



THE UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA AT WILMINGTON

March 4, 2019

Dear Dean Burrus and members of the selection committee,

Please accept this letter as my application for the position of Dean of the Graduate School at UNCW. As you will see, I bring to the position a unique combination of administrative experience, excellence in teaching and scholarship, commitment to inclusive excellence, and national recognition in higher education leadership. I am excited by the opportunity to lead the Graduate School as UNCW builds toward its future as a nationally prominent research university. Because my curriculum vitae provides a detailed accounting of my professional accomplishments, I will use the remainder of this letter to describe the qualities and vision I bring to the position.

Fostering Growth and Excellence During the Transition to Doctoral Status – As you know, the Carnegie Foundation recently reclassified UNCW as a Doctoral University – High Research Activity. While the university has been building towards this designation for several years, this year’s change in classification was driven largely by the productivity of the Ed.D. in Educational Leadership administered by the Watson College of Education. In order to maintain our new classification and to broaden participation by other units, UNCW will need to nurture existing doctoral programs (and other terminal degrees) and to bolster those programs that will lead to new doctoral programs. In fact, it will be critical to take a vertically integrated approach to new doctoral programs, building on our success in undergraduate research, maintaining and growing excellent masters programs, and developing exciting new doctoral programs that capitalize on our strengths and take us in new directions. Because we are the only university in the region, we have a unique opportunity to partner with industries to develop programs that fill regional needs, especially in growth areas such as biotechnology, banking, and data science. It is my belief that there is unrealized potential for new doctoral programs across the university, and that potential can be nurtured at the department level and by building programs that span disciplinary silos (e.g. biostatistics that spans CAS and CHHS). The Graduate Dean will be the campus leader for this growth, and will need to work with other unit leaders to ensure that growth is strategic and supported. Of particular importance will be securing funding for graduate students (stipends and tuition remissions), pursuing programmatic grant funding (NSF Innovations in Graduate Education, etc), and supporting graduate student efforts to develop their own funding base (e.g. dissertation improvement grants). My background in STEM fields, in securing extramural funding, and in building cross-disciplinary programs is well suited for these tasks.

At the same time, the Graduate Dean will also play a critical role in helping the university navigate the transition to Doctoral University status both on and off campus. UNCW has positioned itself as a “best of both worlds” institution; advancing a “high touch” undergraduate experience while fostering faculty scholarship that provides opportunities for undergraduate and graduate students. The transition to Doctoral status has already created tension among some faculty and students wary of what this transition means for our commitment to undergraduate programs. The Graduate Dean will need to take an active role in managing this transition, communicating the strategic growth of graduate programs, and working with the academic leadership to ensure that growth in graduate programs does not come at the expense of our undergraduate programs. The transition to Doctoral status should not be an all or nothing prospect; managed correctly this transition can help programs at all levels. Similarly, the transition to Doctoral status promises an influx of resources that can be used to bolster UNCW’s human capital (faculty, students, staff), infrastructure, and programming. Securing (and maximizing) this

investment from the State Legislature and then investing in areas that will create growth will require a focused effort by the whole university, but the Graduate Dean will need to play a central role. In my twelve years at UNCW I have worked closely with campus leadership and with the System Office on a variety of projects, and this experience has provided me with knowledge, skills, and a professional network that will allow me to assist in this critical process.

Comprehensive Experience in Administration - As a UNCW faculty member (2007 to present), former chair of a large, complex department (Biology and Marine Biology, 2011-2017), and current Interim Chair of a department navigating its own transitional period (Mathematics and Statistics, 2018 to present) I have a strong knowledge of the academic, business, and fiscal operations of the university and I have used that knowledge to improve conditions for students, faculty, and staff. I am trained in facilitative leadership and non-violent communication, which emphasize the importance of building effective relational processes in the workplace. During my time at UNCW I accomplished the following:

- Led two large and complex departments, including all budgeting, personnel, and scheduling
- Oversaw the establishment and growth of undergraduate and graduate programs
- Planned course schedules with over 425 individual course sections (exclusive of DIS, Honors, and graduate research/thesis) that generated over 25,000 student credit hours each year
- Managed up to 43 full time faculty members and nine staff and hired 15-20 part time instructors each semester
- Hired more than 30 faculty and staff who have brought new insights and energy to UNCW
- Coordinated with the College of Arts and Sciences and the Office of Facilities Management to enable significant renovations of Dobo Hall, Osprey Hall, and Friday Hall
- Approved scores of travel requests, purchase orders, scholarship awards, PACS card transactions, and HR assignments each month
- Oversaw the development and implementation of policies and procedures at the department level and aided in this work at the college level.
- Worked closely with the Office of Advancement to solicit donors. Most notably, I helped to establish the Dr. Ron and Janie Hill Honors Scholarship for research in marine mammal biology and the Jack Dermid Scholarship, as well as developed a long term relationship with Dr. Anthony Cavaliere to fund Biology's annual applied learning program
- Served on several campus-wide initiatives and committees, including the Chancellors Strategic Plan Committee (I chaired the SWOT Analysis subcommittee), the Fostering Student Success Committee, and the Campus Climate Workgroup
- Contributed to the planning of the Masters in Coastal Ocean Policy and the Doctorate in Coastal Marine Science
- Represented the university during re-authorization of the Comprehensive Articulation Agreement
- Represented the university during the statewide review of Marine Science Programs. In response to the review of Marine Science Programs, I chaired a statewide committee charged with developing proposals for inter-institutional undergraduate programs and initiated the Coastal Research for Undergraduate Students in North Carolina (CRUS-NC) program with ECU.

I am confident that my breadth of administrative experience on campus and with the UNC System Office will facilitate efforts to grow and manage the Graduate School.

Strong Foundation in Teaching and Scholarship – In addition to a strong background in administration, I am a faculty member with a commitment to excellence in teaching and scholarship. I was hired at

UNCW to bring additional expertise in Biological Oceanography to the Department of Biology and Marine Biology. My teaching practice is strongly informed by the principles of active learning, the use of backward design, and reflection through formative assessment. In lecture, I strive to create a student-centered atmosphere and to engage students through the use of active pedagogies (problem sets, personal response systems, etc). Similarly, I have continually sought ways to make our labs more skills based and inquiry-driven.

A critical component of my teaching experience is BIO 694 – Teaching Practicum in College Biology. This course dates to the earliest days of the doctoral program in marine biology as a way to train our doctoral students for life as a faculty member. The course follows a workshop format in which the elements of backward design, active learning, and assessment are conveyed by having the students engage directly in the process of building a teachable module. By the end of the semester, not only have the students learned evidence based best practices in teaching, they have a tangible product that they can market during their job search and use for their own courses. Students also engage in formulating and writing a well thought out teaching philosophy and they conduct “peer” evaluation of teaching of departmental faculty across the biology curriculum. These exercises provide our students with opportunities to hone their communication skills regarding teaching and to view a variety of approaches to teaching that they can adapt as they move through their career. As Dean of the Graduate School, I will foster this type of early career development across our graduate programs.

My disciplinary research is in the ecology of seafloor communities. I am most well recognized for showing how water flow influences the biology of aquatic organisms in a variety of habitats from freshwater streams to marshes and estuaries to tropical coral reefs. Locally, my work examines the biological and physical processes that govern oyster reef communities. Recently, we have begun to apply this knowledge to improved success of aquaculture and restoration operations. My most recent work on coral reefs tests new hypotheses regarding the role of sponges in cycling of carbon and other nutrients. In this work, we are gaining insight into how coral reefs thrive in nutrient poor environments and how these ecosystems are responding to the pressures of climate change and ocean acidification. Over my career I have published 39 papers in peer reviewed journals (3 more in review or revision), 12 of those include graduate student authors and 6 include undergraduate authors. I have been lead author or co-author on over 120 presentations at conferences ranging from regional to international in scope. I have been PI or Co-PI on grants totaling more than \$2.8M from NSF, NOAA, and other state and federal agencies. My work has been featured in the popular press and on National Public Radio, as well as in funding agency highlights and congressional reports. The interdisciplinary nature of my work allows me to communicate across traditional boundaries, especially in STEM fields. I have experience in both theoretical and applied work that will inform my approach to the development of new programs. I am also well positioned to help complete the planning and implementation of the Doctoral program in Applied Coastal Ocean Sciences.

Most importantly for this position, I have been able to blend my teaching and research into an effective mentoring program for undergraduate and graduate students. At the graduate level, I have successfully mentored nine master’s students, two doctoral students, and three postdoctoral scholars. At the undergraduate level, I served as primary mentor for four Honors Theses (I did not take new Honors Students during my 6-year term as chair of Biology), thirteen Directed Independent Studies, and eight interns/research assistants. I have also served on an additional thirteen Honors thesis committees and twenty-five graduate committees. As Dean of the Graduate School, I will remain committed to providing opportunities for student scholarship and for helping faculty develop their own mentoring skills. Through my work with the Partnership for Undergraduate Life Sciences Education (below) I have access

to a nationwide network of leaders in STEM education, including faculty development professionals with expertise in student mentorship (e.g. Center for the Integration of Research, Teaching, and Learning). As Graduate Dean, I will prioritize working with the Center for Teaching Excellence to bring these national leaders to campus.

National Leadership in Post-Secondary Education – As a graduate student, I made the critical realization that the “worth” of my career would not result from my disciplinary research, which, despite being published in top-tier journals and supported by the National Science Foundation, would only be of interest to a subset of an already limited field of marine biologists and oceanographers. Rather, the value would come from my contributions to supporting student learning as a teacher/mentor and as a leader in post-secondary education. This insight has continually motivated me to seek new ways to improve my own teaching, and to promote those practices among faculty across the country. Notably, I have been involved with three national programs designed to improve post-secondary education through the application of evidence based teaching practices. From 2003-2005 I was Regional Team Leader (RTL) for Faculty Institutes Reforming Science Teaching (FIRST II), a National Science Foundation sponsored dissemination network. As RTL, I hosted, planned, and led a series of workshops for teams of faculty from universities along the northern Gulf Coast with the goal of facilitating adoption of student-centered and inquiry-driven pedagogies. From 2008-2011, I served as Regional Team Leader for FIRST IV, a separately funded program that focused on developing best teaching practices among postdoctoral scholars prior to their becoming faculty. Again, I was responsible for planning and implementation of a series of workshops designed to facilitate the adoption and promulgation of evidence based teaching practices. Through this program I helped mentor forty recent postdoctoral scholars; an experience that informed my view of the challenges that face doctoral students as they enter the market and that will help me to support graduate students as they progress in their careers. More recently (2014 – present), I have been involved with the Partnership for Undergraduate Life Sciences Education (PULSE). This group was formed in 2012 by a coalition of the National Science Foundation, the National Institutes of Health, and the Howard Hughes Medical Institute in response to the publication of *Vision and Change In Undergraduate Biology Education* (AAAS, 2011, ISBN#: 978-0-87168-741-8). PULSE’s mission is to effect change in undergraduate education at the department level, rather than at the individual level. After taking a team of faculty from the Department of Biology and Marine Biology to a PULSE workshop in 2014, I was invited to become a PULSE National Leadership Fellow and I was subsequently elected to be Leader of Southeast Regional PULSE (SERP). As a National Fellow I am engaged with ongoing efforts to promote department scale change, build leadership capacity, and develop a self-sustaining model of academic reform. As Leader of SERP, I am responsible for organizing the efforts of other Fellows in the southeast (roughly the region covered by SACS-COC) to inspire and facilitate reform efforts at colleges and universities across the region. PULSE is now a self-supporting non-profit organization (501-c-3) that has expanded in scope to all of STEM. Importantly, the majority of PULSE’s work is not discipline specific and can be applied to all academic departments (e.g. developing a shared vision, action planning, facilitative leadership skills). Each of these efforts have engaged both my passion for teaching excellence and my leadership skills, and have prepared me to lead the Graduate School by plugging me into national networks of academic leaders committed to improving student learning and the organizations that support it.

Commitment to Inclusive Excellence – A second motivating factor throughout my career has been the notion that higher education is critical to creating a sustainable and just society. As such, I am committed to inclusive excellence; the recognition that our success as an institution of higher education depends on engaging a wide diversity of students, faculty, and staff. My own commitment to inclusive

excellence has inspired me to promote diversity and equity through my efforts both on and off campus. For example, as chair of Biology and Marine Biology I initiated changes to our hiring procedures so that candidates must submit, in addition to their teaching and research statements, a separate statement that addresses “how the candidate’s cultural, experiential, or academic background contributes to building an equitable and diverse scholarly environment”. This requirement signals to the candidate the high value that we place on diversity, and permits candidates an opportunity to highlight aspects of their work that may not be adequately captured on lists of courses taught and publications. I also served on the UNCW Campus Climate Workgroup and am currently a part of the inaugural class of UNCW Diversity and Inclusion Fellows. My efforts as a Diversity and Inclusion Fellow led to the development of UNCW at Home (formerly Year of the Cape Fear), a new umbrella designation for engaged teaching and scholarship at UNCW. A major focus of UNCW at Home is developing mutually beneficial projects with underserved regional communities. Similarly, as Leader of Southeastern Regional PULSE, I have responsibility for ensuring that participants at SERP Institutes represent the wide range of colleges and universities in the region. We have established, as a matter of policy and practice, that all SERP Institutes will include no less than 20% minority serving institutions and representatives from all institution types (community colleges, small liberal arts colleges, regional comprehensives, and research universities). The rich exchange of ideas that results from this confederation of institutions is remarkable, and nearly all participants comment positively on the value added by exposure to colleagues from diverse institutions. Commitment to this ideal often requires direct outreach to institutions that, for a variety of reasons, are not accustomed to participating in regional or national scale programs, and finding resources to facilitate their participation. For example, my latest grant from the National Science Foundation will support a SERP Institute to be hosted at NC A&T, an HBCU, and includes funding to support teams that cannot pay travel costs for their faculty. As Dean of the Graduate School, I will make a priority of leveraging my network of colleagues at minority serving institutions to recruit students from underrepresented minorities, building an inclusive graduate culture, and promoting inclusive excellence as an overarching goal for our efforts.

My goal as Dean of the Graduate School is to promote strategic growth that leverages our existing strengths at the undergraduate and masters levels, build a shared vision among UNCW faculty for a dynamic and productive Graduate School, expand opportunities for all students and faculty, and support early career development of graduate students. I welcome the opportunity to learn more about the committee’s and the administration’s current vision for the Graduate School and engage key stakeholders in a discussion around strategy. I expect we share a mutual interest in opportunities to grow the student enrollment and develop new programs, increase diversity among students and faculty involved in our graduate programs, and further enhance opportunities for faculty development related to Graduate School priorities. Each of these objectives would benefit from additional revenues, especially funds to support students that could be used to enhance UNCW’s recruiting competitiveness.

Thank you for your time in considering my application. I look forward to the opportunity to discuss my ideas and qualifications further.

Best wishes for the future,



Dr. Christopher Finelli

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