UW Medicine
DEPARTMENT OF MICROBIOLOGY

October 2, 2026

Dear Members of the Regents Professor Nomination Review Committee:

It is my great pleasure to write in whole-hearted support of Dr. Jovanka Voyich's nomination for Regents Professor at Montana State University. I first met Jovanka in 2009, when I was a visiting lecturer in the WWAMI Microbiology course. Since then, I have met her many times, both in Bozeman and at scientific conferences, and I have hosted her on multiple occasions as an invited speaker at the University of Washington, Seattle.

Jovanka has made substantial contributions to the field of bacterial pathogenesis, particularly to our understanding of the enigmatic and critically important interactions between pathogens and neutrophils. She has done this work with methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus* (MRSA), by far the most prominent and costly bacterial pathogen in the United States. I am confident that Jovanka ranks among the top three to five investigators in this field worldwide.

I would like to highlight a few of her most influential studies. Throughout her career, Jovanka has never hesitated to challenge established dogma. Nearly two decades ago, she made a major impact by convincingly refuting the then widely accepted view that Panton-Valentine leukocidin (PVL) is the critical virulence factor of MRSA. That paper has become one of the most cited publications on neutrophil-bacteria interactions. She was also the first to use microarray analysis to compare gene expression between *S. aureus* strains and largely through her efforts, the SaeR/S system is now one of the best-understood two-component regulatory systems in any bacterium.

Her work has also provided unexpected insights into the central mystery of the *S. aureus* field: how an organism that colonizes healthy individuals as a commensal can also cause life-threatening infection. Among the most striking of these insights is her 2014 *PNAS* paper, which revealed the remarkable specificity of virulence regulation and showed that it depends on variations in individual host peptides. As an evolutionary microbiologist, I find Jovanka's comparative approach especially compelling. By contrasting community- and hospital-acquired infections, as well as invasive and colonizing strains, she addresses questions of great importance to the advancement of biomedical science.

Jovanka has also studied extensively how the host responds to clinically relevant *S. aureus* strains, using human blood and mouse models of skin infection and bacteremia. She has shown that *S. aureus* directly targets the antimicrobial functions of neutrophils and accelerates their death, which strongly influences the outcome of infection. It is uncommon, and therefore all the more impressive, for a single investigator to lead the field while studying both the pathogen and the host response in such depth.

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Overall, Jovanka has an outstanding record of foundational publications in top-tier journals, with an h-index of 45 and nearly 13,000 total citations. These figures are exceptional and would make any institution, including my own, proud!

Beyond her publication record, Jovanka has shown a sustained ability to secure funding throughout her career at Montana State University, totaling more than $20 million to date. This support includes NIH R21 and R01 awards, a highly competitive STTR Phase II grant, other federal awards (e.g., DoD and USDA), and state grants. Notably, she was named Director of a U54 Clinical and Translational Research program focused on American Indian and Alaska Native communities. Bringing clinical and translational research to these communities is a demanding undertaking, and its success depends directly on the director. For this reason, the NIH scrutinizes candidates for such positions closely; they must demonstrate a proven record in both research and leadership. Jovanka has exactly that record, and few investigators do.

What makes her record even more remarkable is that she has achieved all of this while excelling in substantial teaching and outreach commitments. Jovanka chaired the Montana WWAMI Microbiology and Infectious Diseases course for ten years, and I always enjoyed taking part as a guest lecturer every year. Attendance in her class was consistently outstanding, a clear sign of how much students respected and valued her teaching. Most importantly, under her leadership, Montana students outperformed every other WWAMI site, including Seattle, in all ten years! From my own long experience teaching medical students, I know this is a tremendous achievement.

Jovanka's teaching success reflects a rare balance between remaining highly competitive in research and delivering meaningful instruction. She teaches in a way that helps students truly retain what they learn, as shown by her perfect record of 100% of her students passing the WWAMI common examination. In addition, she has mentored more than 100 undergraduate and first-year medical students in her laboratory. Many of these mentees have received national awards and gone on to veterinary and medical school. Taken together, her dedication to teaching and mentoring has been exceptional.

With all this said, Jovanka's most extraordinary qualities have emerged since she became Head of the Department of Microbiology & Cell Biology (MCB) in 2018. She took the helm at a difficult time, as the department went through three challenging mergers, and she guided it through that period with remarkable skill. In March 2026, I served on the three-member panel that conducted the department's seven-year external review. I was responsible for assessing the department's research strength, and I was truly impressed.

The defining strength of the department under Jovanka's leadership is its ability to generate more than $60 million in direct grant costs, with more than $16 million in indirect cost recovery, between 2019 and 2025. This funding comes primarily from NIH, NSF, USDA, NASA, DoD, the Gates Foundation, the Keck Foundation, and other major sponsors that award only highly competitive grants. Not surprisingly, MCB currently ranks third university-wide in total research funding, behind only much bigger in size Physics and Industrial Engineering. In addition, the department manages and maintains the only BSL-3 laboratory space at MSU, a large-animal BSL-2 facility, and the Cellular Analysis Core, underscoring the depth and complexity of its research infrastructure.

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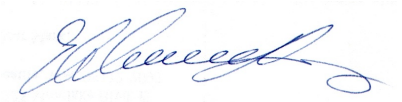
I cannot resist to 'leak' that, during our review discussions, MCB faculty of all ranks and specialties gave exceptional marks to Jovanka's leadership. It was a true highlight of the entire review!

Moreover, faculty research is very well integrated into educational programs at both the undergraduate and graduate levels, providing an exceptional model of research-based pedagogy. MCB competes with tier-one institutions for outstanding graduate students, and its fellows have received prestigious awards from NASA, NSF, NIH, USDA, and the American Heart Association. The department is also a partner in the Duke University Summer Training in Academic Research (STAR) Program and hosts an NIH-funded Post-baccalaureate Research Education Program, extending its training reach to underrepresented populations.

Thanks in large part to Jovanka's tireless efforts, new tenure-track hires are expanding the department's expertise in virology, genetics, immunology, neuroimmunology, bacteriology, and environmental microbiology. The department continues to strengthen its capacity for high-impact interdisciplinary scholarship and national visibility, while reinforcing its culture of engagement with both the scientific and the broader community. The main reason behind this undeniable success is the extraordinary leadership Jovanka has shown.

In summary, I am firmly convinced that Jovanka exemplifies the distinction that the title of Regents Professor is meant to recognize. She has shown excellence in every dimension of her academic role: research, funding, leadership, teaching, and mentorship. Her accomplishments make her highly sought after by larger research universities. I must confess that, over a decade ago, my department chair asked me to persuade Jovanka to apply for a senior faculty opening in our department, where she would have been the lead candidate. I failed miserably, because her dedication to MSU, to the state, and to its community was simply too strong! Recognizing Jovanka with the title of Regents Professor would be a meaningful way for MSU to affirm both her value and her dedication to the institution's continued success. I recommend her for appointment as Regents Professor without reservation. Please do not hesitate to contact me with any questions.

Sincerely,



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