

Jonathan W. Ambrose, Ph.D.

April 24, 2026

Presidential Search Committee
McNeese State University

Dear President Gallot, Chairman Romero, and Members of the Board of Supervisors:

McNeese State University is in a distinctive position as a regional institution with real momentum and a clear identity within Southwest Louisiana. That combination does not require reinvention. It needs disciplined leadership that builds on what is working, strengthens the institution's connection to the community it serves, and keeps the focus on improving outcomes for students. Two decades inside higher education have taught me that the strongest institutions are not defined by sudden change, but by steady execution and a clear sense of direction. They build momentum through disciplined execution, and effective leaders recognize what is working and have the judgment to strengthen it. At the center of that work is a clear commitment to students, where every decision ultimately strengthens the student experience and improves outcomes for those the institution exists to serve.

That is the work I have spent two decades preparing to do, and it is why I am applying for the presidency of McNeese State University.

My path in higher education has provided that perspective from multiple vantage points. I began in physical plant operations at Southeastern Louisiana University, advanced through student affairs, and now serve at the cabinet level where institutional strategy is shaped and resources are committed. That progression, from the operational core to executive leadership, has shaped how I approach institutional work. Universities function as integrated systems. They move forward when academics, operations, and external engagement are connected and focused on improving student success and institutional performance. Much of my career has focused on strengthening that alignment.

That foundation was deepened through my selection as an American Council on Education Fellow, placed at the University of Mississippi. That experience gave me direct exposure to presidential-level governance at a flagship public research university including Division I athletics strategy, state and federal governmental affairs, major donor cultivation, and system-level coordination. It is the kind of preparation that has directly shaped how I approach the responsibilities of a presidency.

In my current role, I operate at the institutional level, aligning academic affairs, enrollment, advancement, and finance toward a unified direction. The work requires more than oversight. It requires decisions to work together in ways that improve student success and institutional performance. At Mississippi College, that work contributed to the highest first-year retention rate in institutional history at 80%, a four-point increase in six-year graduation rates, and one of the largest incoming classes in institutional history. I have also contributed to a \$200 million comprehensive campaign and helped grow a signature fundraising event into a program generating more than one million dollars annually. These outcomes reflect the ability to connect student success, academic priorities, and resource development into a clear institutional direction. They are important not only

as institutional measures, but because they reflect whether students are persisting, graduating, and moving into meaningful opportunities beyond the university.

The presidency of a regional university is, by its nature, an external role. McNeese is deeply connected to the economic and workforce fabric of Southwest Louisiana, and its next president must reflect that reality in both visibility and results. I have built partnerships with industry, healthcare systems, and community organizations, including leadership engagement with Continental Tire, collaboration with the Clinton Chamber of Commerce, and fundraising efforts connected to Children's of Mississippi. I am comfortable representing an institution in those environments, and I understand that those relationships must produce tangible outcomes for students and the institution.

McNeese's designation as a national center for LNG research and safety represents a meaningful strategic opportunity. Its position within the Gulf energy corridor creates a direct connection between academic programs and workforce demand, and the next president must be able to engage business leaders, public officials, and industry partners with credibility while ensuring those relationships translate into academic offerings, experiential learning, and sustained support for the institution. This approach allows McNeese to further define its identity through regional areas of distinction, specifically by aligning with the energy sector to deepen academic programs and create clear career pathways into the region's most critical industry through existing and emerging academic programs tied to workforce needs. At the same time, the university's commitment to leadership development through the Naval ROTC program provides a natural extension of that work, supporting students who are called to serve while reinforcing a culture of accountability and purpose across campus. Together, these efforts position McNeese to continue to develop talent that serves both the region and the nation.

Athletics is an important expression of that identity externally and internally. At McNeese, it brings the community to campus, strengthens the student experience, and serves as a point of pride across Southwest Louisiana. Athletic team success, including recent NCAA Tournament appearances, reflects what is possible when athletics is positioned effectively within the institution. In my current role, I work closely with the Athletic Director to ensure that student success and athletic success are advanced together. That work has resulted in Mississippi College leading the Gulf South Conference in All-Academic Team selections for two consecutive years while also achieving its highest overall finish in the conference all-sports standings. These outcomes reflect a clear principle: athletics should strengthen the institution and remain aligned with academic priorities and financial sustainability, while also strengthening institutional visibility, supporting enrollment, and deepening alumni engagement.

The next president must ensure that athletics remains aligned with the broader mission of the university. That includes supporting the Athletic Director, maintaining a strong student-athlete experience, and ensuring that competitiveness, academic achievement, and financial sustainability are all held in balance. My experience as a student-athlete, combined with my current work in aligning athletics with institutional priorities, has given me a clear understanding of that responsibility. Done well, athletics becomes a unifying force for the institution, reinforcing its mission and deepening its relationship to the region. Success in athletics should amplify the university's story, not exist apart from it.

Shared governance is not a constraint on leadership; it is the mechanism through which durable institutional change is made. Throughout my career, I have worked within all major shared governance structures. I have advised student government leadership, partnered with staff councils, and worked directly with faculty senates on institutional priorities. These experiences have shaped

my approach to decision-making: effective governance depends on clear communication, trust, and alignment around institutional direction. I also believe governance extends beyond the campus. Community partners, industry leaders, and public officials provide valuable perspective on workforce needs and institutional effectiveness. Their input directly informed the development of the Servant Leadership Minor at Mississippi College, a program I designed to close specific gaps in critical thinking and professional accountability identified by regional employers. It is a model of how institutions remain relevant by listening to the industries our students will serve. That same orientation toward access and innovation led to the founding of the Pathways Program, a postsecondary certificate program for students with intellectual disabilities that expanded institutional access and created an entirely new enrollment pathway.

I serve as a teaching faculty member at both the undergraduate and graduate levels and oversee an academic program I helped design and implement. My experience in the classroom has reinforced my belief that faculty are central to the success of institutions like McNeese, as strong teaching and meaningful engagement shape the student experience and ultimately define institutional impact. They are the intellectual core of the institution and must be engaged in shaping its academic direction. Supporting faculty in that work, while ensuring connection to institutional priorities and workforce needs, is essential to effective presidential leadership. As those needs continue to change, McNeese must strengthen its academic offerings while remaining adaptable, developing programs that are both rigorous and responsive. Students should be able to move from enrollment to graduation more efficiently, but not at the expense of the rigor that defines the value of a McNeese degree.

McNeese has momentum. Under the right leadership, that momentum becomes a platform, and the next president must remain externally engaged while maintaining a strong internal focus on execution. External visibility must translate into outcomes that strengthen the institution over time, while maintaining disciplined stewardship of the institution's resources.

I am a Louisiana native, and my family has roots in Southwest Louisiana. The opportunity to lead an institution that serves this region is not incidental to my interest in this role. It is meaningful to me, and it aligns with the work I have spent my career preparing to do.

I understand the responsibility that comes with representing a university like McNeese. I also understand that leadership in this role is measured by results. McNeese deserves a president who is willing to be measured by those outcomes and by the success of the students it serves. I am prepared to lead that work at McNeese State University.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'JWA', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Jonathan W. Ambrose, Ph.D.

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Clinton, Mississippi

PROFESSIONAL SUMMARY

Higher education executive with 20 years of experience and sustained cabinet-level leadership advising the President on institutional strategy and performance. Operate at the institutional level, aligning strategy, enrollment, and student success to strengthen performance and long-term sustainability. Steward a \$20M+ portfolio and bring experience across academic affairs, finance, advancement, governance, and external relations. ACE Fellow with exposure to presidential leadership at a flagship public research university.

EDUCATION

Ph.D., Urban Higher Education | Jackson State University | 2014

M.A., Criminal Justice | University of Louisiana at Monroe | 2004

B.A., Criminal Justice (Jurisprudence) | Saint Peter's University | 2003

ADMINISTRATION & LEADERSHIP

Mississippi College

Clinton, Mississippi | 2014-Present

A comprehensive Baptist-affiliated university serving more than 4,200 students across seven schools: Business, Christian Studies & the Arts, Education, Humanities & Social Sciences, Law, Nursing, Science & Mathematics. Accredited by Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC).

Vice President for the Student Experience | 2024–Present

Associate Vice President & Dean of Students | 2019–2023

Executive Scope

- Advise the President as a senior cabinet leader on institutional strategy, enrollment stability, and long-term planning
- Steward a \$20M+ operating portfolio supporting student success, wellness, residential operations, and campus engagement
- Lead the university's student experience strategy, aligning co-curricular systems with institutional priorities related to retention, persistence, and graduation
- Partner across Academic Affairs, Enrollment Management, Advancement, and Finance to align institutional priorities and improve performance
- Oversee approximately 1.5M+ square feet of facilities, including 2,000 beds and 20 acres of campus space
- Engage regularly with the Board of Trustees and campus leadership on institutional priorities

Selected Institutional Impact

- Led an institution-wide student success strategy resulting in a historic 80% first-year retention rate and a four-point increase in six-year graduation rates
 - Partner with the President on a \$200M comprehensive campaign, supporting donor engagement, institutional positioning, and philanthropic growth
 - Shaped the development of the Mississippi College Gala, a signature fundraising event generating more than \$1M annually for scholarships and institutional priorities
 - Directed \$8.4M in capital and infrastructure improvements
 - Founded and launched the Pathways Program expanding access and creating a new enrollment pathway
 - Led institutional crisis response during the COVID-19 pandemic, maintaining campus operations and strengthening policy alignment
 - Established Mississippi College Dance Marathon raising more than \$766,000
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American Council on Education Fellow University of Mississippi | 2023–2024

Executive Exposure

- Selected for one of higher education's premier executive leadership development programs at a flagship public research university
- Worked alongside the Chancellor and senior leadership team on presidential-level governance and executive decision-making
- Participated in executive discussions and briefings related to institutional priorities, including state and federal governmental affairs and system-level coordination

Selected Strategic Experience

- Engaged in advancement strategy and major donor cultivation, gaining exposure to campaign planning, stewardship, and philanthropic leadership
 - Participated in enterprise-level budgeting and capital planning discussions, strengthening understanding of institutional finance and resource allocation
 - Observed and supported executive leadership in crisis response, public communication, and external relations
 - Participated in Division I athletics strategy discussions, including alignment between athletics, institutional identity, and external engagements
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Assistant Vice President for Student Affairs | 2016–2019

Associate Dean of Students | 2014–2016

Mississippi College | 2014–2019

Executive Scope

- Provided progressive senior leadership within Student Affairs across a five-year period, advancing from Associate Dean to Assistant Vice President in recognition of expanded institutional impact
- Managed a \$5M operating portfolio with responsibility for student conduct, engagement, residential life, and crisis response

- Served as Chief Conduct Officer and chair of the Student Intervention Team, overseeing complex student risk, care cases, and cross-divisional coordination with academic affairs, enrollment, and faculty

Selected Institutional Impact

- Built foundational student success infrastructure including early alert systems, coordinated case management, and cross-divisional collaboration models that supported institutional retention goals
 - Led a comprehensive overhaul of the student conduct system, strengthening alignment between accountability, student development, and institutional compliance
 - Strengthened orientation and transition programming, improving early student engagement and first-year persistence
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Southeastern Louisiana University Hammond, Louisiana | 2006–2014

Public regional university within the University of Louisiana System, serving more than 14,000 students and accredited by Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC).

Director, Student Union | 2007–2014

Executive Scope

- Led operations, programming, and strategic direction of the university's student union and campus event infrastructure
- Served on the Student Affairs senior leadership team at a public institution serving more than 14,000 students
- Managed large-scale campus events, facility operations, and cross-campus partnerships, including coordination with intercollegiate athletics

Selected Institutional Impact

- Played a key leadership role in a \$32M student union construction and renovation project, contributing to planning, budgeting, and long-term operational strategy
 - Created and launched the university's first comprehensive Welcome Week, establishing a foundational transition program that strengthened early student engagement
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Assistant Director, Physical Plant Services | 2006–2007

Executive Scope

- Provided leadership for campus-wide facilities support operations, including custodial services, fleet management, logistics, and service contracts across more than 50 buildings

Selected Institutional Impact

- Achieved full compliance with state fleet management regulations, reducing institutional risk and improving operational oversight
- Co-led development of a campus shuttle system, improving student access and mobility

- Negotiated and managed service contracts that improved efficiency while maintaining service
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ACADEMIC LEADERSHIP

- **Founder, Servant Leadership Minor (18 credits):** Designed and implemented interdisciplinary curriculum; oversee program delivery, assessment, and faculty coordination
 - **Founder, Pathways Program:** Developed a postsecondary certificate program for students with intellectual disabilities, expanding institutional access and creating a new enrollment pathway
 - **Deans Council (Member):** collaborating with the Provost and academic leadership on institutional planning, student success strategy, and cross-divisional initiatives
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TEACHING EXPERIENCE

Assistant Professor | Mississippi College | 2016–Present

- **EDU 190** Foundations for Servant Leadership
- **EDU 390** Strengths in Leadership
- **EDU 490** Servant Leadership Field Experience
- **HED 6503** Student Development Theories (Graduate)

Southeastern Louisiana University | 2007–2014

- **SE 1010** Freshman Academic Success

Adjunct Instructor | Career Technical College, Monroe, Louisiana | 2006

- **CJ** Criminal Law Application
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SCHOLARSHIP & THOUGHT LEADERSHIP

Publications

- Ambrose, J.W. (2014). Moving Towards an Individualized Sanctioning Approach. *NASPA Journal*.
- Ambrose, J.W. (2011). Summer Orientation: It's Not Just for Freshmen. *APCA Journal*.

Selected Keynote and Invited Presentations

- *The Mirror of Leadership* — Keynote Address, MAIS Student Leadership Conference (2025).
 - *Post-Pandemic Gen Z: Recruiting Today's Students* — National Association of Baptist Enrollment Professionals (2023).
 - *Leadership in Action* — On-stage interview with Mississippi Speaker of the House (2023).
 - *Pertinent Issues in SACSCOC Reviews* — Mississippi Association of Colleges and Universities (2021).
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PROFESSIONAL SERVICE

Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC)

On-Site and Off-Site Peer Reviewer | 2018–Present

- Conduct institutional reviews assessing governance, academic quality, compliance, and financial responsibility

Association of Christians in Student Development

Member | 2014–Present

INSTITUTIONAL LEADERSHIP

- **Member, President’s Council (Senior Cabinet)** | 2019–Present — Advise the President on institutional strategy, budget priorities, and organizational direction
 - **Member, Academic Affairs & Student Experience BOT Committee** | 2019–Present — Present on enrollment, retention, and strategic initiatives
 - **Chair, Student Experience Task Force** | 2024–Present — Lead institution-wide review and strategic planning of the undergraduate student experience
 - **Member, Faculty Senate Committees** | 2019–Present — Collaborate on academic and student experience alignment
 - **Chair, Student Intervention Team** | 2014–Present — Coordinate cross-divisional response to student risk, wellbeing, and case management
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COMMUNITY & CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

- **Board Member, Brilla Soccer Ministries** | 2016–Present — Provide governance and strategic guidance for a faith-based nonprofit focused on youth development and mentorship
 - **Board Member, Northside Elementary School Fundraising** | 2015–Present — Support annual fundraising strategy and community engagement initiatives
 - **Leadership Clinton Facilitator, Clinton Chamber of Commerce** | 2015–Present — Guide development of emerging civic leaders through community-based leadership programming
 - **Youth Sports Coach, Clinton, Mississippi** | 2015–Present — Mentor youth through athletics, emphasizing leadership, discipline, and character development
 - **Licensed Foster Parent, Mississippi (former)** | 2017–2022 — Provided care and stability for children in state custody
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HONORS

- Athletic Hall of Fame, Saint Peter's University (Football) | 2008
- Honorary Member, Mortar Board National College Senior Honor Society | 2017
- Mississippi College Yearbook Dedication | 2022