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February 27, 2023

Dear Members of the COTA Dean Search Committee,

It is with great enthusiasm that I submit this letter of interest for the position of dean of the College of the Arts at California State University, Long Beach.

My experience teaching and managing at CSULB and as a part of COTA since 2016 has clarified both the demands and untapped promise of COTA specifically, and CSULB more broadly. With the onset of the pandemic in 2020, we discovered the potential of teaching arts online and simultaneously encountered its profound limitations. As a college, we experienced just how essential the COTA office is to the resiliency and effectiveness of each and every department, unit, and school that comprise it. We saw how critical it is for a vision of the future to engage and respect all the voices of the college and to collaboratively and transparently bring everyone along, with anything less proving unsustainable.

Alongside these challenges, we also experienced the glorious resiliency and desire of students who were suddenly dancing in their bedrooms, acting through a webcam, sketching their family rather than a live model, playing and singing through a mask, filming at a distance, and taking design critiques over zoom. Through all of this difficulty, our students created remarkable work, supported by a dedicated, problem-solving staff, and nurtured by an engaged, creative faculty. The passion of our students triumphed over the challenges and reminded us of the future we are building with every class, every student, in every interaction.

This trial by fire has focused me on what I believe I have to offer the university and the college as its next dean. While the past never offers a blueprint for the future, it can sketch the outlines of the critical path forward and bring into stark relief the essential issues that must be addressed and opportunities waiting to be seized. I am eager to help COTA do both as we chart a promising and sustainable path into the future.

For the past 25 years, I have dedicated myself to developing artists, art, and audiences for Southern California theater. I have done this as the Associate Producer of New Play Development at Center Theatre Group where I had the privilege of building the Kirk Douglas Theatre and nurturing over 100 new plays for the American theater; as a theater critic for KCRW, Southern California's local NPR affiliate reaching a weekly audience of over 300,000; as Director of Cultural Relations for USC; as a teacher at Los Angeles County High School for the Arts; as a producer, general manager, and managing director for several local theater companies; and in my current role as Chair of the Theatre Arts Department at CSULB and program head of the joint MBA/MFA degree in Theatre Management.

In all of these engagements, my leadership draws on my profound respect for artists, creative practice across disciplines, the audience, and an appreciation of the broader artistic ecosystem and communities we serve. I believe the arts are not only critical within a university, I believe they are the essential weavers of the fabric of a just society.

*To connect my passion with my professional and academic experience, I'd like to share a bit about my vision and leadership approach for this role alongside concrete qualifications from my previous work. My curriculum vitae will provide a fuller articulation of my experience, and I trust that if you find my vision and qualifications compelling, we will have further opportunity to discuss my candidacy.*

## Our Moment.

As we continue to emerge from a global pandemic, it is clear that our artistic fields and our academic environments are forever changed. We may not yet be able to fully grasp how, but the shifts are undeniable. The performing arts are welcoming audiences back in diminished numbers. All of our artistic disciplines are grappling with a new awareness of the critical work necessary to represent our communities and carry art forward.

Our students, changed by learning via full days on zoom and having missed rites of in-person passage, come to our classrooms bearing greater burdens and needs than before. Our faculty and staff are stretched beyond capacity as we tackle an enrollment shift that reverses the rising tide of the past decades. The pandemic has revealed already existing cracks in our institutional foundations. The same reckoning that roils the professional field challenges generational assumptions that have held for decades in our classrooms.

## It's about the students. It's about the future.

Our students are the future of our fields.

The very viability of our varied respective artistic disciplines depends on them. As the future artists and leaders of Southern California and beyond, our civic fabric and the health and richness of our communities relies on our work as educators. We fulfill not only our mission as a State University, but also our calling as artists by diversifying our fields and extending their promise for the next generation.

I believe that the COTA community is uniquely positioned by the strength of our programs, the talent of our faculty and alumni, and the commitment of our staff to meet these challenges and ensure that the future of the arts is more diverse and our students more prepared and engaged than any previous generation. The rising awareness of the cost of tuition at private universities and the societal challenges of the student debt burden create an opportunity for COTA to emphasize the access to and quality of our extraordinary arts programs and to provide curriculum and degrees of sustainable value for our students.

We have a once in a generation opportunity.

## Arts and the University.

While I imagine many units on a campus might feel this way, my experience personally and professionally is that the arts sit uniquely within the structures of a university. What is required to train an artist is different than what is required to train an engineer or an English major or a nurse. The data and criteria by which the arts are measured are often more elusive than quantitative: how do you measure the success of a symphony? The data we collect often requires an accompanying narrative to contextualize and translate the experience and impact of the arts into a broader and more tangible context.

To be a champion of the arts, as any dean should, requires a fluency in both the language of the arts and the language of the university. An adept and facile leader translates between varying stakeholder languages helping to make visible the values and demands of the one to the other while championing the common goals and values that are intrinsic to both.

Across my career, I have always had one foot in the creative process and the other in the management of institutions. This experience traversing the rehearsal room and the board room has honed my skills as a translator, communicator, and advocate who can, for example, clarify and contextualize fiscal realities alongside artistic aspiration while maintaining the integrity of both. My ability to appreciate the

needs and authentically respect the concerns of both helps everyone engaged in the process to discover and focus on the shared goals.

While the arts may sit uniquely in a university, we also all know that artists are fundamentally problem solvers. Whether that problem is a design challenge that has yet to find its form, a challenging sonata that tests one's virtuosity, a story that must find its way on film, a play that seems impossible to stage, or a piece of clay that must take shape—this is our creative skill. It is a dean's job, in my view, to translate and contextualize university challenges, whether they be fiscal, material, curricular, operational or other, in a form that we in the arts can creatively and successfully solve.

It is also the dean's job to constantly inspire the university and the public to remember why the arts are essential within a state university, why our presence is part of the social contract to the public good. Beyond the economic and workforce realities of Southern California being one of the great creative capitals of the world, the arts presence on a university campus is foundational.

***Bona fides: USC, Director of Cultural Relations***

*During my time as the Director of Cultural Relations at USC I successfully advocated for the "Arts" to be listed as a top level domain on the university website (a position it still enjoys along with "academics", "research", "patient care", "community", and "global"). Unlike COTA, where the arts all exist under a single university structure, USC's arts programs are spread among six distinct schools. While all the respective deans felt the need for greater visibility of the arts, a desire for individual attention compromised the larger goal. Simultaneously, the university was eager to extend the literal and metaphoric meaning of the "Figueroa corridor" to connect USC with downtown Los Angeles. Recognizing an opportunity to add value to both the arts and the university, I secured funding from the university for the creation of a landing page to connect USC to the arts of downtown Los Angeles and recognize the collective impact and possibility of the arts as a whole at USC. Funding in hand, I was able to build consensus amongst the deans of the arts schools who, because it served them individually, were quick to join the cause and advocate for my proposal that this new landing page be a top-level link on the university's main gateway website.*

**Listen first.**

I believe the dean of an arts college should be a listener, translator, storyteller, manager, partner, and champion. Or more simply, a dean should make things better. That 'better' can only be discovered after listening carefully to the institution, recognizing the essential values and mission already contained within the practices, programs, and people; from there, the job forks into expanding that mission and focusing it so it delivers its greatest impact while building the additional revenue and partnerships that make the conditions of its production more efficient and clear. Through identifying, crafting, and championing the compelling stories of impact and excellence from across the institution, the dean shares those stories with all who will listen (and even some that won't)—all the while managing college resources, not only the financial, but also the physical and human, in a transparent, equitable, and efficient manner, to best serve students consistent with the mission and values of the college and the university.

Listening before acting is a core tenet of my leadership approach and I know that success as a dean will require me to listen deeply to the diverse community of stakeholders and constituents at COTA and from across the university, including and perhaps especially those who may not have been included in these conversations in the past (please also see my diversity statement, which I have attached as an addenda). In order to build constructive relationships and successful strategies to carry an institution forward, one must first listen: listen closely to one's partners, one's constituents, one's audience, one's context. I believe that it is from this highly attuned and informed position that one can cultivate productive partnerships, develop effective strategies, and connect and communicate successfully with a community.

Operationally, that means a careful listening to each department, school, and unit to recognize not simply what is working and what is not, but also to identify and amplify the common themes and strategies across the college that form our collective narratives.

***Bona fides: KCRW, Theatre Critic***

*Each week, for the past 13 years excepting the dark years for theatre during the pandemic, I sit in a theater and listen. As a theater critic for KCRW, my role is to experience the play before I share my take with the public. The job, as once outlined by Goethe, is straightforward: listen for what the artist is attempting to do; listen for whether they've achieved that; and only then determine if what they set out to do was worthwhile.*

*This practice of weekly listening has changed how I listen.*

*Not only has it given me a deep connection to the theater and audiences of Los Angeles, it has taught me to listen for the underlying purpose of a work of art, an initiative, a communication. When we listen to things we agree with or like, the process is easy. When we encounter things that aren't working, the process is more demanding. As I quickly learned after the first terrible play I saw, saying that it was "bad" was neither adding value to the artist or the audience. I had to place it in a context that articulated why the play didn't work and why that mattered, and I had to do it in 3 minutes while you, the listening audience, were stuck in traffic on the 405 listening to "All Things Considered."*

*This weekly challenge has made me keenly aware of what it means and what it takes to communicate responsibly with an audience beyond the arts. The value of my on-air commentary to the theater community is that it engages listeners who didn't tune in to hear about theater. It reaches a broader public. With that benefit comes a responsibility to speak about theater in an accessible, engaging way that doesn't presuppose interest or knowledge about the theater without diluting the message. To accomplish that it required listening to my own commentary to ensure it was accessible and reaching that audience. This practice and awareness of audience has strengthened my ability to advocate for the arts and spark interest with a general public.*

***Bona fides: Shakespeare Center of Los Angeles, Producer & General Manager***

*When I joined Shakespeare Center of Los Angeles, they had what would be considered a very successful annual gala fundraiser. When you 'listened' to the data and the desire of the donors, it was clear that there was untapped potential. By restructuring the donor engagement levels and managing the event differently, I was able to increase donations to the event by 50% year over year to \$500k.*

## **Telling Our Stories - Strategic Engagement**

At its best, strategic engagement marries communication with advancement and community outreach consistent with an institution's values, culture, and mission. This integrated approach begins with knowing and telling the stories that capture the significance and impact of our organization. Identifying the strategic opportunities to leverage the arts natural ability to serve as a gateway to community is central to successful and meaningful partnerships. While always protecting the integrity of the art, every engagement should carry with it the story of the excellence and impact of COTA and all of its departments/units.

The reality of COTA is stronger than our current 'story' of COTA.

While there are, of course, many ways the reality of COTA can improve, we can begin by more effectively and passionately telling the story of who we are and our impact through the arts. These messages needs to be shared and resonate with every department and unit, the college, the university,

our current students, our prospective students, our alumni, our fields, our supporters, and all of our neighbors. This process isn't simply about knowing our story (any more than reading a piece of music is the same as performing it). It's about engaging and understanding our audiences and sharing with them the wonder and value we experience in each of our disciplines and in our classrooms.

To ground these ideas, indulge me while I tell a story.

***Bona fides: Center Theatre Group, Associate Producer of New Play Development***

*When we were first beginning fundraising before the construction of the Kirk Douglas Theatre project, we made a trip to the Goodman Theatre in Chicago. They had just completed a similar project and as we walked through they regaled us with the story of an unexpected million dollar gift. During the soft launch of their capital campaign, two brothers read the posters in the lobby that articulated the goals and impact of the project. Several days later, the director of development got a call from two first time donors. Their gift was both a shock to the theater and significant enough to merit a naming opportunity.*

*Several years after this Goodman trip, I was leading a community hard hat tour at the soon-to-be-completed Kirk Douglas Theatre. The walkthrough wasn't a development event, but a way to engage the community. Several days after the tour, our director of development received a call from a first time donor. I wish I could say that \$100k gift merited a naming opportunity, but it did cement for me the importance of treating every engagement, both internal and external, as a part of a larger, holistic strategic engagement process. We are always fundraising, we are always telling our stories, and we are always serving our communities.*

## **The importance of the whole.**

Throughout my professional career, an appreciation and understanding of the broader ecosystem or 'whole' has guided my approach. I am able to recognize connections across an organization or community, think across a system—be it a department or an entire institution—and analyze and understand the connections, the dependencies of underlying structures, and how their strategic disposition yields a particular result. Beyond recognizing and understanding these connections, I am able to make them visible and comprehensible to others while collaboratively designing strategies to either change the structure through new policies or practices or work within them to change the outcomes.

These strategic skills equip me to not simply manage the resources of the institutions I help lead, but to expand their capacity in alignment with a broader institutional mission and goals. For me, leadership is not simply about reactively addressing problems—it is about creating the infrastructure to address the causes.

***Bona fides: CSULB, Chair, Curriculum Committee Chair, Data Fellow***

*When I first started tackling curriculum in the Theatre Arts Department, I was struck by two things: one, the process of scheduling and inputting a semester's schedule for our Admin. Analyst, Jen White, took more time than it should; two, to try and understand all the dimensions of the curricular 'budgets' (units, WTU's, classrooms) required jumping between disparate university reports that all contained only part of the full picture. Clearly, these two things were connected.*

*Building on my passion for data and my experience as a University Data Fellow I set out to solve these problems.*

*My creation of a robust curricular database that can be quickly and efficiently updated has been key to this work. Seeing and understanding the data has helped the department understand itself both historically and currently. It also serves as a powerful strategic, forward planning tool. Building on my*



*work as a University Data Fellow, I was able to draw from four distinct university data sources. This allows curricular discussions and department planning to consider multiple dimensions quickly and in an integrated manner rather than in a segregated manner through a series of isolated conversations where student unit loads and faculty compensation (WTU's) are discussed separately. With the database as an essential strategic instrument, we are able to consider multiple budgets at once: the student unit 'budget', the instructional budget, the personnel budget, and the space budget. This accessible database has served as the foundation for curricular and resource allocation discussions amongst faculty replacing vague or selective institutional memory with a shared and accepted set of data transparent to all parties. The success of this tool at the department level has led to a broader college-wide implementation discussion. This project is indicative both of my collaborative, data-driven, transparent leadership style and my approach to working within the existing structures of a large bureaucratic organization.*

### **Infrastructure: the underlying culture.**

Success as a dean of COTA will require an institutional commitment to improving the infrastructure of the college. We recognize some of the significant physical infrastructural challenges faced by the college (and made apparent in one instance by the student voices in SOA this fall). Addressing these challenges, as we all know, is a long-term essential goal that requires broad partnerships among the departments/schools, the college, the university, our philanthropic community, and our neighbors (both literally and metaphorically).

While solutions to the grand challenges, like infrastructure and Beach 2030, may be years in the making, the culture of the present is what supports everyone as we work towards that sustainable future. To respond effectively to these grand challenges, we must have a full understanding of all of our infrastructure: not only physical, but the human infrastructure and the cultural infrastructure that we rely on every day.

The approach I am outlining, I believe, can help steward in the kinds of cultural shifts we have the opportunity and need to make to successfully face our greatest challenges and realize our untapped potential as an institution. This shift begins with: understanding who we are here to serve and the moment and context we are in; listening deeply to all stakeholders (especially those who have been previously excluded); listening to the college and university for the underlying mission and values that authentically reflect and unite stakeholders and institution; connecting and transforming that listening into a compelling story that both confirms that people have been heard and helps their story reach their audience; collaboratively and transparently managing with a holistic, integrated vision that strategically leverages our resources (fiscal, human, and physical) in a sustainable way that extends our stories and our impact. And like any creative, iterative process, we then begin again, constantly and consistently, returning to a process of listening, analyzing, reflecting, improving, to fulfill our commitment to our students, our art forms, and our institution.

### ***Bona fides: Center Theatre Group (CTG), Associate Producer of New Play Development***

*The Kirk Douglas Theatre was a foundational project experience that informs how I approach, lead, and realize institutional infrastructure.*

*The most tangible dimension of the project was a design and construction project that transformed an abandoned 1947 movie theater into a live performance theater. We completed the project on-time and on-budget for \$18 million dollars in 2004 after a successful capital campaign. I led the process from an initial sketch through the negotiation of the Disposition and Development Agreement & Lease, to the selection of architects and construction firm, creation and execution of both the operating and business model, through opening, commissioning and producing of the first season of world-premiere plays.*

*The less tangible dimension of the project was a lesson in removing institutional obstacles. When I joined CTG in 1997, the idea of a 'second space' was almost 30 years old. The joke went that immediately after Gordon Davidson opened the Mark Taper Forum in 1967, he set his sights on another space.*

*What took 30 years? And, what made it finally successful?*

*One skill I learned on and through the project was how to identify and remove the obstacles that kept the project from happening. Those obstacles began as internal organizational cultural challenges, then extended to challenges with the belief of the board, then donor challenges, and ultimately challenges with the public/private partnership with the City of Culver City. Each of these challenges required an acute understanding of the obstacle before articulating a solution. It required deep and consistent relationship management and partnerships. Ultimately, it required that a culture that saw the project as a 'long shot' transform into one that saw it as an inevitability, which is what I was able to help accomplish.*

### **It's about the students. It's about the future.**

I return to the students and the future because we need to constantly ground ourselves in their futures. All the rest of our work, policies, and management need to be focused on fulfilling our obligation to the students.

Just as we teach our students not for the world as we have known it, but for the world that they will create and experience, a vision for COTA must be one that, through a profound understanding of our core principles and values, is able to confront the unknown with institutional integrity that places the students at the center of all that we do.

### **We must enjoy ourselves: the culture of place.**

To close, I share my commitment to enjoying what we do. All of us—staff, faculty, and administrators alike—entered academia because we love what we do. The past years have been hard on us all. I believe we should all enjoy doing something that we love and the people with whom we have the privilege to work.

While no dean can remove all obstacles, solve every challenge, or seize every opportunity, I believe they can set a tone for the culture of the institution and an appreciation for everyone who works and studies here. Alongside the qualifications discussed above, I bring to my work a playful joy and appreciation for the opportunity to do what I love.

I would be honored to share that joy and passion with you and hope to have the opportunity to discuss my candidacy further.

Thank you for your time and attention,



Anthony Byrnes