

TUFS Meeting Minutes

Virtual Winter Meeting

Saturday, February 21, 2026 | 9:00 am – 12:00 noon CT

Member Institutions Present

- Austin Peay State University (APSU)
- East Tennessee State University (ETSU)
- Middle Tennessee State University (MTSU)
- Tennessee State University (TSU)
- Tennessee Technological University (TTU)
- University of Memphis
- University of Tennessee at Chattanooga (UTC)
- University of Tennessee at Martin (UTM)
- University of Tennessee Health Science Center (UTHSC)
- University of Tennessee, Knoxville (UTK)

Guests

- Chief Academic Officer, Tennessee Higher Education Commission (THEC) and Tennessee Student Assistance Corporation (TSAC)
- President, National Council of Faculty Senates (NCFS); Faculty Senate Speaker, James Madison University

Meeting Proceedings

1. Welcome and Introductions

TUFS President called the meeting to order at 9:00 AM. Members introduced themselves by name, institution, and role. The meeting aimed to conclude by approximately 11:15 AM without a formal break.

2. Approval of the Agenda

The agenda was approved unanimously.

3. Approval of the October 2025 Meeting Minutes

The October 2025 meeting minutes, incorporating previously circulated corrections and posted to the TUFS website, were approved by unanimous consent.

4. Updates from Tennessee Higher Education Commission (THEC) – Chief Academic Officer

Reduced Credit Bachelor's Degrees

The THEC Chief Academic Officer described THEC's ongoing work to develop a policy framework for bachelor's degrees below 120 credit hours, referred to as "reduced credit bachelor's degrees." A cross-institution steering committee is meeting regularly, with policy expected by the May THEC board meeting. THEC, as a coordinating rather than governing board, intends to set parameters while leaving specific design decisions to campuses.

Discussion raised several member concerns:

- SACSCOC requirements limit titling options for sub-120-credit programs; other states have used designations such as Bachelor of Applied Science or Bachelor of Applied Practice.
- Members emphasized the importance of protecting general education requirements and ensuring these programs serve a clear purpose, particularly for adult and returning learners rather than simply shortening traditional degree paths.
- Data from a TSU compressed 3-year program showed consistent student burnout and dropout rates, even among high-achieving students, underscoring the need for careful program design.
- Concerns were raised about long-term effects on alumni engagement, institutional sustainability, and the value of the college experience beyond coursework.

Lottery Scholarship Funding

The THEC Chief Academic Officer reported that lottery revenues are declining due to competition from sports wagering and changing demographics, creating a projected shortfall for scholarship programs. Dual enrollment grant costs have grown to exceed HOPE, Promise, and Reconnect combined. THEC will work with institutional and system leadership to restructure programs while protecting students currently in the pipeline.

Contact: julie.a.roberts@tn.gov | <https://www.tn.gov/the/about-the-the-c-tsac/commission-meetings.html>

5. Updates from National Council of Faculty Senates (NCFS) – NCFS President

The NCFS President provided an overview of NCFS, which connects faculty senate leaders nationally to identify shared trends and coordinate responses on issues including shared governance, workload, academic freedom, and program prioritization. NCFS has met annually since 2017 and holds two webinars per year.

- NCFS and partners including Stand Up for Higher Education and PEN America are developing a common national narrative on the value of public and higher education, noting that faculty voices are particularly persuasive on talent attraction arguments.
- Spring webinar on academic freedom, hosted by Stand Up for Higher Education, is open for registration. NCFS annual meeting: May 21–22, 2026, Pittsburgh (hosted by Duquesne University).
- Fall 2025 academic freedom webinar recording available at: <https://ncfs18.org/programs/fall-2025-webinar-the-state-of-academic-freedom/>

- The NCFS President noted that a federal court recently required the U.S. Department of Education to rescind its anti-DEI directive — a positive development emerging from ongoing legal challenges.

6. Updates from TUFS President-Elect: CPHE and Tenure Legislation

Commission for Public Higher Education (CPHE)

The TUFS President-Elect updated members on CPHE, the new alternative accreditation body. The public comment period for evidentiary guidance is open until March 4, 2026. A faculty working group spanning seven states has engaged constructively with CPHE leadership, and faculty input has resulted in substantive revisions to proposed standards. Members and their colleagues were encouraged to submit comments: <https://cphe.org/commission-for-public-higher-education-releases-draft-evidentiary-guidance-for-public-comment-period/>

No Tennessee institutions are among the initial ten-institution cohort, though legislation in other states that would require transitions to CPHE is being monitored. CPHE aims for Department of Education recognition by 2027.

Tenure Legislation

Two relevant pieces of state legislation were discussed:

- SB1838/HB2581 (de-tenure bill): Withdrawn by its sponsor on February 18, 2026, following sustained advocacy by university government relations offices and chancellors who met directly with legislators to emphasize tenure's role in workforce development and institutional quality. While technically eligible to return in a future session, the sponsor's statements suggest it is effectively dead for this session.
- HB2194 (faculty disciplinary process bill): Passed the House Education Subcommittee 5–1. This bill seeks clearer distinctions between tenure policies and faculty disciplinary processes, with language that could route certain matters through the provost rather than faculty committees. Institutions are monitoring the bill and engaging with legislators on language.

Discussion on tenure advocacy was substantive. Members broadly agreed that the most effective legislative arguments frame tenure around workforce development, economic competitiveness, and Tennessee's ability to attract and retain high-quality faculty — rather than solely around academic freedom. Viewpoint diversity was also identified as a compelling argument on legislators' own terms. The UT System's VP of Government Relations was cited as a model for this approach and will be invited to a future TUFS meeting.

7. Faculty Senate Reports

Representatives from ten institutions provided updates. Key highlights by institution:

University of Tennessee at Chattanooga (UTC)

- Record enrollment of 11,085 students; working toward a Board-set goal of 15,000 by 2030.

- Severe classroom shortage due to major construction projects (College of Business expansion, new residence hall, new nursing and health sciences building); faculty asked to expand scheduling into early morning and late afternoon hours.
- All faculty completed a 3-hour active shooter and emergency response training following a fall 2025 campus incident; the training was well-received.
- Monitoring legislation affecting online course pricing and faculty disciplinary processes.

Middle Tennessee State University (MTSU)

- Negotiating a Faculty Senate proposal to eliminate the summer pay cap, which currently limits faculty who teach, develop courses, and work on grants simultaneously.
- Transitioning from D2L to Canvas for summer and fall 2026; some faculty are early adopters. Bonus incentive system in beta year (Board of Trustees mandate).
- Second annual Board of Trustees faculty research reception planned for March 17, highlighting faculty and student work.
- Faculty Senate passed a resolution requiring faculty inclusion in academic reorganization processes; new IT committee established to improve communication with the IT department.

University of Memphis

- Faculty Senate drafting a motion on the value of tenure framed around economic benefit and state priorities; to be shared with TUFS upon passage.
- Oracle transition completed in early January 2026; Dean of Arts and Sciences search underway with campus visits beginning.
- First Dean's 360 review process launched in collaboration with the Provost's office; enrollment numbers for incoming students are up significantly.
- State capital funding advocacy ongoing for replacement of aging and condemned campus buildings.

East Tennessee State University (ETSU)

- Oracle transition (launched Summer 2025) ongoing; unresolved issues include disappearance of accumulated faculty leave balances in January.
- Second round of market salary adjustments underway, targeting 90% of market value; ETSU had fallen significantly behind peer institutions over many years.
- Faculty climate survey launched (closes end of February); social media policy in development following fall 2025 events.
- New campus academic building on track to open fall 2026, alleviating a two-year classroom shortage; faculty workload and tenure/promotion policies in second round of public comment.

University of Tennessee Health Science Center (UTHSC)

- Significant leadership transitions across colleges and administrative offices; most vice chancellors and deans are new.

- Governor Lee's proposed budget includes historic investment in medical education, including support for a new interdisciplinary medical building at UTHSC.
- A voluntary retirement incentive program was proposed to the Board for faculty with 5+ years of service; official announcement expected within weeks.
- IRB application process transitioned to the DASH platform as of February 16, 2026.

Austin Peay State University (APSU)

- Record enrollment continues; multiple leadership searches underway (Senior VP of Faculty Affairs, Dean of College of Education, Director of Institutional Effectiveness).
- Student Success Task Force active; ad hoc committee studying office hours policy modernization, including implications for fully online faculty.
- Constitution, bylaws, and Faculty Senate Executive Committee handbook under revision to clarify roles and expectations.
- Oracle implementation ongoing with some unresolved issues; CourseDog room allocation software also experiencing implementation challenges.
- APSU Faculty Senate celebrating its 50th anniversary: April 10, 5–7 PM, Clarksville. All TUFs members welcome.

Tennessee Technological University

- Provost search underway with online interviews begun; VP of Research serving as Interim Provost.
- SACSCOC accreditation site visit in progress; general education requirements and tenure/promotion policies recently revised.
- Oracle launched January 2026, causing significant disruption for faculty and staff. Enrollment at a 10-year high of approximately 10,700 students.

Tennessee State University (TSU)

- Faculty morale significantly affected by the absence of salary increases over two years and suspension of tenure and promotion processes, both stemming from the institution's ongoing financial challenges.
- Spring 2026 enrollment below expectations; the president's 5-year plan anticipates continued challenges through 2028 as financial corrections are implemented.
- A voluntary separation package was proposed to the Board; official announcement expected within weeks.
- Faculty Senate is actively engaged with university leadership on questions of data transparency and shared governance.

University of Tennessee, Knoxville (UTK)

- Concerns raised about the impact of reduced credit degree initiatives on humanities, arts, and foreign language programs already under pressure from enrollment-based budget models; significant structural changes in the College of Arts and Sciences anticipated.

- DASH system disruptions have curtailed budget-related shared governance for two years; Senate is making progress toward restoring its oversight role.
- ADA compliance deadline (end of April 2026) requires accessible course materials; tip shared from APSU that Adobe Acrobat Pro includes built-in compliance tools achieving 100% compliance.
- AI training active at university, college, and department levels, including engagement of a consulting firm to assess AI competency and develop faculty programming.

University of Tennessee at Martin (UTM)

- Faculty Senate passed a change to tenure criteria removing the requirement that all evidence be from work done “at UT Martin,” enabling tenure upon initial appointment; Board of Trustees vote expected imminently.
- Key searches completed: New Provost and new Dean of College of Education, Health and Behavioral Sciences, both starting April 1.
- College of Business and Global Affairs undergoing significant restructuring following a failed dean search: departments dissolved, School of Business created, teaching load increased from 3-3 to 4-4, and MBA teaching moved into regular load.

8. Next Meeting – Spring Virtual Meeting

The Spring 2026 TUFs meeting will be held virtually on Saturday, April 18, 2026, 9:00 AM – 12:00 PM CT. Calendar invitations will be distributed. State legislative representatives will be invited.

9. Such Other Matters – Tenure Advocacy Document

The group agreed to develop a concise TUFs statement on the value of tenure for legislators and other stakeholders, emphasizing workforce development, economic vitality, and institutional quality.

10. Adjournment

The meeting was adjourned at approximately 11:20 AM CT.