Sarah Coakley, Ph.D.

May 1, 2026

Presidential Search Committee
McNeese State University
Lake Charles, Louisiana

Dear Members of the Search Committee,

I am honored to submit my application for the position of President of McNeese State University. McNeese stands at a pivotal moment, shaped by its deep commitment to student success, its critical role in the economic vitality of Southwest Louisiana, and its opportunity to further define itself as the premier regional university serving both Louisiana and Southeast Texas. With a strong foundation as a student-centered, teaching-focused institution, McNeese is uniquely positioned to expand its impact as a driver of workforce development, community resilience, and regional prosperity.

In my current role as Provost and Chief Academic Officer at Georgia Highlands College (GHC), I lead Academic Affairs, Student Affairs, Enrollment Management, and Institutional Effectiveness across five campuses serving nearly 6,000 students in both urban and rural communities. Over the course of nearly thirteen years, from faculty to dean to provost, my leadership has centered on expanding access, strengthening academic quality, and building an institution that delivers both educational and economic impact. I bring a strategic, collaborative, and student-centered approach grounded in execution and measurable results, and I am prepared to lead McNeese into its next chapter with clarity, energy, and purpose.

GHC and McNeese share a deeply aligned mission and institutional profile. Both serve diverse regional populations, balancing access with the delivery of rigorous academic programs that prepare students for meaningful careers. Each institution plays a vital role in supporting first-generation students, adult learners, and workforce needs across its service area. My experience guiding GHC through a transformation from a primarily associate degree-granting institution to a growing mixed-baccalaureate college positions me to apply proven strategies to strengthen enrollment, enhance student success, and expand regional impact.

A defining feature of my leadership has been serving as an architect of institutional growth and alignment. I strategically connected academic program development with data-informed student success initiatives, contributing to a 23% increase in total enrollment at GHC since 2022. I spearheaded the development of multiple bachelor's degree programs in high-demand fields that integrate rigorous academics with career-focused experiences such as internships and capstone projects. Today, nearly 40% of all GHC students are pursuing a four-year degree, a 280% increase

over the last three years, with a 35% rise in bachelor's degrees conferred last year alone. These outcomes reflect a deliberate strategy of aligning academic offerings with workforce relevance while ensuring students have clear, supported pathways to completion and career success.

Workforce alignment has been central to this approach. In response to healthcare workforce shortages, I am managing the expansion of our nursing (ASN) program, which has doubled its enrollment capacity to more than 300 students while maintaining NCLEX pass rates above 90%. I am also leading the launch of a traditional Bachelor of Science in Nursing for Spring 2027. To support this work, more than $13 million in funding was secured from the University System of Georgia and the Georgia General Assembly for facility renovations, faculty hiring, and advanced simulation equipment. These efforts expand student opportunity while directly addressing regional workforce needs, an approach that aligns strongly with McNeese's role in supporting key industries such as healthcare, energy, and agriculture.

My experience also includes strengthening and scaling student pathways across educational systems. I prioritized expanding dual enrollment opportunities, doubling student participation and strengthening partnerships with local high schools. Collaborating with institutions in the Technical College System of Georgia and beyond, I developed transfer articulation agreements that provide direct pathways for associate degree graduates to continue into our bachelor's programs. I also led the creation of a dual degree program with the Georgia Institute of Technology and built additional transfer pathways that allow GHC graduates to pursue master's degrees at partner universities.

A central part of my approach to student success is creating structures and supports that meet students' needs and maximize their potential. At GHC, I expanded 8-week course offerings across disciplines and modalities, enhancing flexibility and opportunity for a diverse student population. This innovation led to a 10% increase in course pass rates across all demographics compared to the traditional semester-long format. In addition, I implemented mid-semester admissions and financial aid awarding, ensuring no student is more than eight weeks from starting or returning to college. I also co-founded the *Ready to Start* scholarship, which provides funding to students with small outstanding balances, ensuring that temporary financial challenges do not prevent continued enrollment or degree completion. I also secured funding for free English and math placement testing, created three retention assistant positions, and launched a full-withdrawal initiative providing early intervention and personalized guidance.

These initiatives have contributed to a culture of measurable success. In recognition for our work in advancing student achievement, GHC was named a 2025 Top 10 Finalist for the Aspen Prize for Community College Excellence, a national acknowledgement of institutional excellence, equity, and student achievement. While McNeese operates in a different sector, this accolade represents my focus on building a culture where every student is empowered to excel, where graduation is the expectation, and where outcomes translate into meaningful careers and lives of impact.

Throughout my career, I have built cultures where faculty and staff are partners in shaping the institution's direction. I redesigned faculty evaluation and tenure processes, compensation structures, and institutional policies while building consensus with faculty senate and college leadership. I also led a college-wide strategic alignment initiative, using qualitative and quantitative data to optimize programs, reallocate resources, and sustain institutional growth during periods of fiscal constraints.

These efforts reinforced trust, advanced academic priorities, and ensured student success and fiscal stewardship remain central to institutional decision-making.

Sustaining an engaged campus community also requires investing in the people who make the institution exceptional. I am a fierce advocate for supporting faculty development and staff growth. I established an annual professional development fund, now totaling $75,000, to support instructional innovation, conference participation, and scholarly activities. Fully funded by private donors, I created the Faculty Appreciation and Research Spotlight event to celebrate faculty scholarly contributions and recognize their achievements. To support staff development, I co-designed Northwest Georgia Leadership Education and Development (NWGA LEAD), a year-long leadership program that equips emerging leaders from four higher education institutions with the skills, confidence, and networks to advance in their careers.

McNeese's continued success will depend on cultivating purposeful partnerships that connect education, workforce, and community impact. Under my leadership, GHC established its first named academic school through a $7 million investment from Atrium Health Floyd. Nearly $5 million of that commitment provides full scholarships for any nursing student who commits to employment in the regional healthcare system after graduation. This innovative partnership expanded access, strengthened critical workforce pipelines, and serves as a model of how strategic collaboration fuels institutional growth and regional prosperity. I see tremendous opportunity for McNeese to build on its strong regional partnerships to further strengthen its role as a catalyst for workforce development and economic growth across Southwest Louisiana and beyond.

My experience within the University System of Georgia has also prepared me to lead effectively within the University of Louisiana System. I have worked within a complex governance structure that requires aligning institutional priorities with system strategy, translating policy into practice, and collaborating across institutions to advance shared goals. I was recently selected as Chair-Elect of the Academic Affairs advisory committee, consisting of all 25 provosts in the University System of Georgia. This experience has strengthened my ability to navigate system-level decision-making, engage stakeholders, and support initiatives that require both consistency and flexibility across diverse colleges.

In addition, my service as GHC's accreditation liaison for the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC) has provided deep experience in policy, compliance, and institutional accountability. I have overseen program review and assessment processes, led efforts for our 2023 Fifth-Year Interim report, and my office is currently preparing for reaffirmation as the Class of 2028. This work has reinforced my commitment to data-informed decision-making, continuous improvement, and maintaining high standards of academic quality, critical components of effective system-level leadership.

On a personal note, my family and I are eager to relocate to Lake Charles and become active members of the community. Having earned my Ph.D. at Tulane University, I have longstanding ties to Louisiana and a deep appreciation for its culture, resilience, and people. I am excited by the opportunity to serve a region that values higher education as a catalyst for opportunity and growth.

I view my leadership as that of a growth architect, focused on aligning strategy, people, and resources to advance institutional mission and impact. The work I have led at Georgia Highlands College reflects the opportunity ahead at McNeese State University. I would be honored to partner with faculty, staff, students, alumni, and community leaders to build on McNeese's strong foundation and lead the university into its next chapter of success.

Sincerely,

Sarah Coakley

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Executive Summary

Accomplished higher education leader with extensive experience driving institutional transformation, academic excellence, and student success. Proven record of advancing enrollment growth, workforce-aligned degree development, and cross-sector partnerships that expand opportunity and impact. Strategic, collaborative, and equity-focused leader with demonstrative ability to inspire innovation, fiscal accountability, and shared vision across diverse stakeholders.

Education

Ph.D., Chemistry, Tulane University, 2012
Dissertation: "Normal Mode Analysis of DNA Charge Transfer and Internal Vibrational Energy Dynamics"
Advisor: Dr. Alexander Burin

B.A., Chemistry, University of Illinois at Chicago, 2006

Professional Experience

Georgia Highlands College, Rome, GA

Provost and Chief Academic Officer, July 2021 – present
Senior executive leader responsible for academic affairs, student affairs, enrollment management, and institutional effectiveness, serving nearly 6,000 students across five campuses in Northwest Georgia. Provides strategic oversight of curriculum development, student learning assessment, and continuous improvement of academic and administrative units. Leads cross-functional collaboration to enhance student support services, streamline admissions and onboarding, maintain accreditation, and drive faculty and staff development, including tenure and promotion processes. Directly supervises 12 senior leaders and staff across key institutional areas and oversees approximately 120 full-time faculty.

Interim Director of Athletics, April 2024 – October 2024
Served as Interim Athletic Director for six months, overseeing daily operations, compliance, and student-athlete support across all athletic programs. Primary responsibility was coordinating logistics for GHC Baseball's conference championship tournament (hosted at GHC), district championship travel, and travel to the NJCAA World Series.

SACSCOC Accreditation Liaison, January 2023- August 2024
Served as Interim SACSCOC Accreditation Liaison, supporting institutional compliance and reporting requirements. Coordinated accreditation-related initiatives and documentation to ensure alignment with SACSCOC standards and prepare and submit GHC's 5th Year Interim Report.

Dean, School of Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics, August 2018 – July 2021
Served as Academic Dean of the School of STEM, overseeing programs in agriculture, biology, chemistry, engineering, geology, health professions, mathematics, and physics, with a budget of approximately $3.8 million. Managed a team of three Division Chairs, 35 full-time faculty, four lab staff, and one administrative assistant. Provided strategic leadership in academic planning, resource allocation, and program development.

Strategic Impact & Institutional Achievements

- Led GHC to be named a top 10 finalist for the Aspen Prize for Community College Excellence in 2025 and a top 25 semifinalist in 2023.
- Achieved overall enrollment growth of approximately 23% between Fall 2022 and Fall 2025. Increased bachelor's degree enrollment by 230% to nearly 2000 students.
- Secured a partnership with Atrium Health Floyd that resulted in the first named GHC academic school and a $7M gift over five years, including $5M of direct student support.
- Launched a faculty professional development fund and secured consecutive annual increases, now reaching $75,000.
- Co-founded the Ready to Start scholarship with the GHC President to support access and affordability for incoming students.
- Developed and launched five new bachelor's degrees in Health Sciences, Building Information Modeling Management, Environmental and Natural Resources, Organizational Leadership, and Digital Media and Communication.

- Built industry partnerships that led to more than $600K in software and equipment donations to support the Building Information Modeling Management program.
- Launched and expanded GHC's offerings of 8-week courses, leading to improved student success rates across multiple demographics and modalities. Implemented mid-semester admissions, allowing students to be admitted in October and March.
- Expanded the number and quality of articulation agreements, creating seamless transfer opportunities from technical and community colleges to GHC and from GHC to colleges and universities in and out of the state.
- Implemented educational technology solutions for the academic catalog, course scheduling, assessment and accreditation, and accessibility. Launched Element 451, a CRM for admissions, orientation, and student communications.
- Launched a college-wide academic strategic alignment project**,** a quantitative and qualitative, internal review of academic degree programs, pathways, and resources to ensure efficient allocation of resources.
- Led comprehensive redesign of faculty evaluations, tenure/promotion, and post-tenure review, Faculty Senate bylaws, and College statutes.
- Created the "GHC Academic Showcase" and "Faculty Appreciation and Research Spotlight" events to celebrate and disseminate faculty and student scholarship.
- Facilitated the development and launch of the GHC Student Ambassadors in partnership with Phi Theta Kappa; named a 2023 PTK Distinguished Administrator.
- Co-developed and launched NWGA LEAD, a year-long collaborative leadership program between GHC, Dalton State, and Georgia Northwestern Technical College.

Teaching Experience

Georgia Highlands College, Rome, GA

Tenure, August 2018

Associate Professor, Chemistry, August 2017 – present

Assistant Professor, Chemistry, August 2013 – August 2017

- Courses taught: CHEM 1211K and 1212K, Principles of Chemistry I & II, CHEM 1151K Survey of Chemistry I, MATH 0997 Corequisite Support for Quantitative Reasoning
- Led the redesign of the Principles of Chemistry sequence, including the adoption of a free textbook (OER), and launched the GHC Chemistry YouTube Channel that houses over 100 instructional videos created by GHC chemistry faculty.

Kennesaw State University, Marietta, Georgia

Part-Time Assistant Professor, Chemistry, January 2015 – May 2015

Tulane University, New Orleans, Louisiana
Teaching Assistant, Chemistry, August 2006 – May 2012

Research Experience

Dissertation: "Normal Mode Analysis of DNA Charge Transfer and Internal Vibrational Energy Dynamics"
Tulane University, New Orleans, August 2006 – May 2012

- Investigated the nature of quantum mechanical vibrations by novel theoretical efforts.
- Studied the significance of quantum effects on charge transfer in DNA by developing a theoretical model based on small polaron theory for non-adiabatic charge transfer.
- Developed a quantum mechanical theoretical description of vibrational energy flow through organic molecules based on a modification of Marcus electron theory applied to anharmonic transitions and compared theory to known spectroscopic data.
- Computational skills and experience in GAUSSIAN 03 and GAUSSIAN 09 Density Functional Theory calculations, and SciLab.

Visiting Researcher, Pacific Institute of Theoretical Physics (PITP)
University of British Colombia, Vancouver, March 2008

Grants and Research Support

University System of Georgia STEM Initiative (STEM IV), July 2019 – June 2022
STEM Education Improvement Plan Grant
The University System of Georgia's (USG) STEM Initiative is a project designed to improve student access and success in the STEM fields and enhance existing instructional capabilities of STEM faculty in Georgia's postsecondary institutions. Role: PI (2019-2021)

Affordable Learning Georgia Round 11, #M32, February 2018 – December 2018
MiniGrant – Creation and Revision of Ancillary Materials
Affordable Learning Georgia (ALG) aims to support the sustainability of previous Textbook Transformation Grants through substantial improvements and adaptions of created open educational resources (OER) or the creation of new ancillary materials for ALG-funded OER. Role: PI

Affordable Learning Georgia Round 8, #304, January 2017 – December 2017
Textbook Transformation Grant – OpenStax Textbooks
Affordable Learning Georgia (ALG) is a University System of Georgia initiative that focuses on reducing the cost of textbooks and the enhancement of GALILEO, Georgia's Virtual Library and ALG's parent initiative. Role: Co-PI

University System of Georgia STEM Initiative (STEM III), July 2016 – June 2019
STEM Education Improvement Plan Grant
The University System of Georgia's (USG) STEM Initiative is a project designed to improve student access and success in the STEM fields and enhance existing instructional capabilities of STEM faculty in Georgia's postsecondary institutions. Role: Grant Administrator, Chemistry Coordinator (2016-2018)

Georgia Department of Education CFDA #84.366B, October 2016 – September 2018
Mathematics and Science Partnership Program, Paulding County School System
The Mathematics and Science Partnership program strives to improve teacher quality through partnerships between state education agencies, institutions of higher education, high-need local education agencies, and schools to increase the academic achievement of students in mathematics and science. Role: Higher Ed Consultant

Publications

Tesar, S.L., V.M. Kasyanenko, I.V. Rubtsov, G.I. Rubtsov, and A.L. Burin, "Theoretical Study of Internal Vibrational Relaxation in Polyatomic Molecules", *J. Phys. Chem. A* **117(2)** (2013), 315-323.

Tesar, S.L., J.M. Leveritt, A.A. Kurnosov, and A.L. Burin, "Temperature dependence for the rate of hole transfer in DNA: Nonadiabatic regime,", *Chem. Phys.* **393** (2012), 13-18.

Kasyanenko, V.M., **S.L. Tesar**, G.I. Rubtsov, A.L. Burin, and I.V. Rubtsov, "Structure *Dependent* Energy Transport: Relaxation-Assisted 2DIR Measurements and Theoretical Studies", *J. Phys. Chem. B* **115** (2011), 11063-11073.

Burin, A.L., **S.L. Tesar**, V.M. Kasyanenko, I.V. Rubtsov, and G.I. Rubtsov, "Semiclassical Model for Vibrational Dynamics in Polyatomic Molecules: Investigation of Internal Vibrational Relaxation", *J. Phys. Chem. C* **114** (2010), 20510-20517.

Leveritt, J.M., C. Dibaya, **S. Tesar**, R. Shrestha, and A.L. Burin, "One-dimensional confinement of electric field and humidity dependent DNA conductivity", *J. Chem. Phys.* **131** (2009), 245102.

Presentations

Partners in Leadership Development: Northwest GA LEAD
Presenter, *University System of Georgia Teaching and Learning Conference*, Columbus, GA — April 2025
Highlighted regional leadership collaboration and faculty development strategies across Northwest Georgia institutions.

Streamlined Pathways to Baccalaureates and Beyond
Presenter, *Community College Baccalaureate Association Annual Conference*, Austin, TX — February 2025
Presented Georgia Highlands College's BS in Health Sciences as a model for workforce-aligned degree pathways and regional talent development.

STEMFIT: Mathematical Fitness for STEM Courses
(Author only-did not present) *American Mathematical Association of Two-Year Colleges Annual Conference* — October 2021
Shared data-driven curriculum innovations designed to improve STEM readiness and retention.

Full STEM Ahead: Charging into the Open Educational Resource Revolution
Workshop Facilitator, *Transforming STEM Higher Education Conference*, AAC&U, Chicago, IL — November 2019
Led a national workshop on OER adoption and its strategic implications for access, affordability, and instructional quality.

Textbook Transformation in STEM Courses at Georgia Highlands College
Presenter, *University System of Georgia Teaching and Learning Conference* — April 2019
Analyzed institutional successes and challenges in implementing OER across STEM disciplines.

Innovative STEM Strategies for Middle Grades and Secondary Education
Workshop Facilitator, *Bartow County School System-Wide Professional Development Day* — March 2019
Delivered high-impact teaching strategies to enhance STEM curriculum alignment with postsecondary expectations.

Campus Spotlight: Charging Up Chemistry
Presenter, *University System of Georgia Board of Regents Meeting*, Atlanta, GA — February 2019
Featured institutional innovation in STEM pedagogy and student engagement at the system level.

Selected Professional Training

- **SACSCOC Academic Peer Evaluator Training**
  Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges, Austin, TX, December 8, 2024.
- **Aspen Rising Presidents Fellow – Cohort 7**
  Aspen Institute College Excellence Program, 2022-2023.
- **Community College Research Center Summer Institute – Guided Pathways**
  Teachers College, Columbia University, July 2022.
- **Professional Certification in College Student Wellbeing, Trauma, and Resilience**
  Learning for Life, Florida State University, May 2022.
- **Executive Leadership Institute**
  University System of Georgia, Peachtree City, GA, 2019-2020
- **New Deans and Chairs Workshop**
  University System of Georgia, Peachtree City, GA, February 28, 2019.
- **Leadership Academy**
  Cobb Education Consortium, 2017-2019.
- **Presidential Leadership Program – Cohort 3**
  Georgia Highlands College, 2017.
- **University System of Georgia STEM Summit**
  Middle Georgia State University, Macon, GA, August 8, 2016.
- **Vernier Software and Technology: 4-Hour Hands-On Data Collections Training**
  Atlanta, GA, March 15, 2014.
- **New Faculty Academy**
  Georgia Highlands College, 2013-2015.

College and Professional Service

- Chair-Elect, CAO Advisory Leaders-Academic Affairs (formerly RACAA), University System of Georgia, 2025-present.
- Chair, Chief Information Officer Search Committee, 2025.
- Steering Committee, NWGA LEAD program, 2024-present.
- Chair, Athletic Director Search Committee, 2024.
- Executive Committee, Regent's Academic Committee on Academic Affairs (RACAA), 2023-present.
- USG Data Science Initiative, 2022.
- Chair, Assistant Vice Provost Search Committee, 2020.
- Member, Environmental Scanning Committee, 2019.
- Grant Reviewer, Affordable Learning Georgia Round #13, 2019.
- Member, Data Council, 2019-2024
- Member, Polices and Procedures Taskforce, 2019-2024.
- Member, Institutional Effectiveness Committee, 2018-2019.
- Member, Paulding Site Wynn Building Renovation Committee, 2018-2019.
- Chair, Division of Natural Sciences Leadership Team, 2018-2019.
- Member, Vice President of Academic Affairs Search Committee, 2018.
- Coordinator, Regents Engineering Pathway (REP), 2017-2021.
- Member, Division of Natural Science and Physical Education Leadership Team, 2016-2018.
- Faculty Member At-Large, Instructional Council, 2016-2017.
- Member, SACSCOC Reaccreditation Committee, 2016-2017.
- Chair, Chemistry Faculty Search Committee, 2016.
- Pre-Engineering associate's degree pathway Committee, 2014.
- Member, Faculty Senate, 2014-2017.
- Fabulous Fridays Faculty Leader, 2013-2015