

DR. BENJAMIN A. VALDEZ

January 20, 2025

Search Committee

Casper College

C/O: Pauly Group, Inc.

Dear Members of the Search Committee,

I am excited to submit my application for the President of Casper College position. With a strong track record of strategic leadership, programming innovation, fiscal management, team building, and a strong commitment to student success, I am eager to contribute my experience and vision to advance Casper College's vital initiatives.

Throughout my career, I have successfully leveraged academic programs to foster institutional growth and increase student enrollment. A recent example is establishing a \$18 million state-of-the-art healthcare simulation center. This initiative, which I led from concept to completion, was developed to address growing workforce demands while providing students with cutting-edge educational opportunities. Through targeted program design and strategic outreach, this facility has directly contributed to a 9% increase in student enrollment for the FY23 school year, following an 8% increase in the FY24 school year, leading to the largest historical enrollment.

Additionally, I led efforts to secure \$26 million in external funding to expand our trades and construction management programs and facilities. This project enhanced our institutional capacity and strengthened partnerships with industry stakeholders, ensuring that our graduates have the skills to excel in their chosen career fields. These initiatives have positioned the institution as a leader in workforce development, aligning academic offerings with community and employer needs. All in the support of eleven new high-demand academic programs.

The healthcare simulation center and the trades and construction management facilities have received funding through grants, community investment, federal congressional appropriations, state and local funding, and the establishment of the Southeast Technical College Foundation.

Central to my leadership philosophy is a focus on student retention and success. Recognizing the importance of supporting students throughout their academic journey, I have implemented initiatives that increased overall retention to 80%, with our health sciences program achieving an impressive fall-to-fall retention rate of 84% for FY23. These outcomes result from fostering a student-centered culture, implementing data-driven support systems, and investing in faculty and staff development to enhance the student's educational experience.

A Collaborative and Visionary Leader

As the Vice President of Academic Affairs at Southeast Technical College, I have consistently sought to unite people around a shared vision for the future. My leadership approach is rooted in believing that the best outcomes are achieved when all voices are heard, and diverse perspectives contribute to decision-making. Early in my tenure, I developed a comprehensive shared governance structure that empowered faculty to have a meaningful voice in shaping the institution's direction. This transformative change gave faculty formal input on academic policy, curriculum development, and resource allocation. Creating a more inclusive decision-making process has fostered a culture of collaboration, mutual respect, and shared responsibility.

As a leader, I am committed to addressing challenges directly with integrity and focusing on solutions. I believe in leading with a trustworthy and transparent leadership style, allowing me to build strong relationships and foster trust among diverse constituencies. I strive to be an approachable, authentic, and dependable leader who creates an environment where open communication and shared accountability are the norm. This leadership philosophy has enabled me to navigate complex situations effectively while maintaining the confidence and respect of those I serve.

My vision for leadership is not only collaborative but also forward-looking by constant evaluation of the campus strategic and master planning. Institutions must be agile and adaptive in today's rapidly changing educational landscape. I have led strategic initiatives that position our college to meet the evolving needs of students and the workforce. One of my proudest accomplishments is the development of a state-of-the-art Healthcare Simulation Center, a project that I championed from its inception. This center provides students with cutting-edge training in healthcare professions, preparing them for the complexities of modern healthcare environments. The facility is a tangible example of my commitment to ensuring our institution is at the forefront of educational innovation and serving the community's needs in meeting their workforce needs.

One of my primary objectives at Southeast Technical College was establishing a governance structure promoting collaboration, transparency, and accountability. I firmly believe that a thriving institution requires active input from all stakeholders, faculty, staff, and students alike. To this end, I worked closely with faculty leadership to create a formal shared governance model that ensures their voices are heard in all major decisions affecting the academic experience.

This structure has advanced greater engagement and trust between the administration and faculty, leading to a more cohesive and unified campus culture. Faculty now participate in committees responsible for academic policy, curriculum review, and institutional planning. This has improved decision-making and resulted in higher faculty morale and a stronger sense of ownership in the college's future. I am proud of our progress in fostering an environment where collaboration and shared governance are ideals and practices embedded in the college's daily life.

At the heart of my leadership style is a commitment to transparency and relationship-building. I understand that leadership is not simply about making decisions but engaging with people, building trust, and being accessible. I have always prioritized maintaining open lines of

communication with all constituencies—students, faculty, staff, governing boards, and community partners. I hold regular town halls, maintain an open-door policy, and ensure that decision-making processes are transparent and well-communicated.

This relational approach has been fundamental in my work with elected governing boards. As the Vice President of Academic Affairs, I have successfully built strong, collaborative relationships with our board members, state legislators, community leaders, and strategic partners by consistently keeping them informed, seeking their input, and aligning institutional priorities with broader community needs. By fostering these relationships, I have ensured that our institution's strategic goals are supported and that we have the backing needed to implement transformative initiatives.

My relational leadership extends beyond the college itself. I have worked extensively with external stakeholders—industry partners, local government officials, and community organizations—to build mutually beneficial partnerships. These relationships have been instrumental in securing funding, developing new programs, and creating opportunities for our students.

Fostering a Culture of Teamwork and Family

At the core of my leadership is a commitment to fostering a positive, inclusive, and supportive campus culture. I firmly believe that an institution thrives when everyone—students, faculty, and staff—feels like part of a larger community, a family. Throughout my career, I have worked to cultivate a sense of teamwork by encouraging collaboration, building trust, and celebrating shared successes. Recognizing and valuing every individual's contribution has created an environment where people feel motivated, supported, and united in our common goals.

I actively work to nurture relationships across all college levels, from students to senior leadership, ensuring that everyone is engaged in building the institution's success. We have implemented team-building programs, recognition initiatives, and open communication channels to strengthen department connections. I am proud to say that our college community feels like a close-knit family, and this sense of belonging has contributed to a stronger, more cohesive institutional culture.

Recruitment, Retention, and Student Success

While recruiting new students is essential to the sustainability of any institution, I firmly believe that retaining current students and ensuring their progression to graduation is even more critical. Under my leadership, we have implemented robust strategies to build a strong support system that addresses our students' academic, social, and personal needs, enabling them to thrive throughout their educational journey.

To support retention, I championed the development of wraparound services designed to meet students where they are. These services include enhanced academic advising, tutoring programs, mental health resources, and peer mentoring initiatives.

Additionally, I have prioritized the creation of guided pathways that simplify the student experience by providing clear, structured routes from enrollment to graduation. These pathways include well-defined milestones and proactive interventions to ensure students are consistently supported and encouraged to achieve their goals.

One of the most exciting initiatives in student success has been the partnership between Southeast Technical College (STC) and Northern State University (NSU), known as the STC + NSU Agreement. This groundbreaking collaboration creates a seamless pathway for STC graduates to transition to NSU, allowing them to continue their educational journey without disruption. By streamlining the transfer process, this partnership ensures that students can achieve their academic and professional goals efficiently and effectively.

Rooted in a vision of supporting students while strengthening South Dakota's workforce, the STC + NSU partnership encourages graduates to remain and contribute locally. By aligning the resources and expertise of both institutions, this initiative exemplifies our commitment to student success. It demonstrates the power of collaboration to create transformative opportunities for individuals and communities alike.

A Commitment to a Student-Centered Experience and Success

A core tenet of my leadership philosophy is a deep commitment to ensuring that every decision we make serves the best interests of our students. A college president must always be guided by the question: "How will this benefit our students?" This student-centered focus has guided my work in both academic and administrative areas, ensuring that our programs, policies, and facilities are designed to meet the diverse needs of our student population.

At Southeast Technical College, I have been instrumental in expanding student support services, increasing access to financial aid, and creating programs that address underrepresented and non-traditional students' unique needs. Under my leadership, we have developed mentorship programs, expanded mental health services, and improved career counseling to ensure every student has the resources and support needed to succeed. My dedication to student-centered experience has improved student outcomes and increased retention and graduation rates.

While recruiting new students is essential to the sustainability of any institution, I firmly believe that retaining current students and ensuring their progression to graduation is even more critical. Under my leadership, we have implemented robust strategies to build a strong support system that addresses our students' academic, social, and personal needs, enabling them to thrive throughout their educational journey. Southeast Technical College has averaged a 76% fall-to-fall student retention rate over the last five academic years.

Financial Sustainability

Ensuring the financial sustainability of an institution requires strategic foresight, creativity, and a commitment to resource development. Throughout my career, I have demonstrated the ability to align institutional goals with financial strategies that ensure long-term stability and growth. I am an evidence and data-informed decision-maker who analyzes information to guide resource

allocation and prioritize initiatives that yield the greatest impact. A significant element of my leadership success is my ability to analyze an institution's financial status and develop strategies for enhanced financial sustainability. I currently manage an annual operating budget of \$45 million and have previous experience overseeing budgets as large as \$85 million. My approach involves a deep understanding of financial metrics, transparent collaboration with stakeholders, and a commitment to aligning resources with strategic priorities. These efforts have enabled me to identify opportunities for operational efficiencies, generate new revenue streams, and ensure the long-term financial health of the institutions I have been honored to serve.

I continuously look for creative solutions to financial challenges, including expanding external funding sources through targeted fundraising activities. This includes developing relationships with donors, cultivating alumni connections, and working with local and national organizations to secure grants and sponsorships. My ability to identify and leverage diverse funding opportunities has allowed me to build robust financial support for institutional priorities and foster innovation.

At the heart of my approach to financial sustainability is a commitment to transparency and collaboration. I actively engage faculty, staff, and governing boards in budgetary discussions to ensure financial decisions reflect the institution's mission and values. This inclusive approach builds trust and ensures that financial planning aligns with the needs and aspirations of the entire campus community.

I am confident that my leadership experience, commitment to collaboration and transparency, and passion for student success make me a strong candidate for the position of President at Casper College. I deeply respect the college's mission and believe it is critical to providing accessible, high-quality education that transforms lives and strengthens communities.

The opportunity to lead Casper College—a storied institution with a rich history of academic excellence and passion for student success—resonates deeply with my professional values and aspirations. The chance to further the college's work aligns with my commitment to fostering partnerships that create meaningful, systemic changes in higher education and beyond.

I am enthusiastic about the possibility of bringing my experience, vision, and passion for education to Casper College. Thank you for considering my application. I welcome the opportunity to discuss how my background, skills, and goals align with this exciting role.

Sincerely

A handwritten signature in dark ink, reading "Benjamin A. Valdez". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Benjamin" being more prominent and the last name "Valdez" following in a similar style.

Benjamin A. Valdez