



LYNDON B. JOHNSON SCHOOL OF PUBLIC AFFAIRS  
THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN

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March 24, 2021

Dear Members of the Search Committee,

I am pleased to submit my letter of application for the position of Dean at the University of Arkansas Clinton School of Public Service. I am a dynamic and proven leader in civic engagement, policy, curriculum, and diversity. I have intentionally cultivated a multi-faceted professional trajectory bridging academic, practitioner, community, and media realms for two decades.

At this pivotal time in our nation's history, the Clinton School's vision of empowering students to *think and do* has an amplified resonance. As we emerge from the pandemic, more will be asked of those committed to public service, and as the School approaches its 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary, there is a natural opening to reflect on where the Clinton School is, reinforce its vision, fine-tune its curricular base and expand its overall footprint.

I have an unmatched passion for the intersection of curricular and community-based learning that is foundational to professional public service. As Dean, I will bring my skillset to the University of Arkansas community through four reinforcing pillars:

- Institutional bridge building
- Curricular leadership and innovation
- Experience leveraging the strengths of a presidential program
- Stakeholder engagement and stewardship

### **Institutional Bridge Building**

*My vision of bridge-building is intentional. Bridge building is not an organic exercise—it requires a strategic vision that meets the needs of diverse stakeholders, seeks best practices, and promotes inclusiveness by bringing together stakeholders who otherwise would not engage.*

I believe that accessible bridges must be built between universities, government, media, and communities. This guiding principle prompted the LBJ School to create the Dean of Civic Engagement position for me. Our mandate to amplify the practice of civic engagement at the University of Texas at Austin resulted in the launch and growth of the LBJ Women's Campaign School, creating an in-depth policy briefing series, establishing a research partnership with the YWCA USA, and most recently starting a joint student recruitment initiative with Texas A&M's Bush School of Government and Public Service.

A substantial part of my university portfolio is outward-facing—building bridges with external stakeholders. An equally impactful part of my work is internal facing—building inter-campus bridges. Large public universities offer a wealth of resources, however these are siloed and require the explicit build out of bridges. Throughout my time at the University of Texas I have been committed to building bridges that create spaces of inclusion and efficiency. For example, as the University of Texas stands on the cusp of gaining Hispanic Serving Institute (HSI) status, I was part of the team that built out the Latino Research Institute. I was recruited to bridge the new academic department of Mexican American and Latina/o Studies with the historically rich legacy of the Center for Mexican American Studies. This required developing a foundational strategy with a small but agile interdisciplinary departmental team, re-

positioning the community-facing center, development, and establishing the role of a newly appointed advisory board that all together created an intersectional space for underserved students.

In the real world, complex public policy issues are not neatly siloed. And to best prepare our next generation of public servants for what awaits outside of the classroom, we need to ensure that bridged institutions are part of their educational experience, whether in the form of internships, workshops, practicums, or immersive classroom experiences. At the same time, as educators, we need to ensure that our students are receiving foundational academic concepts that provide them a toolkit of the highest quality. Our future servant leaders need the best of both worlds—enriching curriculum and experiential knowledge beyond the classroom.

### **Curricular Leadership & Innovation**

*I believe that experiential learning is a necessary component for public service and public affairs students. A rigorous, yet enriching curriculum, must come alongside experiential service-learning. A carefully structured academic program ensures all members' success—students, faculty, and community stakeholders. Experiential learning entrenches conceptual linkages between the how and why.*

At my core, I am a teacher. Over the last two decades in the higher education arena, I have experienced almost every role related to university learning—from a TA to a Professor overseeing multiple TAs, principal investigator, internship coordinator, and lead for graduate curricular reform. While these roles are different, they are all rooted in the same mission, the transference of knowledge.

The transference of knowledge is not only about teaching but also coordination. Program curriculum, especially in outward-facing disciplines such as public service and public affairs, requires the coordination of many moving parts—different instructor specializations, internships, and capstones. And as universities navigate the pandemic's continued impact, we should be re-evaluating and increasingly integrating hybrid learning models that combine synchronous and asynchronous learning.

Presently I am immersed in this very enterprise of coordination. I am part of the three-person faculty team revamping the core policy development course. Over the years, we realized that the foundational learning provided to students in core policy development varied too widely depending on who was teaching the course. At the same time, we saw that one of our school's strengths was providing various policy development lenses based on the instructor's specialization. After close to two years of course re-design, we will be launching a new modular-based core to bring consistency to policy instruction.

As the next dean of the Clinton School, I would bring my curricular innovation, university administration, and community engagement experience to institutionalize its academic excellence. At the same time, I would assertively engage the Clinton Presidential Library, the Clinton Foundation, and the larger University of Arkansas system to propel the school's academic footprint and reputation.

### **Experience Leveraging the Strengths of a Presidential Program**

*Presidential programs afford students and the larger university community a wealth of resources and leadership-grounded mission not available in other programs. Presidential programs provide a rare intersection of assets. However, there must be intentional coordination and planning within presidential programs and the other presidential entities to ensure a maximally effective synergy.*

The intellectual and mission-driven imprint of presidential programs is unique. At the LBJ School, President Johnson's life and work, from his time as a school teacher in Cotulla, Texas, to his launch of the Great Society, anchor the school's culture. And beyond the LBJ School, the presidential program's leadership legacy and resources expand to the larger University of Texas community.

One of the most rewarding aspects of my professional career as an LBJ faculty and leadership team member is my LBJ Library and LBJ Foundation work. I served on the planning team for the school's 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2020. In the years leading up to the anniversary, we coordinated alumni, foundation, academic, community, and philanthropic stakeholders to commemorate its golden anniversary. While the anniversary celebration was very different from what we had planned for, it provided an opportunity to bring LBJ's work to a larger audience amplifying the presidential program's strengths.

As the next Dean of the Clinton School, I would leverage the presidential program's intersectional strengths to enhance resources. Presidential programs provide multiple touchpoints for stakeholder engagement that can support the school's academic success and impact.

**Assertive Stakeholder Engagement and Stewardship**

*Expanding the Clinton School's footprint will require an assertive development plan and at the same time, an entrepreneurial mindset to seeking out new revenue options.*

The Clinton brand is already world-renowned. My job as Dean would be to ensure that existing stakeholders continue to be deeply involved with the school and identify and cultivate new funding sources that can support faculty through endowments, student financial aid, and programmatic growth.

I bring experience working closely with development and leadership teams to secure funding and grants to support academic and civic engagement initiatives. For example, in launching the LBJ Women's Campaign School, our funding plan was based on harnessing a development strategy that envisioned scaling the WCS to have a nation-wide footprint. To that end, funds have come from outside the LBJ School through development, grants, and tuition.

The Clinton School's public service mission through bridging has been at the center of my life's work. To be blunt, and at the risk of being too bold, I am uniquely qualified to transition the Clinton School from a hidden gem to one at the forefront of graduate programs and presidential institutions.

As the next Dean of the University of Arkansas Clinton School of Public Service, I would integrate my proven commitment to academic excellence and bridge-building in an environment ripe for expansion and refinement. There will be no more enthusiastic and driven ambassador for the Clinton School, amplifying its work and reinforcing its position as a public service education model.

Sincerely,



Victoria M. DeFrancesco Soto, Ph.D.