

# MINDY BENSON

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Dear Co-Chair Barnes, Co-Chair Christiansen, and Members of the Search Committee:

Having been nominated, I am honored to submit my application for the presidency of Southern Utah University. As this letter and my curriculum vitae will demonstrate, I am uniquely qualified for this opportunity at this time and have the experience, ability, knowledge, passion, commitment, and relationships to successfully lead this University.

In recent weeks, I have been asked why I want to be the president of SUU. My answer is simple and heartfelt. I love SUU and have a deep desire to help shape its destiny and make a positive impact on the lives of our students, faculty, staff, alumni, and friends. This is a special institution. Our mission is crucial and consequential. I know SUU changes lives for the better because my own life was forever transformed as a student here, and I have witnessed thousands of students experience this same transformation. It has been my great fortune to devote my professional career to the place and to the people I cherish, in student affairs, in alumni relations, as vice president of alumni and community relations, and as interim president since July 2021.

Over the past twenty five years, I've also been afforded many professional opportunities beyond the campus and Cedar City. As a professional event planner, I have helped organize and lead numerous large-scale events throughout the country, including national political conventions, presidential and gubernatorial inaugurations, and headliner concerts. The leadership skills I've acquired in these high-stakes, high-pressure events—strategy, teamwork, attention to detail, calm under pressure—have helped me successfully confront the day-to-day issues and pressures of a university president.

I acknowledge that I am not a traditional presidential candidate. However, the shifting dynamics of higher education call for a different kind of president with a distinct and unique set of skills and capabilities, many of which I have developed throughout my career. An extensive study conducted by Deloitte's Center for Higher Education Excellence and Georgia Tech's Center for 21st Century Universities asked college presidents to rank the most important skills needed in their jobs. Their top two answers were "strategist" and "communicator/storyteller," followed by "fundraiser" and "collaborator." When asked to rank their most important responsibilities, the top two answers were "fundraising/alumni/donor relations" and "strategic planning," followed by "enrollment management" and "trustee relationships." Contemporary presidents, they concluded, must look "up and out" from campus more than "down and in," and need to "focus on relations with the governing board, the public, alumni, and political leaders."

I am that contemporary candidate for SUU. I am a proven leader, communicator, collaborator, fundraiser, strategist, and builder and steward of relationships. While I am fully confident in my ability to engage with those who are "up and out" from campus, I will never lose sight of the people for whom we exist: our students, and our faculty and staff who teach and mentor them.

Allow me to share a few of my thoughts about how I will lead, my professional experience, the priorities and issues critical to SUU's future, and the lens through which I, as president, will address the opportunities and challenges of SUU.

## **Leadership Philosophy of Engagement and Vision**

The phrase "people support what they help to create" summarizes my approach to leadership. This philosophy is a guiding force whenever I consider an issue, project, or initiative. As interim president, I have intentionally fostered a campus culture that engages and empowers faculty, staff, and

students to take an active role in the University's decision-making process. I believe when individuals and groups have their voices heard and can contribute their collective knowledge, experience, and wisdom, they are more invested in and supportive of the decision, which leads to better outcomes. This is why preserving and amplifying SUU's shared governance model is an important priority for me.

For example, early in my tenure I was confronted with the issue of whether or not to require a COVID-19 vaccination for our students. Rather than following urban institutions and making an immediate decision on my own, I first chose to invest time engaging and listening to our campus community. I held several online forums with our faculty, staff, and students. I carefully read and thoughtfully responded to scores of emails, and sought the counsel of trusted advisors, including the leadership of the faculty senate, staff association, and student association along with SUU trustees, local leaders, local health officials, and my cabinet. The ultimate decision did not, and could not, satisfy everyone. However, my sincere desire was that each person felt heard and understood and that their opinions and concerns were equally valued and considered. To me, that is the essence of shared governance.

My approach to shared governance will also engage all of our major stakeholders in formulating and executing a bold, ambitious shared vision for the University. SUU's vision and strategic plan must focus on a number of critical themes and address how we will: 1) Preserve our highly personalized and caring learning environment; 2) Increase access and affordability for all students; 3) Improve student success, retention, completion and workforce preparedness; 4) Prioritize diversity, equity and inclusion for all; 5) Foster a campus culture healthy in all ways; 6) Launch an ambitious fundraising campaign; 7) Expand communication and brand awareness regionally and nationally; 8) Galvanize regional economic development and industry partnerships; 9) Resolve community issues in partnership with community leaders; and 10) Ensure the enduring strength and vitality of SUU.

I served as a member of our strategic planning committee in 2020-2021 and was integrally involved in creating a draft blueprint for the University. With new leadership, and the changing higher education landscape in a post-pandemic environment, I will invite the planning committee and campus community to review, modify and update our plans to forge a bold future for SUU. My expertise and background in communication also uniquely prepares me to coalesce all stakeholder groups and ensure there is a deep sense of ownership, support, and commitment to our shared mission and vision. I will also clearly and consistently articulate the University's vision, priorities, and distinctive qualities to energize and inspire our greater campus community.

### **Building Community Through Collaboration and Connection**

The soul of SUU is its people. This includes faculty, staff, students, alumni, community members, the Board of Trustees, the Utah Board of Higher Education, legislators, donors, and friends. As a president, strategically collaborating, connecting, and building community among all of these groups is paramount. I have dedicated my career to putting people and relationships first and have found that doing so leads to better outcomes. This is the same approach I will take as SUU's president.

An important piece of building community and valuing people first at SUU is through diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). I have a deep personal commitment to advancing this work on our campus. Students and alumni often speak of the belonging they feel here and that they "aren't just a number" at SUU. The vision, mission, and goals set forth by SUU's Office of Equity & Inclusion coupled with SUU's Equity Framework are excellent tools to help our campus community create an environment that celebrates diverse approaches and points of view. Such tools not only smooth the way for diverse students, but also allow all students to gain knowledge and skills to interact and compete on a more divergent or varied plane once they graduate. These tools need increased investment, expanded buy-in, and broad utilization across campus. That starts at the top. As interim president, I have worked to listen, learn, and understand the experiences and challenges of diverse groups across campus. I have also collaborated with the faculty, staff, and students leading these efforts to find specific ways we can make our campus a place of belonging.

The confidence, enthusiasm, and support of faculty and staff is also essential to our success. If our employees feel valued, fairly compensated, and appropriately resourced, our students will benefit. Our campus community has worked relentlessly to keep up with the demands of aggressive enrollment growth and numerous innovative academic initiatives while navigating the ever-changing challenges of a worldwide pandemic. In my role as interim president, I have listened empathetically to their thoughts, concerns, opinions, and ideas on how we can collectively enhance employee morale and our campus culture. In the last ten months, I have expanded the scope of our president's council agendas to include more feedback from faculty, staff, and students, convened our associate vice presidents to tackle important issues, and launched employee retention and community building initiatives. More than 1,100 people choose to work at SUU and their active engagement is crucial to fulfilling our mission.

I have devoted the majority of my career to building and cultivating relationships in the community, region, and state. I'm confident that, as president, these well established relationships will elevate SUU's regional and statewide stature and benefit the University in meeting our opportunities and challenges. Moreover, I have been successful in developing new relationships over the years, and as president, will continue to seek out and connect with new stakeholders for mutual benefit.

I am appreciative of the history of the founding and nurturing of this institution by its surrounding community, which is undeniably a true partner with the University. I believe that the president of the University is, and must be, a community leader. Our ability to mobilize support from the community will advance both parties. We have seen this symbiotic relationship bring success many times throughout our shared history, and the continuation and strengthening of that bond is essential. The institution is also an economic engine for Cedar City, Iron County, and the greater region. As president, I will continue to work cooperatively with area leaders, industry partners and the general public to enhance the economic vitality of the community and region.

I was able to draw upon my relationships with city and county leaders during my first days as interim president. The extensive flooding in Cedar City and Enoch City this past summer affected a number of our students, faculty, staff, alumni and friends. I was able to quickly and closely coordinate the University's vast volunteer efforts with that of city, county, state, and ecclesiastical leaders, because of the long-standing and trusted associations I have in the community and region. I will also continue to work collaboratively with our Board of Trustees, the Commissioner's Office, Council of Presidents, and the Utah Board of Higher Education to ensure SUU remains a strong leader and partner in advancing higher education in our state.

### **Enriching the Student Experience**

The centerpiece of my administration will be a focus on student success. I am committed and will work tirelessly to enhance the student experience, both in and out of the classroom, and believe that my ability to do so has been cemented by my experiences. I devoted the first twelve years of my career working with student leaders to enhance the student experience here. For the past fourteen years I have taught an event management class on campus. The course curriculum is focused on hands-on learning and leadership opportunities that provide my students with real-world event planning experience. As a result, we have alumni working as event professionals all over the world. The growth and success of this class led to the creation of an event management minor that is now part of the Hotel, Resort and Hospitality Management program in the Dixie L. Leavitt School of Business.

My experience teaching and working with students throughout my career has reinforced the importance of providing for the holistic needs of our students. All students' academic successes are impacted by their mental, emotional, social, physical, and financial well-being. We will focus on meeting students where they are, and providing them with the holistic support they need to thrive on our campus. As interim president, I have convened a mental health task force, found proactive solutions to confront the mental health challenges our students face, and worked with student leaders to bring a student health clinic back to campus.

I also believe an SUU education should be affordable and available to anyone who is prepared and desirous of a college degree or credential. I am a proponent of a balanced enrollment growth plan where the University invests in strategies to sustain and expand both face-to-face and online experiences that meet the needs of students and the capacity of the University and community. We must also provide appropriate resources for faculty and staff to support our enrollment growth. Our primary focus is educating Utahns and I will expand efforts to recruit and retain students of color, first generation, non-traditional, and students from repressed socioeconomic backgrounds, and continue to advocate for scholarship funding specifically for underserved populations.

### **Expanding Revenues and Accelerating Momentum**

A critical role of a president is securing financial resources to achieve the University's mission, support faculty and staff, and elevate student achievement. As SUU's leading advocate and champion, I directed the University's effort to secure nearly \$39 million in new ongoing and one-time funding during the most recent legislative session. This included the largest amount of ongoing funding ever secured for compensation, insurance increases, performance, and growth. It was an honor to represent SUU and strengthen the relationships and trust between lawmakers and the University. As a result of this unprecedented funding, we recently announced that for the fourth year in a row, SUU will not increase tuition.

As President, I will launch an ambitious, comprehensive fundraising campaign to garner much needed resources. I have extensive experience in securing external resources through private fundraising, corporate sponsorships, and government grants. With more than 25 years of student and employee relationships to call upon, I am eager to engage our boards, enlist our alumni and emeriti, and invite our friends to invest in SUU's future and its students.

SUU is at a pivotal moment. As we commence our 125th year, our University has unmistakable momentum. We have momentum because of our talented and dedicated faculty and staff, a burgeoning and accomplished student body, loyal and enthusiastic alumni and friends, a capable and committed administrative team, and strong fiscal health. We are in an ideal position to propel SUU forward and seize this important moment as we celebrate our 125th anniversary. If given the opportunity to lead at this historic time, I will devote all of my energy and ability in service to our students, my colleagues, and the external stakeholders of the University. I hope to dedicate the remainder of my career to SUU, and plan to retire in Cedar City. Therefore, I will be prepared to live with every decision I make. Importantly, I won't need the 12-18 months new presidents often take to assemble their new team, devise new plans, and acquaint themselves with faculty, staff, students, community, alumni, donors and political and industry leaders. I am prepared and ready to lead now. I will hit the ground running and advance the University forward on Day One.

In closing, I want you to know it would be the honor of a lifetime to serve as the president of my alma mater and the University I love. The prospect of such an opportunity is humbling, yet greatly energizing. I look forward to the possibility of visiting with you in greater detail about how I can help write the next chapters of SUU's epic and inspiring story.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Mindy Benson". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Mindy Benson