I designed and guided the implementation of several comprehensive, first-year experience programs. Each was a college-wide effort that involved deans, department chairs, English and math faculty, academic counselors, the math and writing centers, and student services. Informed by the recent literature on college student success (Rendon, Garcia, Person, 2004; Gonzalez, 2003, 2009, 2012; Kuh, 2012; Padilla, 2011; Tinto 2008), the central feature of these new first-year experience programs involved establishing cohort-based learning communities. Every new first-year student was carefully placed in a learning community. Learning support systems were put in place to help students in math and writing, as well as career development. Results for OLLU: In 18 months, we increased the end of fall term GPA for all of our entering new students by more than 23 percentage points. In 2012, only 37% of our new students earned a GPA of 3.0 or above. In 2013, 60% of our new students earned a GPA of 3.0 or above. Conversely, in 2012, 36% of our new students had a GPA that was below 2.0 at the end of their 1st term. In 2013, only 15% of our new, students had a GPA below 2.0.

In addition to my work at OLLU, I've served as an institutional effectiveness consultant for 13 years, primarily with the national initiative, Achieving the Dream, Inc. Achieving the Dream serves more than 230 colleges with one specific purpose: Increasing student success. Over the last decade, I worked with more than 40 colleges in data-informed institutional transformation initiatives to increase student success. In 2012, Zane State College won the prestigious Leah Meyer Austin Award (luminafoundation.org) for improving college readiness and completion rates for first generation college students. I served as their institutional effectiveness coach (with Dr. Alice Villadsen) for this multi-year initiative. In 2013, South Texas College won the Leah Meyer Austin Award for improving college completion rates for Hispanic students. I served as their institutional effectiveness coach (with Dr. Martha Romero) for the multi-year initiative. More than 200 colleges compete annually for this prestigious award.

I also bring 18 years of experience as a faculty member at the University of San Diego, San Jose State University, California State University Fullerton and California State University San Marcos. Within my faculty role, I designed and coordinated graduate programs in college counseling and student development. As a faculty member, I was awarded the Outstanding Teaching Award in 1999, 2003, and 2010. I also served on the academic senate and the academic senate executive committee. Many of my students have earned prestigious fellowships and internships, and have gone on to serve as effective educators and leaders. My research examines program effectiveness in increasing student success, campus culture and the persistence of students of color in college, access to college, and the role of faculty in serving the public good. My work appears in *The Journal of College Student Development*, *The International Journal of Qualitative Research in Education*, *The Journal of College Student Retention*, *New Directions for Higher Education*, *Urban Education* and *The Journal of Hispanic Higher Education*. I served on editorial boards for *The Journal of College Student Development*, *the Journal of the First Year Experience* and *Students in Transition*, and *the Journal of Hispanic Higher Education*. My book (with Raymond V. Padilla) is titled, "Doing the Public Good: Latina/o Scholars Engage Civic Participation."

With more than 18 years as a faculty member, the act of teaching is very personal for me. On a personal level, I believe that my capacity to be a great teacher and leader involves the utilization of all of my experiences, training, personality, and knowledge. I believe the best teachers teach with every fiber of their being. Some of us are storytellers and share powerful stories to facilitate break-through teaching moments. Some of us

are incredibly visual, and use elaborate displays of information to simplify concepts and formulas. Finally, some of us are driven by social interaction and use small group dynamics to deepen understanding and application of theory.

Teaching predominately first-generation college students, I developed my own theory of student learning to inform my teaching strategies. My theory states, "Students learn as they overcome or "breakthrough" common hurdles in acquiring knowledge, skills, and dispositions. " Our job as educators is to understand and identify the common hurdles and develop breakthrough concepts, stories, or pedagogies to overcome and eliminate such hurdles for students.

I agree with Finley (2012) that "every college graduate needs and deserves to reach high levels of achievement." My job, as a leader in higher education, is to ensure that all students can demonstrate high levels of learning achievement. More than that, I believe that distinctive colleges with diverse students provide the best learning environment to produce the next generation of artists, scientists, and leaders that will liberate our human potential.

Thank you, again, for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Kenneth P. Gonzalez, Ph.D.