12 August 2026

Sanders College of Business & Technology
University of North Alabama
1 Harrison Plaza
Florence, AL 35632

Dear Members of the Search Committee,

Please consider this letter of interest as my application for the position of Dean and Professor at the Sanders College of Business & Technology (SCBT) at the University of North Alabama. I am drawn to this opportunity because it sits at a useful intersection of programmatic goals (business, technology, healthcare, workforce development, innovation, and regional economic growth) that feels like an unusually strong match for the braided path of my own professional and academic career.

I did not begin as someone who planned to spend his career in the academy. My early professional life in Houston (Texas) took me first into sales (earning "Top 10" individual performance nationwide for November 1999), then into an exciting new business planning opportunity at Compaq Computer Corporation (surviving every layoff throughout the acquisition by Hewlett-Packard), and then into intense new growth from a challenging VP-facing financial analysis role at Memorial Hermann Healthcare System in Houston. Those were quite formative years for my business skills and sensibilities. Beyond the invaluable crucible of full-commission sales, "Big Tech" taught me to think about change, scale, systems, and execution. "Big Health" taught me to think about cost, complexity, service, and the value of humanity. My foray into graduate business education (MBA in 2004; PhD in 2011) gave me the language and theory to understand what I had already been seeing in practice: organizations are complex living systems of people, incentives, routines, constraints, and choices... so many difficult choices.

That background still shapes how I work to this day. I am a strategic management scholar, an AACSB-experienced academic administrator, and a practicing strategy consultant. I am also a passionate teacher who still believes that every single person has inherent value and potential and that good business education should make students more useful, more thoughtful, more capable, and more prepared to enter the world with something meaningful to contribute, regardless of which type of organization they join *or launch*. SCBT appeals to me because it appears to share that practical seriousness throughout its mission. The curated mix of business, entrepreneurship, computing, IT, analytics, and healthcare administration offered through the diverse delivery modalities of certificates, micro-credentials, experiential learning, career support, and regional engagement is exactly the kind of strategic portfolio that can change the life trajectory of any single student as well as strengthening an entire region.

My academic career has been anchored at AACSB-accredited institutions, and I currently serve as Executive Associate Dean in the College of Business and Economic Development at the University of Southern Mississippi (double-accredited with AACSB; Carnegie R1). In December of 2026, I will complete my eighth year of progressive responsibility in the Dean's Office. Beginning in January of 2019, I first served as Interim Associate Dean for Undergraduate Education, then as Associate Dean for Research and Graduate Education, and, since January of 2021, as Executive Associate Dean. Across these roles, I have worked daily in the bullseye of academic administration: student success, faculty development, staff development, curriculum, accreditation, assessment, budgets, personnel matters, policy interpretation, graduate education, enrollment pressures, conflict management, and the ordinary hundreds of daily details that determine whether a college functions well or merely claims to.

The Dean of SCBT must be both the principal administrator and the primary advocate for the College. I have come to understand both sides of that calling. When the Dean is away to build relationships, raise funds, and shine the brightest possible light on the College, someone at home must keep the institution moving. In my current role, that has often been me. I have deftly managed sensitive matters, helped interpret and apply policy, supported School Directors and program leaders, worked closely with HR and General Counsel, coordinated our accreditation-related work, and developed trust when decisions were difficult. I have learned that the art and science of administration is not about title or ceremony. It is about listening, patience, timing, fairness, judgment, and the willingness to do necessary work without needing to be the center of every story. My personal life is already quite fulfilling, so I often point the light of recognition and credit in my professional life toward others.

My leadership style is warm, friendly, relational, direct, analytical, and service-oriented because the fact that I believe strongly in people is my biggest strength *and weakness*. I try to begin difficult conversations from the most constructive point available, with calm kindness and measured tone, and I believe deeply in process, evidence, and fairness. People may not always like a decision, but they should understand how it was made. Transparency is optimal for rule-bound organizations such as public universities, so your people should be able to see that the rules were followed, that relevant facts were considered, and that not one single person was treated as disposable. I have sometimes described my approach as being "friendly and firm because I am fair." That phrase has served me well because it captures the balance I try to maintain. A college should certainly be a humane place, but no one is served if it is a vague place. Marked by diligence and humility, clarity can be an exceedingly powerful form of kindness.

This belief has shaped my work with faculty governance and faculty development. I recently served as the inaugural Chair of our College Promotion & Tenure Taskforce which reviewed our *Faculty Policies & Procedures Manual* and drafted hard-fought revisions to clarify standards for tenure and promotion across several novel types of faculty classifications. The work was not glamorous, and it was not always easy, but it has already born excellent fruit for

faculty morale. Faculty members deserve goals they can understand, processes they can trust, and pathways that do not depend on whispered exceptions or inherited ambiguity. Shared governance works best when the entire faculty's voice is protected by clear rules, transparent processes, and a common (and documented) understanding of fairness.

I have also chaired multiple faculty searches and participated in many others. Recruiting and retaining good faculty is one of the most consequential tasks of a Dean, especially in fields where business schools compete with industry salaries and other institutions for talent. I understand the importance of hiring carefully, onboarding well, supporting scholarly and professional development, and preserving a culture where people can see a meaningful future for their career. Several faculty that I have helped recruit and retain have recently earned multiple University-level awards, so I am emboldened that my general approach is effective. I would bring that same energy and care to SCBT as it continues to support faculty across its various academic domains and related professional fields.

My work with staff development has been equally important to me. Two staff members with whom I had the opportunity to collaborate and mentor have risen into major leadership roles: one to Director of Marketing and Communications and another to Assistant Dean for Student Success. I take satisfaction in those stories because staff excellence is so often the hidden infrastructure of student success. A good college does not run only on faculty talent or Dean-level strategy. It depends on the efforts, competence, judgment, and morale of staff members who know the students, the systems, and often see problems before anyone else has named them. In resource-constrained environments, leaders must challenge capable staff without burning them out. I have learned more than once that gently fanning a flame often produces steadier light than pouring gasoline on it. The best Deans know they cannot achieve their mission alone.

SCBT's academic portfolio is especially attractive to me because it has both a smart range and a sensible logic. The blend of degrees across traditional business fields and newer areas such as computer information systems, data analytics, innovation and entrepreneurship, and human resource management adds requisite complexity that aligns with the labor market that students will enter. Also, the graduate-level programs in business, accounting, and healthcare administration, as well as a hybrid executive doctorate combined with certificates, micro-credentials, centralized advising and career support, experiential learning, specialized centers, and a business incubator complete the ambitious portfolio, and these further reflect the world students are entering. I have relevant experience with that level of portfolio complexity. As Associate Dean for Undergraduate Education, I handled degree-plan issues, graduation requirements, academic standing matters, student complaints, policy waiver requests, advising-related concerns, undergraduate curriculum matters, and student-success initiatives. As Associate Dean for Research and Graduate Education (past and concurrent responsibilities), I have provided administrative, curricular, operational, and programmatic oversight for graduate business programs, including the Master's degrees in business administration (MBA), professional accountancy (MPA), economic development (MS-ED), sport management (MS-

SM), logistics and supply chain management (MS-LSM), leadership and talent development (MS-LTD), and an executive Ph.D. in leadership and organizational development (PHD-LDR). I also supported efforts to develop a new graduate degree in business analytics (MS-BA) as well as several dual-degree options, concentrations, certificates, and myriad continuous improvement processes.

Technology-enabled delivery is also familiar territory. I was the first faculty member at USM to develop the online version of our Strategy capstone course which helped support the initial launch and growth of fully online BSBA programs. More recently, as mentioned above, I helped advance thinking around fully-online analytics-oriented graduate programming by working with colleagues inside and outside the College to revise a dormant M.S. in Business Analytics proposal into a more flexible interdisciplinary model (due to resource limitations). Given that they are merely pedagogical tools that students can select to find their best success, I do not view the modalities of online, hybrid, or face-to-face as competing ideologies. The real question is whether a modality serves student learning, program quality, access, flexibility, and the ever-changing needs of the market.

Student success has remained the living center of my academic work. I have taught more than one hundred sections across undergraduate and graduate programs with excellent instructor ratings at three institutions. For the bulk of my assignments, I have taught Strategy capstone courses which are writing-intensive, speaking-intensive, integrative, and demanding. I like those courses because they force students to pull the business curriculum together. The best-prepared students see my course as a fun and exhilarating "exit interview" from business school. (Unfortunately, I also get students that have not prepared well, and we labor through together as they struggle forward to discover the integrations.) Regardless of preparation, I challenge my students to dance with uncertainty, analyze real organizations, make arguments, weigh evidence, understand tradeoffs, and communicate under pressure. In other words, they must practice the work of management, and my students learn why some top executives collect total annual pay packages which contain *two* commas. If being the CEO was easy, anyone could do it.

Outside the classroom, I have been involved in student recruitment, student advising, honor student advising, campuswide entrepreneurship programming, business-plan competitions, student awards ceremonies, "The Hatchery" incubator, and the *True South™ Basic Economic Development Course*. Earlier at SEMO, I served as Faculty Advisor for the Collegiate Entrepreneurs Organization, Campus Director for the Big Idea! Competition, Campus Director for the Redhawks Open Business Plan Competition, and Faculty Fellow in the Technology Entrepreneurship Initiative. Those experiences align well with the culture at SCBT because you already have the ingredients of a strong student-opportunity ecosystem: advising, career services, experiential learning, centers, entrepreneurship, computing, technology, business, and regional partners. As Dean, I would make sure those ingredients reinforce one another with the maximum visibility and intention possible.

My scholarly identity also fits SCBT well. My research has appeared in high-quality outlets such as *Journal of Management Studies*, *Strategic Organization*, *Journal of Business Research*, *Society and Business Review*, *Journal of Management History*, *Journal of Energy and Development*, *Journal of Corporate Citizenship*, and *Journal of Managerial Issues*. My research interests primarily revolve around corporate governance, managerial cognition, and the external environment of business. These are not abstract interests detached from practice. They are connected to how organizations behave, how leaders make choices, how institutions shape action, and how businesses affect communities and the world. As Associate Dean for Research and Graduate Education, I helped coordinate research infrastructure, published the College's *Research Impact Report*, and supported efforts to make faculty scholarship more visible. Most recently, I received USM's Leadership in Research Award in 2024. I believe that a regional, doctoral-level, AACSB-accredited university can maintain a practical, student-centered mission while also expecting meaningful scholarship, applied research, and intellectual contributions. In fact, those aims should strengthen one another. Good scholarship sharpens teaching, deepens community engagement, and helps a college speak with authority about the economic and organizational questions facing its region.

Accreditation and continuous improvement have been central to my administrative experience. I have served on the Assurance of Learning Committee for more than a decade, and my Strategy capstone courses carry a substantial assessment load. I have assisted the Dean in writing and revising our AACSB Continuous Improvement Review materials, participated in Peer Review Team visits, and managed regular AACSB data requests and survey responsibilities. I have come to see accreditation as more than periodic compliance because accreditation is a disciplined peer-accountable way to ask better questions. Given that SCBT operates with both AACSB and ABET accreditation in view, I recognize that business and technology faculty may use different vocabularies. However, both groups understand quality, evidence, standards, and continuous improvement. I would want to support accreditation as a useful institutional guide, not as a panic-inducing season of reactionary paperwork. If handled well, SCBT can continue to sharpen its identity and clarify its promises to students, employers, alumni, donors, and regional partners.

Financial and operational judgment would also be central to my work as a Dean. Before academia, much of my industry career was in corporate finance. At HP/Compaq and Memorial Hermann, I learned indelible practical lessons about budgets, planning, data, costs, vendors, systems, and resource constraints in large organizations. In higher education, I have participated in many high-level budget conversations across two different Presidents and three *very* different Provosts at Southern Miss. I have also been involved in large and small budget-related decisions, curricular planning, faculty and staff issues, and resource allocation discussions in the Dean's Office. I understand that growth-oriented responsible stewardship means that each "No" must protect a prior or future "Yes!" Given the budget constraints that typically drive our activities, the external dimension of this role excites me. SCBT has a natural platform for regional engagement

because it connects so many functional domains, and North Alabama and the Shoals region offer rich possibilities for partnership with employers, alumni, donors, advisory boards, civic leaders, healthcare organizations, technology firms, defense-related industry, analytics-driven employers, and advanced manufacturing. A Dean in this environment should be eager to leave the office, listen carefully, build trust, and work to translate the conversations into new opportunities for all stakeholders.

The opportunity to increase my focus on external work fits my personality. I am at ease creating and nourishing social connections because I remember people, places, stories, and situations, sometimes to a degree that surprises even me. I use warmth, humor, storytelling, and careful listening to understand what others value and where their interests may connect with institutional priorities. I do not think strong external relationships should feel forced or transactional. The best ones usually begin with curiosity and shared interests that evolve into trust and collaboration. Over time, they can become any number of great things… internships, scholarships, advisory relationships, applied projects, executive education, donor support, research partnerships, student mentoring, and new program ideas. Although my formal fundraising experience has been limited by the design of my previous roles, I have spent almost a decade watching effective development work up close, participating in donor and stakeholder events, and building the kind of relationships on which fundraising depends. I am deeply engaged with our Business Advisory Council, and several development officers I trust have told me that the core skills for effective fundraising are already present in my standard operating system: comfort with people, authentic communication, careful listening, credible storytelling (and salesmanship), and the ability to connect a person's values with an institution's needs. I welcome the opportunity to fully embrace this part of the Dean's role at SCBT.

My vision for SCBT would begin with listening because I want to learn before claiming to know. I would want to hear from faculty, staff, students, alumni, advisory board members, employers, donors, university leaders, and regional partners. I would want to know what people love about SCBT, what they fear losing, what frustrates them, what they believe is possible, and what they think we must become. From there, I would focus on three connected priorities. First, I would work to preserve and strengthen the positive culture at SCBT. Culture is often transmitted in slogans but established by trust, clarity, responsiveness, and visible fairness. Second, I would help SCBT sharpen its distinctive academic identity at the intersection of its various strategic domains and programs. I am relieved that I have the requisite professional and academic experiences to confidently vouch for the pieces that you have already assembled, and I see the next opportunity as enhancing the linkages between them. Third, I would expand external engagement so that more students gain access to internships, career pathways, applied projects, mentoring, entrepreneurial support, and professional networks across North Alabama and beyond. As the labor market continues to evolve, there will continue to be a premium on real hands-on experience. Rather than just reacting to these shifts, I think we can shape them across the region with coordinated teamwork across the faculty, staff, and students.

I would also bring a deep appreciation for SCBT's institutional context. A regional, doctoral-level, public university carries a powerful service mission. Students arrive with different goals, resources, talents, and levels of preparation, yet each student deserves a serious education that can enlarge their professional opportunities. The faculty and staff deserve a leader who shows respect for their work, clarifies priorities as needs shift, removes barriers when possible, and communicates honestly when difficult tradeoffs arise. External stakeholders need a Dean who can listen, build relationships, understand their needs, and connect those needs to the SCBT's mission without making them feel like targets. With careful listening, I will use my interpersonal aptitudes to harvest relevant information to enhance engagements and, eventually, propose a range of mutually satisfactory goals. Although speed is possible in these interactions, those of us from the South know that relational dynamics develop best over a bit slower and gentler pace that does not feel frenetic, forced, or fake. This is certainly not a call for laziness but rather a call to build quality and strength on the front-end of the relationship. The returns of authenticity often exceed the required investment of time and effort.

Although I am often described as full-speed-ahead and whatever-it-takes for achieving success, my core ideals are not primarily about our imaginary and illusory perfection as leaders. On the contrary, they are about how we prepare to manage the risks that we might someday fail because we are wise enough to acknowledge that we are human. *Integrity* shows our strength to the degree that internal realities can support external portrayals. *Transparency* allows us to help others see better. *Honesty* empowers true growth by discarding deception. *Fairness* allows everyone, no matter how unique or different, to have a chance to make their best contribution. Taken together, we can build a bench of trustworthy talent that is deep and wide as we explain our value proposition as a regional, doctoral-level university serving the public trust. When properly installed, these values allow us the requisite armor and protection to press forward with full intensity to achieve the vision for SCBT.

More than any other business image, I see the role of Dean as the *Chief Service Officer*. In the quest to balance and satisfy the various needs of the students, staff, faculty, alumni, University officials, and the community, a big ego only gets in the way. Also, given that the needs of myriad stakeholders, sometimes delivered as loud demands, are often mutually exclusive, most decisions by the Dean will immediately be deemed "right and good" by some observers and "wrong and bad" by others. Based on my years in the trenches serving alongside my Dean, I fully realize and accept that this situation is a normal and daily aspect of the job, so any pretense to perfection would only ever be a fool's errand.

One of my favorite British essayists, Dorothy Sayers, once wrote that "work is the gracious expression of creative energy in the service of others." If she was right, then the simple question for those connected to SCBT now becomes how should we use our energy to serve others? For the students, it may involve diligent studying and applying new lessons to stand on business principles for optimal organizational performance. For the staff, it may involve empowering team members to create their best contributions of time and talent within the

reasonable constraints of our priorities and processes. For the faculty, it may involve finding the best flourishing and freedom for diverse disciplines, with bravery to communicate new ideas to our colleagues and our students, and cheerful service expressions for the mutual good of the individual and the group. As we selflessly serve others with our rich tapestry of labor, there are few limits on how we can impact our external communities. Public institutions like UNA delight me because all are welcome, and there is a potential purpose and place for each person. This abiding belief animates my approach to administrative work as we all strive to create environments of growth and fulfillment for everyone who chooses to join us.

The remainder of my application packet contains my CV, references, and my unofficial transcripts. I certainly appreciate this opportunity to communicate my enthusiastic interest in the position, and, if I am determined to be a good fit to serve SCBT, then I look forward to our future conversations.

Sincerely,

Joel Bolton, Ph.D.
Executive Associate Dean
College of Business and Economic Development
University of Southern Mississippi