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January 23, 2025

Re: Honorary Degree Nomination for Kirk Davis

Dear President Edwards,

The University Commencement Committee has unanimously nominated Kirk Davis for the 2025 Honorary Degree Award. Mr. Davis' candidacy was put forth by Dr. Matthew J. Fox, a graduate of Wright State's Boonshoft School of Medicine, who currently practices plastic surgery in the Dayton area. Based on his recommendation and the sincere support letters forwarded to the committee by Mr. Davis' many recommenders, it is our shared and unanimous belief that Davis represents Wright State University's "highest ideals" through his "exceptional accomplishments," two of the guiding principles to which our committee must adhere in approving or rejecting candidates for this prestigious honor.

As you will see in the nomination packet accompanying this letter, Kirk Davis was obliged to suspend his Musical Theatre studies at Wright State University due to financial and family difficulties that forced him into the role of family breadwinner. Leaving Wright State, he purchased a suit at a thrift store for an interview with a regional newspaper, and began a career that would take him to dizzying heights. Through sheer determination and an admirable work ethic, he became one of Wright State's most unlikely success stories, starting a career in media at the bottom, then founding his own business, and finally working his way to CEO positions in global, billion-dollar companies. According to Dr. Fox, Mr. Davis "credits his time at Wright State as a pivotal moment that opened his eyes to broader possibilities and prepared him for future leadership roles."

Kirk Davis has turned failing businesses into highly profitable corporations through creative thinking, measured risk-taking, and a respectful leadership style that earns the trust of his collaborators. His recommender Michael Felice states, "He's a rare leader who truly listens – his tagline "lead while being led" isn't just words but genuinely reflects his fundamental beliefs and values." Paul Weichselbaum says that Davis is a "leader who combines strategic vision with genuine humility. Kirk has this remarkable ability to make everyone in the room feel heard while still driving toward clear objectives." David Fisher states that he leads with "authenticity, grace, and a modesty that fosters some of the most productive and creative strategy sessions that I've ever been part of." Rebecca Roth concurs in her letter of support, affirming that Davis encourages "team members to share alternative perspectives on an issue" and that he "was always an engaged listener, looking to learn. The transparency and respect he showed others at all levels of the organization garnered him broad support." The strength of Kirk Davis' nomination packet

reflects his ability to build long-lasting friendships that are characterized by respect, trust, and joy. Ashley Higgins mentions that “He deeply cared about sharing a clear vision, set of ethics and operating goals, and supporting employees with opportunities to further grow and develop.”

Throughout his career, Mr. Kirk has been a staunch supporter of “preserving the role of local journalism in American communities,” serving on prestigious boards such as the Associated Press and leading the transition from “traditional media to modern challenges while maintaining core journalistic values and community service.” His newspapers consistently receive high honors for “community service, editorial quality, journalistic engagement.” Davis has also been a strong advocate for education and higher education despite sacrificing his own college career. Recommenders mention him donating funds to help build a school and supporting his children through their college degrees.

It is for these reasons and many more, that the Wright State University Commencement Committee unanimously recommends that Kirk Davis be awarded a Wright State University Honorary Degree during the May 2025 graduation ceremony. We believe that he serves as a shining example of the humanitarian values and strong work ethic that should define and motivate Wright State University students.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "K. Davis", with a large, stylized flourish extending from the end.

cc. Marlena Akhbari, Misker Dressie, Tara Hill, Michelle Newsome, Terry Oroszi, Zifeng Yang, Elizabeth Turner, Bryan Nethers

To the Honorary Degree Committee of Wright State University,

I am writing to nominate Kirk Davis, CEO of Harte Hanks, for an honorary degree from Wright State University. Mr. Davis's extraordinary journey from modest beginnings in Lancaster, Ohio to becoming one of the most influential figures in American media demonstrates the transformative power of education.

As mentioned in his initial nomination letter, Mr. Davis's connection to Wright State, though brief, proved foundational to his remarkable career. After winning a scholarship to study musical theater, his time at the university exposed him to new perspectives and leadership opportunities that would shape his future approach to business and community service. While family circumstances necessitated his early departure to support his mother and siblings, the seeds planted during his time at Wright State would bear fruit throughout his career.

After leaving Wright State, he purchased his first suit from a thrift store and walked to the Lancaster Eagle-Gazette to apply for a job. This beginning marked the start of an extraordinary career trajectory in journalism and media. His natural talent, dedication to learning every aspect of the industry, and commitment to his hometown community propelled him forward rapidly. By age 23, he was already among the youngest media executives in the country, demonstrating extraordinary business acumen and leadership ability.

His professional achievements include serving in key leadership roles at major media companies, culminating in his positions as CEO of GateHouse Media and later Harte Hanks, two prominent, public companies with national and global reach. Throughout his career, he has consistently demonstrated a commitment to both business excellence and preserving the vital role of local journalism in American communities.

Mr. Davis's impact on journalism and community service has been consistently demonstrated through his extensive board service and industry leadership:

- He has served on the boards of the American Press Institute, The Associated Press, and the New England Newspaper Association, where he has consistently advocated for the preservation and advancement of quality journalism.
- His newspapers have consistently received awards for community service, editorial quality, journalistic engagement, including from Editor & Publisher Magazine's "10 newspapers that Do it Right" for coverage of homelessness and journalistic innovation, Suburban Newspapers of America, The New England Newspaper & Press Association and more
- Throughout his four-decade career, he has been a tireless champion for local and regional journalism, understanding its crucial role in maintaining informed and engaged communities
- His leadership has emphasized the importance of adapting traditional media to modern challenges while maintaining core journalistic values and community service, shown by his track record of success, even in challenging market conditions

What truly distinguishes Mr. Davis is his unwavering commitment to local communities and democratic discourse. He has consistently worked to preserve local newsrooms and strengthen community journalism, understanding their vital role in American public life. His approach to business leadership has always balanced innovation and adaptation with preservation of core journalistic values, even as the media industry has faced structural challenges.

Awarding an honorary degree to Kirk Davis would serve several valuable purposes for Wright State:

1. It would recognize his extraordinary achievements in business leadership and media innovation, as well as his commitment to public service, journalism, and local and regional communities
2. It would highlight the lasting impact Wright State can have on students, even when circumstances prevent degree completion.
3. It would inspire current and future students, particularly those facing financial or personal challenges, by showing how determination and public service can lead to extraordinary achievement.
4. It would strengthen Wright State's connection to a leader who has consistently demonstrated commitment to education, innovation, and community service.

Mr. Davis's story resonates strongly in today's world, where both higher education and journalism face significant challenges. His success in navigating digital transformation while maintaining commitment to community service provides a model for how traditional institutions can adapt while preserving their core values.

The arc of his career—from a young man buying his first suit at a thrift store to becoming a nationally recognized media executive & leader in journalism—embodies the transformative potential that Wright State seeks to unlock in all its students. Despite his brief enrollment, he credits his time at Wright State as a pivotal moment that opened his eyes to broader possibilities and prepared him for future leadership roles.

I strongly recommend Kirk Davis for this honor. His combination of business achievement, innovative leadership, and dedication to public service embodies the highest ideals of Wright State University. His story will resonate with and inspire the Wright State community for years to come.

Dr. Matthew J. Fox

Transformational C-level Executive and Business Builder with a strong commitment to journalism and freedom of speech in local communities nation-wide, having held prominent roles as a board member for the American Press Institute, the Associated Press, and the New England Newspaper Association. As a leader, delivers organic and inorganic growth, efficiencies and measurable, sustainable multimillion/billion-dollar outcomes, while sustaining and protecting journalism for local communities nation-wide. Thrives on assembling and mentoring top talent and building a culture that connects, engages, and motivates cross-functional teams, bringing clarity around a compelling value proposition, vision and strategy.

Notable achievements:

- **Expanding Synergies:** Following the 2014 IPO of New Media Investment Group (NMIG), carried out acquisition of Dow Jones' Local Media Group for \$82M (3.4X TTM EBITDA) and generated 200% return over the next five years. Subsequently, **deployed \$2.5B in capital to acquire 37 companies**, including the \$1.2B acquisition of Gannett, **creating the largest local publishing company in the world to build better local news ecosystems across the country**
- **Propelling Profitability:** **Reversed \$8M operating loss, driving 262% improvement to \$13M operating profit** in three years for a \$100M company, for Fidelity Investments-owned Community Newspaper Company. Built "Path to Profitability" plan, which implemented an incentive share program, streamlined product and production, centralized executive and functional leadership across eight business centers, and adopted a digital go-to-market strategy around new brands.
- **Bolstering Value Propositions:** Crafted and executed strategies that resulted in **dramatic turnarounds and financially significant exits**, including the sale of the Community Newspaper Company to the Boston Herald and two PE sponsors for \$150M and Enterprise NewsMedia to Gatehouse Media for \$185M, **each at 12X TTM EBITDA**.
- **Digital Transformation for Viability and Sustainability:** In the wake of changing consumer behaviors, expanded revenue streams with the launch and growth of GateHouse Live, a live events and promotions division, from **zero to \$57M** over four years and UpCurve, a digital marketing agency formed in 2012 that generated **\$110M in revenue** in 2019.

A Career of Creating Value for Investors, Communities, and Customers

Harte Hanks

Public global marketing services company with services across analytics, strategy, digital marketing, customer care, direct mail, logistics, and more

CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER, 2023– Present

Hired to chart a path to growth and increased profitability for a hundred-year old media and marketing company through organic growth

- Drove transformation of core business, including hire of senior executive team to drive refreshed growth and go-to-market strategy
- Defined and executed AI strategy & capability build-out across the business, driving new revenue & clients
- Launched multiple strategic new partnerships to drive revenue growth & access to new markets

METRO CORP MEDIA

Comprises two recognized and awarded city magazine brands serving the great cities and suburbs of Boston and Philadelphia.

CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER, 2021– 2023

Hired to assist company in restoring profitability post-Covid, developing a growth strategy, ensuring a strong leadership team is at the helm, and succession planning.

- Re-imagined and expanded Live Events division
- Installed highly talented senior executive team to lead Philadelphia Market (Digital VP, Editor, Publisher)
- Launched Phase I of City/Studio agency aimed at commercializing company capabilities related to custom content, digital marketing services and event management

- Achieved 20% revenue growth in 2022

GATEHOUSE MEDIA/NEW MEDIA INVESTMENT GROUP

\$1.6B media and marketing solutions company; 11,000 employees; 23 million consumers; 580 markets across 37 states.

CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER, GATEHOUSE MEDIA, 2014 – 2019 CHIEF OPERATING OFFICER, NEW MEDIA INVESTMENT GROUP, 2014 – 2019

Upon emergence from financial instability, appointed COO of newly formed, publicly traded New Media Investment Group (NMIG) and CEO of the operating subsidiary, Gatehouse Media. Focused on strengthening value proposition while stabilizing industry-wide revenue decline due to changing consumer behaviors. Drove strategy development and execution to lead continuous innovation, M&A activity, digital transformation and organic growth.

- Drove 300% growth, from \$500M to \$1.6B in revenue through acquisition, rollup and scale of 35 companies.
- Launched campaign to acquire Gannett for \$1.2B in cash/stock, supported by \$300M synergy plan, resulting in the formation of the largest local publishing company in the world.
- Outperformed industry every year in same-store revenue performance while receiving awards for journalism
- Crafted full business optimization plan that reduced expenses \$400M by streamlining and integrating stand-alone businesses, maximizing technology digitization transformation, optimizing procurement and centralizing national operations.
- Initiated and scaled a consumer marketing agency to augment \$700M subscription business, leveraging progressive digital marketing strategies, and generating 225,000+ digital-only subscriptions for leading regional news brands across 37 states at 52% CAGR.

PRESIDENT | CHIEF OPERATING OFFICER, GATEHOUSE MEDIA, 2009 – 2014

In the wake of an aggressive growth strategy, overleveraging and the recession of 2008, selected to shepherd the \$500M, 4,000-employee, company through tumultuous economic times and Chapter 11. Focused on improving operations and profitability, while partnering with investors and Fortress Investments to restructure and develop business plan.

- Centralized services that included advertising design and fulfillment in Chicago and a companywide hub for a centralized news and design center in Austin.
- Implemented procurement program to lower supply costs and renegotiated leases across 100+ markets.
- Earned Innovator of the Year award from prominent research firm for building and launching UpCurve, a \$7M digital marketing agency.
- Elevated human resources to perform in a true “business partner” capacity, coinciding with implementation of companywide communication and recognition programs.
- Built restructuring plan while simultaneously expanding the company through a strategic acquisition and reemerging as a new public company.

CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER, GATEHOUSE MEDIA, NEW ENGLAND, 2006 – 2009

Upon GateHouse's IPO, recruited to lead the \$175M, 1,700-employee New England media division. Further, supported the integration of several acquisitions, including both Enterprise NewsMedia and Community Newspaper Company.

- Realized \$25M in synergies with overhead reduction, integration efforts and efficiencies.
- Reimagined and launched scalable digital consumer brand (WickedLocal.com) serving 165 communities.

ENTERPRISE NEWSMEDIA, LLC – *Offers publication of print and online media in New England. Acquired by GateHouse Media in 2006.*

CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER, 2004 – 2006

Hand-selected by PE firm to steer financial and operational turnaround for the \$85M regional news portfolio, which employed 800+, and operated 15 newspapers and websites. Spearheaded large-scale turnaround through tight financial controls, outsourcing, organic and inorganic growth strategies, resulting in \$185M exit/12X TTM EBITDA.

COMMUNITY NEWSPAPER COMPANY (CNC)

Fidelity Investments-owned company of the largest publisher of weekly and daily newspapers in New England.

PRESIDENT | CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER, 1998 – 2002

In the face of considerable C-level turnover, recruited to turn around and stabilize organization with an \$8M operating loss on \$100M revenue. Achieved \$13M operating profit, resulting in \$150M exit/12X TTM EBITDA.

Additional Career Highlights

HOLDEN LANDMARK CORPORATION, LLC – *Holder and builder of local media, marketing products and services in Central Massachusetts.*

FOUNDER | OWNER, 2001 – 2018

Grew a \$6M portfolio of award-winning local newspapers and nationally celebrated parenting magazine, orchestrating sale of newspaper portfolio to GateHouse Media in 2018, while continuing oversight of rapidly growing \$1M national sign franchise, digital and web service offerings.

Earlier career: Worked for two prominent newspaper groups, Thomson and Ingersoll, receiving successive promotions. Promoted to Publisher/President of The Daily Record (PA), the youngest in the company, and among the youngest in the country.

Board Leadership

Director, Audit Chair, Associated Press, 2015 – 2024

Director, City and Regional Magazine Association, 2022 – 2023

Director, International News Media Association, 2018 – 2020; American Press Institute, 2013 – 2019

Member and Vice Chair, Board of Directors, News Media Alliance, 2013 – 2020

Additional board roles for New England Newspaper Association

Education

Executive Development Programs, Harvard University/Babson College

Undergraduate Coursework, Theater, Wright State University

Honors

Leaders Among Us Award, Lasell College

Hi Kirsten –

I wanted to write a note in support of nominating Kirk Davis for an honorary degree from Wright State University. I had the opportunity to work with him when he was COO of GateHouse Media and I cannot say enough about his passion for the publishing industry and for developing talent. At the time, I was working in finance for a private equity company that had been engaged in restructuring GateHouse and seeing the kind of passion Kirk had for developing talent and culture was unlike anything I had experienced. He deeply cared about sharing a clear vision, set of ethics and operating goals, and supporting employees with opportunities to further grow and develop.

I had the opportunity to meet candidates for hiring a new Chief People Officer toward the end of their interview process and was blown away by what Kirk had imparted upon them about his goals for the role and the company. He had the ability to imbue his excitement and feeling of responsibility to support local communities and figure out the way to sustain local news to become the foundation of culture. It is something that has stuck with me and remains a part of the culture of Gannett now, post our merger integration, and long past Kirk's leadership responsibility.

I hope that his nomination is well supported by others he has mentored and supported over the years and cannot think of a more deserving candidate.

Thanks,
Ashley Higgins



November 27, 2024

Kirsten Halling
The Honorary Degree Committee
Wright State University

Dear Ms. Halling,

It is my honor to recommend Kirk Davis for an honorary degree from Wright State University.

My name is David Fisher, Chief Transformation Officer for Harte Hanks. I've had the pleasure of working with Kirk for the past two years. I was initially a consultant for Harte Hanks, but as I got to know Kirk and witnessed his leadership and execution, I enthusiastically agreed to join the company and work closely with him daily.

During our time together, Kirk has proven to be an exceptional Chief Executive Officer. He leads with authenticity, grace, and a modesty that fosters some of the most productive and creative strategy sessions that I've ever been part of. These qualities, paired with a keen business acumen curated from decades of experience in senior positions, have formed truly impressive outcomes as Kirk navigates everything from delicate negotiations to demanding situations. I can genuinely say that I've learned so much about running an organization thanks to his guidance and mentorship.

Kirk's capabilities extend far beyond his inspirational management of Harte Hanks. Most of Kirk's professional life has been dedicated to sustaining and improving the outlooks of several journalism and media brands. His track record of results-driven leadership at organizations such as GateHouse Media indicates his inherent ability to guide large businesses through extraordinary market volatility. Additionally, his prior commitment as a long-standing Board Member of The Associated Press demonstrates his passion for maintaining the integrity and precision of prolific media brands. However, it's his willingness to run towards the challenge of protecting journalism, newspapers, and the communities they serve throughout rapidly evolving conditions that makes his service stand out.

Over the course of his career, Kirk has fostered a family first environment which makes team members feel valued and deeply cared for. It was this same family-oriented mind-set which led Kirk to make the difficult decision to leave Wright State University. Despite these sacrifices, his determination to start at the bottom and work his way to the very top of some of the most prestigious media institutions in our country, speaks volumes as to why he deserves this recognition. With this nomination, I'm delighted to offer my show of support and my pride in being part of his team by recommending Kirk for an honorary degree from Wright State University.

Sincerely,

David Fisher

David Fisher
Chief Transformation Officer
Harte Hanks

November 27, 2024

To The Honorary Degree Committee, Wright State University,

I am so happy to write this letter supporting the nomination of Kirk Davis for an honorary degree from Wright State University. In my role as SVP, Strategic Planning at GateHouse Media, I reported directly to Kirk and worked with him on pretty much a daily basis from 2012-2019. While there are so many great things I could tell you about Kirk, I will focus on a few areas that seem to align with the ideals of Wright State University.

I'll start with Kirk's personal drive. I first heard about Kirk back in the '90's when I was at The Boston Globe. Colleagues spoke reverentially about the young (30-something) Publisher of the Tab newspapers, competitive weeklies in affluent suburbs of Boston. A look at Kirk's resume from that time forward demonstrates successive career growth, culminating in CEO positions at two publicly traded companies (GateHouse Media/New Media Investment Group and Harte-Hanks), along with prestigious industry Board Memberships (including the Associated Press, International News Media Association and the Alliance for Audited Media). I believe Kirk's success has been fueled by a work ethic that is second to none, his focus on innovation (without fear of occasional failure), and a leadership style that strives to get the best out of each employee.

As I am certain you are aware, the past 15 years have been incredibly challenging for the newspaper industry, with the decline of traditional advertising streams and consumers turning to digital news sources. Yet Kirk remained intensely committed to local journalism and communities. While at GateHouse, Kirk made significant investments in research to inform the re-launch of digital news products that reflected consumer priorities and preferences. Additionally, he worked tirelessly to diversify revenue streams that would support continued investment in local news. This includes the launch of a digital marketing agency for small and mid-sized businesses and a robust events business – both of which became independent divisions of the company. Not every idea worked. A platform providing support services for families with aging parents ultimately wasn't successful, but it provides an example of Kirk's relentlessly creative mindset in support of local markets.

Kirk often described his leadership style as "leading while being led." From the interview process to encouraging team members to share alternative perspectives on an issue, Kirk was always an engaged listener, looking to learn. The transparency and respect he showed others at all levels of the organization garnered him broad support, even in the face of the many difficult decisions he had to make in his role. Notably, Kirk would remain in touch with employees whose positions were eliminated in rounds of cost cutting. Any discussion of Kirk as a leader would be remiss if it did not speak to his personal charisma. An interview with Kirk would inevitably seal the deal with a targeted hire, he always commanded the room during his presentations at our annual sales conferences, and his karaoke performances (hearkening back to musical theater days) were always great fun.

I'll close with a comment on Kirk's commitment to the importance of education. I've seen this both through his major financial contributions to building the Riverbend School, a local Montessori school serving toddlers through Grade 8, and his focus on his children's educational accomplishments (now college graduates). Being recognized with an honorary degree from Wright State University, which provided him with a foundational educational experience, would mean the world to Kirk.

Please let me know if you have any further questions.

Most sincerely,

Rebecca Roth

Dear Members of the Honorary Degree Committee,

I am writing to recommend Mr. Kirk Davis for an honorary degree from Wright State University. I've known Kirk for almost a decade, starting in my capacity as an advisor to one of the several of the large enterprises he's led. What started as a professional relationship has grown into a long friendship that gives me unique insight into his character and achievements.

In my work, I interact with many executives, but Kirk stands out in ways that make him uniquely deserving of this honor. He's a rare leader who truly listens – his tagline "lead while being led" isn't just words, but genuinely reflects his fundamental beliefs and values. I've watched him transform struggling companies into billion-dollar enterprises by building teams that function like families, where every voice matters. What's remarkable is how he's done this while staying true to his core mission of serving communities through journalism.

On a personal note, I grew up in Gahanna, Ohio, and I realize now that I grew up reading the very newspapers Kirk helped build and sustain. Though I didn't know him then, I experienced firsthand how critical strong local journalism is to communities across America. The newspapers Kirk published and grew weren't just news sources – they were the threads that kept our communities informed and connected.

As our friendship has deepened over the years, I've seen Kirk's immense commitment to education and learning expressed in a number of ways. The proudest I've ever seen him was watching his daughter graduate from NYU last year. This meant so much to him because he'd had to leave his own studies at Wright State early to support his family. Seeing him help make his daughter's dreams possible, after sacrificing his own is a microcosm of Kirk's broader character.

Kirk's journey from the Lancaster Eagle-Gazette as a young man to serving on the Global Board of the Associated Press as a decorated executive is exactly the kind of story Wright State celebrates – one of transformation, service, and excellence. I can think of no better candidate for this honor.

Please don't hesitate to contact me if you need any additional information.

Sincerely, Michael Felice

Dear Members of the Honorary Degree Committee,

I'm writing to recommend Kirk Davis for an honorary degree from Wright State University, as I cannot imagine anyone more deserving of that honor.

I met Kirk when I was 25, just four years into my consulting career. While I had worked with senior executives before to some extent, this was different – it was my first time working closely with a senior leader.

The timing of our work was challenging. The publishing industry was facing serious headwinds, and Kirk was steering his organization through choppy waters with significant pressure coming from all angles. What stands out to me, even years later, was how he approached these challenges. Despite leading a multi-billion dollar company through a challenging macroeconomic environment, Kirk showed strength of character in how he engaged with our entire team. I'll never forget watching him give his full attention to a 21-year-old analyst presenting their analysis – treating them with the same respect and consideration he showed our senior partners. I remember him stopping her in the hallway to thank her by name for the excellent work and ask her questions about her background and aspirations. It might seem like a small thing, but in my experience, that kind of genuine engagement is rare at his level.

What I observed in those early days, and what I've seen working with him again in the last couple years, is a leader who combines strategic vision with genuine humility. Kirk has this remarkable ability to make everyone in the room feel heard while still driving toward clear objectives.

Over the years, I've had occasional opportunities to spend time with Kirk outside the boardroom, and what's struck me most is that his thoughtful, engaging leadership style isn't just a professional persona – it's simply who he is. Whether in a strategic planning session or over dinner picking wines he thinks the table will really enjoy, Kirk brings the same warmth, curiosity, and authentic interest in others to every interaction. He's a leader who genuinely cares about people, and it shows in everything he does.

Kirk's journey from his early days leaving Wright State to his current role as a respected industry leader is the sort of thing you can't make up. As I've learned more about him, I've only been more and more impressed. He would be an exemplary recipient of this honorary degree.

I'm happy to provide any additional information if helpful.

Thank you,

Paul Weichselbaum