

December 29, 2025

Dear Search Committee Members:

Thank you for considering my application for the position of Head of the Horticulture and Landscape Architecture Department at Colorado State University. After a career as a Landscape Architect in the Charlotte, NC metro area, I decided to pursue a PhD in Design at my alma mater, North Carolina State University, with my mentors Robin Moore and Nilda Cosco at the Natural Learning Initiative. In 2014, I accepted my first and only academic position at the University of Oklahoma (OU). AY 2026 marks my fourth year in administration at OU. Originally, I served as Acting Director and later as Associate Director once the Landscape Architecture Division merged with the Regional and City Planning Division and the Environmental Design and Urban Design programs forming the Division of Planning, Landscape Architecture, and Design (PLAD). When I became Acting Director in AY 2023, the program was in serious trouble. With a total enrollment of 12 students across three cohorts, the provost charged me with increasing enrollment. I identified that building a welcoming and supportive community would attract new students. Relying on my many decades of community engagement experience from my professional practice and academia, I have co-built a strong and supportive community of faculty, students, alumni, and industry partners.

The first task was to co-create a strategic plan addressing the Provost's request. I employed a horizontal decision-making process with faculty, students, alumni, and industry partners to create a plan compatible with the University and College's strategic plans. In this approach, everyone's input was weighed equally recognizing that all perspectives were valid. Given the Provost's directive, the strategic plan identified ways to build enrollment, while increasing credit hour generation, increasing fundraising initiatives, prioritizing community engagement, and building a national reputation.

An expedient way to increase enrollment was to recruit from within OU. An accelerated degree between the undergraduate Environmental Design (En D) degree and the MLA allowed students to finish the bachelor's and the 3-year MLA in six years. I actively recruited En D students into the accelerated degree program by guest lecturing and reviewing student work and building relationships with undergraduate advisors. Since AY 2023, I increased enrollment to historic levels. In 3.5 years, enrollment grew by over 150%. I wanted to create other infrastructure to increase enrollment. I worked with the Graduate College for 3 years to identify a path to create a 5-year MLA where students would complete the bachelor's and master's degrees in five years. The intent of the new degree would be to recruit high school students.

A side effect of increasing enrollment is an increase in credit hour generation which has doubled over the past five years. The increase is attributable to higher enrollments and increased offerings of General Education courses and additional sections of popular courses. I supported faculty in creating new courses that would expose more undergraduate students to Landscape Architecture which became another vehicle for recruiting. An important metric for OU is cost per credit hour which involves balancing faculty salary with credit hour generation. In a 2-year period, PLAD moved from the absolute least efficient on campus to the second quartile in terms of cost per credit hour.

While enrollment and credit hour generation helped secure the financial health of the program, I wanted to initiate a fundraising plan which had never happened in the program outside of the university sponsored drives. Charging minimal fees for community engagement projects launched the fundraising campaign. Project costs were covered through the program's budget and the fees collected were deposited in an OU Foundation account to provide GA/TA funding for students. In addition to single donor contributions, I raised approximately \$150,000 in 3.5 years. All monies are designated to help students.

Incorporating community engagement into the curriculum is an important part of the program's strategic plan as it supports the University's strategic plan and provides meaningful experiences for faculty and students. Contemporary students are not motivated by the threat of bad grades or deadlines for which there are many valid reasons. Furthermore, the impact of the social isolation experienced during Covid is still felt. Students crave connection and meaning. In community engagement projects, students may miss internal deadlines but are ready to present on time to community partners. I coordinate the community engagement efforts for the program. Since AY 2023, the program has engaged with more than a dozen communities, non-profits, and tribal nations in Oklahoma. With this growing library of projects, I am working to connect communities to funding to make these projects a reality. In November 2025, I wrote a grant for the Seminole Nation Museum in Wewoka, OK for \$113,700.

A longer-term goal of the strategic plan was to build a national reputation for the program to assist with recruiting students. Faculty encouraged students to enter design competitions, and the program paid the entry fees. Faculty spent many hours reviewing student entries. While progress was not expected so soon, our students have been selected for two national awards in 2026. Frank Hicks was selected for the prestigious LAF Ignite Fellowship and Alesha Milsap and Sraboni Das Meem won a student award from the Council of Educators in Landscape Architecture.

As soon as I received tenure, I entered administration where I have grown enrollment to historic levels; doubled credit hour generation; raised \$150,000 in donations; assisted over a dozen communities, non-profits, and tribal nations across Oklahoma; wrote a grant for a community project totaling \$133,700; and mentored students who received national awards. Since tenure, my research efforts have mirrored more extension-type activities, such as community engagement/design projects, which supported the program and University's strategic plans. However, I have started to shift my focus back toward more traditional research activities. I am gleaning research products from my community engagement, such as grant funding. Also, I am conducting a study investigating the benefits children experience from nature exposure through agritourism. At OU, I will submit my full professor dossier in summer 2027.

The College of Agriculture's slogan 'Come to the Table' resonates with me and my interest in collaboration and community building. I look forward to discussing how I may serve CSU, the College of Agriculture, and the Department of Horticulture and Landscape Architecture.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "S. Little". The signature is stylized and cursive.

Sarah Little, PhD

Associate Director, Division of Planning, Landscape Architecture, and Design