

June 19, 2025

Dear IFAS Leadership and the FYCS Search and Screen Committee,

I am grateful for the opportunity to submit my application for the position of Chair of the Department of Family, Youth and Community Sciences (FYCS) at the University of Florida. After years working with the faculty, staff, and students in FYCS as Associate Chair and, most recently, as Interim Chair, I feel a deep sense of satisfaction in what has been accomplished. Through these experiences, I have gained valuable insights into the opportunities and challenges that the department will face in the coming years. During my brief time as Interim Chair, the department has faced an unpredictable and unstable environment, shaped by changing state and federal policies, procedures, and practices concerning higher education. These challenges will likely persist. However, I believe FYCS is well-equipped to navigate these challenges, and I believe I am the right person to lead FYCS through these troubling times. With this renewed commitment, I offer my candidacy for Chair of the department.

Several months ago, I decided that I would not apply for the chair position primarily due to personal health reasons. I was uncertain how the stress and pressure associated with the role would impact my overall health and well-being. However, after spending more time in the position, I have gained a better understanding of the job and how my body responds to the pressures. I now feel more confident than ever that I am ready and fully committed to continuing my service as chair.

I bring with me over 25 years of experience working at land-grant universities, with over a decade dedicated to the department in various roles, including undergraduate program coordinator, graduate program coordinator, Associate Chair, and currently, Interim Chair. Throughout my career, I have also held faculty appointments in all three mission areas: teaching, research, and Extension. In this letter, I will briefly summarize this accumulated experience as I address the duties and responsibilities required for the department chair position.

Academic Programs and Mentorship

My past and present leadership in academic programs demonstrates my ongoing commitment to advancing the department's academic programs. Although I served as the undergraduate coordinator for less than a year, the brief experience helped me better understand how the undergraduate program functions, from advising, course scheduling, and faculty teaching assignments, to recruitment, retention, student development, and student conduct. As the graduate coordinator, I had a similar learning experience regarding program operations; however, my most significant accomplishment was assisting with establishing the first PhD program in the department. Collaborating closely with the department chair, faculty, and leadership from CALS and UF, we developed the doctoral program with a specialization in prevention science, which was a new specialization for the department. To support this specialization, five new faculty members have been hired over the past eight years. I chaired several search committees for these new faculty positions, and, after my tenure as graduate

coordinator, I also chaired the department's graduate admissions committee, ensuring that we admitted the most qualified graduate students.

My leadership experience in academic programs has shaped my current goal of fostering growth and innovation in both undergraduate and graduate education. I envision not only increasing student enrollment and credit hours, which is an important metric for success within UF/IFAS CALS, but also creating and sustaining academic programs that develop foundational skills for career success and employability, cultivate student growth and development, and promote community connections. These goals can be achieved through careful, data-driven curriculum development, the adaptation and implementation of innovative instructional design and technologies, and creating opportunities for students to engage with individuals and families within their communities. The FYCS department has recently completed a curriculum review of its undergraduate and master's degree programs. The proposed changes strive to place a greater emphasis on professional development and career preparation. However, these changes have not yet undergone a thorough circular evaluation to determine whether the revised curricula are achieving their intended goals. Additionally, the department's doctoral program is entering its eighth year, and to stay innovative and relevant, it is time for a comprehensive review of this program as well. To assist in advancing this vision, I interviewed faculty members interested in program leadership. Based on these discussions, I selected new coordinators for both the undergraduate and graduate programs. New leadership can bring fresh ideas to areas such as curriculum development, student recruitment and retention, and student development, and help better prepare our academic programs for the future.

Elevating Research

In research, the principle of collaboration is central to my leadership approach. I believe it is important that FYCS continues to serve as a hub for multidisciplinary partnerships that connect various academic units and extend into communities at the state, national, and international levels. Recently, FYCS was recognized as the leading department in IFAS for research funding by FTE, which is an outstanding accomplishment and a testament to the dedication of the faculty, students, and staff in building fruitful collaborative relationships. In my own research, I have successfully obtained internal and external grant funding as either the PI or Co-PI on various multidisciplinary projects. Recent examples include the Florida PROSPERs initiative (USDA NIFA), which seeks to prevent youth substance use in rural communities; the IGNITE clinical trial (NIH NIMH), focused on improving outcomes for young adults diagnosed with bipolar disorder; and the Health Communication Practices trial (UF Health Cancer Center seed funding), which worked to enhance communication between mothers with breast cancer and their daughters. These projects represent my overall approach to securing grant funding: identifying a need, forming a multidisciplinary team to address the need and strengthen the proposal, developing and implementing evidence-based interventions, and studying the outcomes and impacts. As chair, I would continue to explore opportunities to support faculty in developing innovative, collaborative, and interdisciplinary grant proposals. I recognize that developing fundable grant proposals often requires substantial support due to their complexity. As chair, I would seek to identify sources of support for proposal development and for help navigating the increasingly complex funding landscape characterized by evolving federal and state policies related to higher education research.

Elevating Extension

My Extension work reflects my dedication to the land-grant mission of IFAS. As a state Extension specialist, I developed a program focused on intergenerational approaches to promoting healthy families and communities. These programs created resources that enabled county Extension faculty to make their programs more inclusive across various age groups. I believe that one of the department's greatest strengths is its Extension programming. The state

specialists are exceptional and represent the best of IFAS in Florida. Their programs are well-recognized throughout the state, and I am committed to supporting the ongoing success of each Extension specialist. Additionally, I am dedicated to collaborating with Extension leadership as they create new pathways for Extension initiatives, specifically Initiative 5: Improving Individual, Family, and Community Health, and Initiative 7: Preparing Youth to Thrive as Responsible Citizens and Productive Members of the Workforce. I believe that in these uncertain times, it is essential to support the state specialists as they respond to new and evolving needs across the state. This new direction may require specialists to reinvent themselves, challenge established systems within Extension, and develop innovative approaches to promoting youth and family development, community health and resilience, and overall well-being.

Commitment to Shared Governance

My commitment to shared governance is reflected in my leadership approach. One of my initial tasks as Interim Chair was conducting the annual or semi-annual evaluations for faculty and staff. In these meetings, I sought to create an environment where each individual felt comfortable expressing their concerns and ideas. These same principles guide all of my interactions with department faculty and personnel. For instance, I collaborated with faculty to revise the post-tenure review research criteria to improve clarity and ensure alignment with institutional policies, and we worked together to identify priorities for critical faculty hires. I believe that this participatory approach fosters inclusive and collaborative departmental communication. It has guided the department's progress in the past and will continue to shape its growth in the future.

FYCS Reputation, Communication, and Development

Enhancing the visibility and reputation of FYCS has been a consistent focus of my recent work. Through regular dialogue with deans and IFAS leadership, I make sure that the department's accomplishments and goals are highlighted whenever possible. I also provide ongoing support to faculty serving on college and university committees, including the faculty senate, to ensure they have the resources needed to enhance their engagement with college and university proposals and initiatives. At the same time, I believe the department's reputation is built on the quality of the work produced and its impact on the families, youth, and communities in which they live. These relationships boost the department's visibility and enhance its reputation while showcasing a commitment to evidence-based solutions for pressing community challenges. As Chair, I would continue my work with the new communications assistant to develop and implement a communications plan to ensure the faculty's work reaches key stakeholders and decision-makers, further enhancing the department's visibility and reputation.

I also recognize that pursuing additional funding through IFAS development is essential for the longevity of the department. While my direct experience in fundraising has primarily focused on competitive grants, I recognize the increasing importance of private donations in supporting the department's land-grant mission. I plan to collaborate with the IFAS Advancement Office to identify potential donors whose interests align with the department's program areas. Engaging with alumni through events and communications is also vital, as they can serve as ambassadors and supporters of the department's programs. As Chair, I will reestablish the department's advisory committee, composed of key stakeholders from local and state agencies, nonprofits, and government organizations that share the department's vision. This committee will provide valuable feedback on our academic programs and help create new opportunities for donations, student development, and research initiatives.

Finance and Budget Management

My experience in various leadership roles within the department has provided me with the knowledge and skills necessary to effectively manage department budgets. In my roles as

graduate coordinator and Associate Chair, I navigated the complex funding environment for graduate assistantships. I implemented a new funding strategy to address the loss of college support for graduate assistantships, which was provided during the initial implementation of the new PhD program. This new approach supplemented faculty funding from start-up and grants with additional departmental funds, which ensured that the assistantship funding could be maximized to cover the length of a student's involvement in the program. To date, this strategy has increased the number of funded students and enabled faculty to support their students throughout their entire program of study.

As Interim Chair, I manage a modest annual operating budget that strives to balance immediate departmental needs with long-term sustainability. I have worked to establish a more transparent budgeting process that involves faculty in setting funding priorities and how resources are allocated. As FYCS prepares for anticipated cuts to the operating budget, I have strategically set aside resources to protect core department functions and personnel while exploring ways to increase revenue to support future needs. My experience managing budgets for sponsored projects, including the Florida PROSPERs initiative funded by USDA NIFA, has improved my knowledge of budgeting principles and compliance with funding standards. I am confident that thoughtful, yet creative, fiscal management is important for developing a climate in which growth and innovation can continue to thrive, even in the face of limited resources.

Personnel Management and Faculty Development

In addition to managing fiscal resources, I believe it is essential for the chair to manage the department and its personnel effectively and efficiently. Over the past year, I developed and implemented a staff reorganization plan, which involved clarifying job descriptions, restructuring workflows, and realigning positions to better support departmental goals. These changes have already resulted in better operational efficiency and reduced administrative burdens.

Finally, promoting the professional development of the diverse faculty, staff, and students has been a central focus. As Associate Chair, I introduced updated faculty mentoring guidelines and ensured that all early career faculty had a formal mentoring committee to support their progress toward tenure and/or promotion. In addition, I established a new standing committee, the tenure and promotion advisory committee, to review and evaluate materials submitted for faculty promotion and tenure for both tenure-track and non-tenure-track positions. As interim chair, I have successfully supported nine faculty members through the post-tenure review process, along with one faculty member's promotion. My commitment to professional development also extends to students. This year, I significantly increased travel funding for students. This funding helped support a team of graduate students achieve victory at a conference research competition (SPR cup). It also supported two students who received NACTA graduate student teaching awards.

Maintaining Excellence in Dynamic Times

Despite uncertainties at both the state and national levels, as well as challenging resource conditions, I believe that FYCS is well-prepared to continue the outstanding work in teaching, research, Extension, and outreach. While the department is composed of faculty from diverse disciplinary backgrounds, a recent faculty retreat showed its core strengths in collaboration, open communication, and shared sense of purpose. As chair, I would build upon these strengths by creating an environment of trust and respect, implementing initiatives that promote interdisciplinary collaboration, and facilitating in-depth discussions on a collective vision and future directions. This will enable faculty to further build on each other's strengths and leverage them to develop innovative, cutting-edge grant proposals, future-focused undergraduate and graduate courses and curricula, and dynamic, state-of-the-art Extension programs. The department has already seen the fruits of its labor in recruiting exceptional faculty and staff, including our new nonprofit faculty who will arrive in August, recognition of high-profile research

initiatives and awards, successful faculty promotions and evaluations, and the expansion of the graduate programs. If I am selected to continue my leadership of the department, I will maintain my focus on:

- Enhancing academic programs through innovative instructional design, technology, and increased engagement in online education.
- Encouraging innovation by engaging faculty and students as partners in developing grants, projects, curricula, and Extension/outreach initiatives.
- Building and nurturing collaborative relationships with key leaders and stakeholders to enhance the department's reach, influence, and impact.
- Promoting faculty, staff, and student development through guidance and mentoring for success in tenure and promotion, recognizing achievements, funding special projects and strengthening mentoring relationships at all levels.
- Promoting trust and transparency in leadership, particularly regarding funding and resource allocation, faculty and staff evaluations, and strategic planning.
- Fostering a safe and friendly workplace environment that encourages respect, teamwork, and positivity.

I have come to fully embrace my leadership role at FYCS during this crucial period. Through these experiences, I have developed a better understanding of the principles and processes that promote departmental excellence in teaching, research, Extension, and outreach. I have learned that the leadership of FYCS requires creating an environment where innovative and creative people can do their best work, and my experiences have taught me how to better cultivate an innovative, collaborative, and inclusive department environment. I am excited to continue serving FYCS in this critical leadership role.

Sincerely,

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

Larry Forthun, Ph.D.
Interim Chair and Professor