

Robert M. Pignatello

December 29, 2020

Dear Members of the Westfield State University Presidential Search Committee:

I am writing to express my enthusiastic interest in the Presidency at Westfield State University. With my higher education experience that includes a strong commitment to student success, reputation as a successful and collaborative thought leader, I believe I can provide the leadership Westfield State is looking for and needs at this critical time.

After a long and successful career in executive roles at The City University of New York, I assumed the Presidency at Lock Haven University in North Central Pennsylvania. In many key areas over a short period of time I am confident to say I have made a real and lasting difference here.

My unwavering and strong belief in access to public higher education begins with the fact that I am a first generation citizen and college graduate - the son of working class immigrant parents. My father was a factory custodian and a union leader. My parents were just able to save enough to send me to the local public college which redirected the course of my life and ignited my passion for the transformative power of higher education. Both my personal and professional experience underscored for me the vital importance of degree attainment to advance both social and economic mobility for all and most especially for those who struggle with access and affordability and need it the most. This became the inspiration for my work and career.

That's why my efforts at Lock Haven involved making a degree more affordable by increasing merit-based scholarships and needs based aid, reducing fees, and raising funds for hardship needs in order to help our students - most of whom are either on Pell or some form of state aid - to enroll and stay enrolled. One third of them are first generation. Our communities consist of working class families with modest incomes. LHU is 4th in the State System moving graduates into and up through the middle class. Keeping degree attainment affordable and accessible has been a major priority of mine here.

Working with local employers, we are developing new programs to help close the skills gap to meet their needs. As the traditional student population continues to drop, we are pursuing adult-learners and other more affordable pathways toward employment such as new certificate and associate degrees along with moving more instruction online. This means looking harder at what we offer, how and when we offer it and addressing the very different needs of the adult learner. For example, there is a high percentage of manufacturing jobs in the region and we are developing an institute for the study of manufacturing and industrial technology. We will be organizing "communities of practice" to adapt our curriculum to the needs of the region and

involve employers in program changes to keep up with trends. Recently we combined our Small Business Development Center with Penn State to save costs and maintain services.

Creating collaborative solutions requires developing strategic partnerships. At Lock Haven I worked with a major local health care provider to make available hospital space for a healthcare simulation lab. It was funded by a state legislature earmarked appropriation in the budget that we lobbied for. This was necessary to expand our nursing program which is a high demand profession in the region. Establishing a School of Nursing followed as did MOUs with health care providers to convert local LPNs to RNs. We are also collaborating to expand our Physician Assistant program.

I became convinced at Lock Haven that there are many opportunities to fill the need for short term credentials in North Central PA that we could address. As a result, LHU is expanding existing associate degrees and working to establish new ones along with other short term credentials and non-credit programs. At our Clearfield Branch Campus this had already long been the focus – adult learners, short term stackable credentials and non-credit offerings as well. At LHU the objective has been for us to become a “Communiversities.” This is now taking a more regional approach through PASSHE’s Redesign initiative where smaller universities in the system, like LHU, are soon to be combined to create greater scale and efficiencies. At the core of this integration effort for LHU is a focus on workforce development credentials developed in conjunction with area employers. LHU is an important institution and vital economic driver in Clinton County as its 3rd largest employer.

People are and will continue to look to colleges and universities as crucial engines that drive the new post COVID economy, and these institutions need to adapt and evolve to do that. I can see Westfield State clearly recognizes this. There are indeed many constraints that put additional pressure on enrollment and yet create new possibilities as well.

Pennsylvania, of course, is an extremely competitive environment as is Massachusetts and I believe my experience here can be helpful. The impact of demographic shifts upon enrollment have now been greatly exasperated by the continuing impact of COVID on the economy, labor market and demand and interest in the pursuit of academic credentials leading to an even greater challenging time for enrollment and recruitment. Prior to the pandemic we were poised at LHU to increase enrollment substantially for the first time in seven years after leading the system in enrollment loss all that time. Despite having decided to go mostly remote this past semester and dealing with the impact of the pandemic, I am proud to note that we were able to “stop the drop” and end the seven year dramatic enrollment decline. I attribute this to our aggressive marketing efforts, strong virtual engagement over the summer and positioning ourselves as the closer to home alternative to students in the area. That included expanded dual enrollment with the local school district based on specific programmatic pathways. Last semester we organized a STEM career night at the local high school where students learned more about STEM careers and the programs available for them at Lock Haven. In addition, we are also ramping up pre-professional programs where we have collaborative partnerships with other

academic institutions to begin to prepare students for careers in dentistry, medicine, veterinary studies, engineering, and pharmacy.

LHU started as a teaching college in 1870 and that is still a big part of its identity with graduates who are teachers, principals, superintendents, and counselors. In addition to Criminal Justice, Sports Management, Business and STEM programs, Allied Health programs like Nursing and the Physician Assistant program have taken center stage to meet local labor needs.

Our degree offerings at LHU had not been aligned enough with market demands and employment trends and our market penetration with existing programs has been weak. Changing that was a top priority of mine. In order for us to integrate and coordinate advancement efforts we established a new University Advancement Office and re-imagined this area to strengthen our coordination and capacity for marketing, communications, media and government relations, fundraising and alumni relations. This has involved my personal involvement and attention regarding new branding and messaging efforts. One of the early goals was the development of a stronger and higher profile in the marketplace emphasizing not just our outstanding healthcare programs, but in other areas as well. Our institutional re-branding looked to increase market penetration across all campus offerings and promote our smaller size, personal attention, location, value and impact. We are now aggressively targeting new markets and transfer students. I see this as a need in the profile I can contribute to.

This initiative involved making extensive use of social media and digital marketing. Institutions need to use social media for strategic messaging and understand that this is where students look for and receive information, exchange concerns, post questions etc. Our social media plan is now integrated into our overall marketing and communication efforts. Now, during the pandemic, we are meeting the challenge to convey our brand and compassion for students in this socially distant and virtual environment which involves mobilizing faculty, staff and coaches to walk alongside our students more than ever before. Our efforts are evolving and adapting to a very changed landscape and economy and digital technology is at the center of it. The president needs to be visible on social media to connect with all stakeholders and reinforce the brand along with key messages and priorities. I have done that.

These communications, marketing and branding skills, coupled with skills as a relationship builder, are also drawn upon to support philanthropic efforts and priorities. At LHU we are cultivating donors, bolstering a culture of giving and preparing to launch a major capital campaign. Right now the focus has shifted to raising money for student hardship resulting from the pandemic. I have actively worked with alumni to engage them not only for financial support but to serve as examples for current students to inspire them for similar success through various programs and events. Last fall we dedicated a large outdoor bald eagle (our mascot) statue financed by alumni to commemorate our 150th anniversary. We began a Student Retention Fund that I have been personally involved in which received front page attention in the Philadelphia Inquirer. We are proving how small just in time grants of \$500 or \$1000 can make the difference in a student staying enrolled.

I feel I have the qualifications to help promote the premier programs offered at Westfield State and the broad strength that exists across the institution in so many areas and that I would be a very effective ambassador. With my experience in external relations, along with the related skills involved, I believe I can help address identified needs in the profile to bolster the University's identity and profile.

Both at CUNY and now at Lock Haven, I have worked on behalf of our students to ensure that they feel included, a sense of belonging, and are supported holistically. During my tenure I stressed that improving retention must be both a moral and financial imperative for us and that it must be a comprehensive and community wide effort. Consequently, I have made issues like student mental health and well-being a major priority. We opened a food pantry to address food insecurity, added to the Counseling staff to address mental health struggles and formed a working group to look at how we can raise awareness, remove stigmas, and improve services.

We also established a task force on Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, Civility, and Freedom of speech - areas where the University needed to improve. Raising awareness about these issues, engaging the community in them and integrating them into our curriculum became a focus. Increasing the diversity of our student body and addressing achievement disparities was the subject of a recent workshop we organized for our Trustees. Over this summer I established the University's first Office of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion reporting directly to the president as a member of the executive team and we are making these issues a major strategic priority. Other related work in the area of inclusion and equity involves our two pre-existing Presidential Commissions on LGBTQ issues and The Status of Women at LHU, where I am working with stakeholders to better institutionalize support. During my long career in CUNY I worked in very diverse environments where diversity, equity, and inclusion were primary and operationalized values.

Service is at the heart of our mission at LHU. I am proud to have expanded our service engagement, which helps us build important relations in the community, gives students valuable field experience that promotes the common good and builds good citizenship. Many of our students come to LHU to help people and are concerned about social issues and equity. Social Justice was a primary mission focus at John Jay. During my tenure at LHU we also established a Day of Community service to recognize the life and legacy of Dr. King where students, faculty and staff together volunteer their time to support community agencies. Certainly, today's Generation Z students care deeply about social justice and recent events have galvanized these concerns so much more. I firmly embrace the value and importance of experiential learning.

I feel strongly that success on closing the achievement gap must be just as important as access. We must strive to achieve equitable outcomes for all students. When we talk about student success and being student centered this must apply to each and every student. This means recognizing the potential of all students and removing obstacles that thwart them where we can. That's why, as I mentioned, we now provide just in time retention grants and working with our Foundation we are actively fundraising for this purpose to help keep more of our students

enrolled. We stopped blocking students from returning to school who had modest account balances for example. We also need new ways to build resilience into their college experience. This means more effectively integrating academic, career, and personal growth pathways for all students. We must commit ourselves to removing barriers to student success and pursue innovative ideas and high impact strategies and bring that impact to greater scale. I would like to work with Westfield State on learning communities, core competencies, e-portfolios and creating a stronger holistic student experience for students. In fact, I have been exploring at LHU how to create a credential for certain essential skills employers tell us they look for such as leadership, problem solving and resilience.

Using predictive analytics, we are working harder to find students who are in need or struggling so we can design more effective outreach to help them. Institutional Research is an area that must be strong. The capacity to collect, analyze, and apply student data is fundamental to helping them be more successful. We need to do more to help faculty apply the data we have about our students. We're looking at a fuller deployment of data analytics at Lock Haven in order to make the data more usable by faculty.

It is important also to remove the administrative silos that can block coordination and work purposefully to make services more convenient for students. Long ago at John Jay we created a one-stop student service center. Here at Lock Haven we have consolidated oversight for student success related services and are moving toward creating an entire Student Success Building so that we can also physically consolidate support services where they will be more conveniently co-located and it will include "concierge service". Learning from NSEE results, we are also re-imagining our Student Union with an eye to increase student engagement.

What happens in the classroom is the key to retention. Students need professors who are excited about learning, serve as effective mentors and care about them as people. Great teachers who have strong student connections make all the difference. That's why innovation and excellence in teaching and learning must be incented and rewarded and why engaging faculty by building a culture of trust, support and cooperation is paramount. We are in fact reviewing the promotion process. All faculty must be better engaged. But there is a particular need to look for ways to better support and engage adjuncts as they are often marginalized. I have enjoyed guest lecturing for several classes and at John Jay I taught a class in Public Policy.

As President at Lock Haven, I am enthusiastically and personally active and visible with students and have made student engagement and improving their experience a high priority. Whether on social media, at sporting and other events or just walking through the cafeteria, I enjoy connecting with them and they know who their President is. Part of our goal at LHU is to give students a home away from home experience. We even dedicated one of our dorms for students to live with their pets. I am also proud to have expanded our outreach and support to veterans by creating a dedicated Veteran Lounge and Resource Center and increased community recognition for local veterans.

Student success requires institutional reorientation. Ultimately, only if more students succeed can we truly call ourselves an engine of opportunity and mobility. We must look at and

view our processes from the perspective of the end-user - our students - for us to truly be a student centered institution. As some experts have indicated, and I too am drawn to, the healthcare case management model can be a good practice to bring together the various campus departments and offices to bear and coordinate interventions customized for a particular student. I am proud that LHU just received an extension of its TRIO funding which is helping so many first generation students. We are now very focused on insuring that we are “student ready.” I am proud to have led an 8% increase in our retention rate at LHU over the last two years. This was an outcome that many contributed to and is evidence that focused efforts pay off.

As a student of employee engagement, I feel employees – all faculty and staff - must be supported, respected and valued in order for them to contribute to improving the student experience and producing better outcomes I discuss above. They are indeed our most important asset. This has been a focus of both my research and practice. I have long and strong experience in shared governance and building and strengthening valued relationships with all campus stakeholders. I’ve worked extensively and effectively with bargaining units, faculty, staff and students, on improving consultation, transparency, and collaborative decision-making. I have also worked closely and effectively with our Council of Trustees, alumni, elected officials and community organizations.

I consider myself a servant leader and have used this approach of compassionate leadership to make great strides at LHU and improve campus culture through creating an environment of respect, trust, and cooperation. These relationships were extremely strained upon my arrival and are now much improved. We have given voice to faculty, students and staff and have created a “we” culture and one that cares. This included broadening shared governance through the establishment of a University Leadership Council, town meetings, being visible and accessible, listening, and improving internal and external communications. I hold monthly lunch meetings with our union leaders. I began an employee recognition program and created new activities to promote professional development and conducted “shadow days” where I worked along-side employees to show appreciation for their work and to get to know them. As a result, morale was demonstrably lifted and engagement increased. Needless to say these strategies have had to be adapted during the pandemic through virtual connections. But, having these trusted relationships is helping us through difficult times.

My prior experience as a local mayor and work as a State Legislative staffer in New Jersey, provided me with an appreciation, understanding, and advanced capability to work with elected officials for the support of campus objectives and strengthening “town/gown” relationships which I have put to good use here. I believe I am well equipped to strongly advocate on behalf of Westfield State with government officials and help it navigate these challenging waters.

During my career, I expanded community outreach by creating more public cultural and community activities including establishing new art galleries, a faculty lecture series, wellness fair, and concerts. We also have hosted events open to the community to showcase

undergraduate student research. I am actively involved and visible in the community at LHU and enjoy it.

Having been a campus chief operating officer in CUNY, over many years, I have worked collaboratively on financial planning, marshaling resources to advance strategic priorities and efforts to increase institutional efficiency and effectiveness while supporting the core academic mission and student success. This often involved overseeing difficult reallocation and reduction strategies in order to balance budgets while maintaining support for core academic needs by working closely with all divisions to incent and support faculty excellence and improve student services. My experience at CUNY and Lock Haven developing strategic plans that align with resource allocation and strategic priorities in a collaborative manner would be helpful at Westfield State. We are also now in the process of preparing for our re-accreditation as well, with an expected site visit next year. At LHU, I led the development of sustainability plans to align our revenues and expenses.

I like to think out of the box. For example, looking for new revenues at John Jay, I initiated a program to rent facilities for TV and movie production that brought in \$1 million-dollars gross revenue. Several initiatives I undertook – like that one and creating the first campus virtual book store contract which has saved students a considerable amount of money and became the model for a University wide contract, were widely recognized.

While at John Jay I also worked to develop international programs in Italy. Here at LHU I have initiated discussions at the system level to create alliances between the campuses in order to advance international and intercultural opportunities for students. I regularly hosted a lunch at the President's residence to engage our international students. This of course is another area dramatically changed by the pandemic.

My experience in facilities management would also be an asset. At John Jay, I oversaw the campus' role in the construction of a major 600,000 sq foot new building. In addition, during my years at CUNY I was also successful securing City capital funds, working with the Borough President, for various projects, and improvements. I was a member of the CUNY IT steering committee and secured significant funding to enhance technology at John Jay which was well known for having outstanding facilities. At LHU we are reimagining a mixed use academic building for renovation to meet changing needs.

Throughout my career at CUNY, I served as the institutional lead through many crises including 9/11, Hurricane Sandy, H1N1, and SARS. Today, of course, we are all now challenged to respond to and protect our communities from COVID-19 and safely maintain and execute our mission for our students and the communities we serve under very difficult circumstances. These are existential times for us as a nation that have already and will continue to reshape higher education institutions that requires a different kind of leadership. I am proud of the public health mitigation efforts we undertook which rely heavily on remote instruction, important safety protocols like asymptomatic testing with robust contact tracing, and dramatic reduction of on campus residency, while still providing our students with an engaging educational experience to help them "Soar Higher". Our approach was recognized as a model for others. The relationships

I built at LHU and my experience as a crisis leader are helping us here. I would bring that to Westfield State at a critical time.

The President's relationship with the Board of Trustees is a primary one of great importance. This must be a trusted partnership to guide the college forward. I work hard to engage our trustees for their guidance through retreats and workshops in order to involve them more in the stewardship of the University and to keep them informed.

We have long-standing traditions at this 150 year-old institution. I am sure Westfield State is very proud of its traditions as well throughout its distinguished history. It was not easy to celebrate milestones like this in 2020 but it is important that these traditions are honored while we at the same look ahead and adapt and evolve in order for us to thrive and serve our students.

In closing, I believe my experience and success in many key areas through thoughtful, collaborative and capable leadership align with the position profile and can be readily transferred to Westfield State. There are also some clear and relevant parallels between Lock Haven University and Westfield State and my work here.

Together we can build on Westfield's success and reputation by mobilizing all stakeholders to use its assets and strengths to broaden its impact and embrace the considerable challenges and opportunities that lie ahead. This, for me, is a tremendously exciting leadership opportunity with a great mutual fit. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Robert Pignatello". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial "R".

Robert Pignatello