

TUFS Meeting Minutes

Virtual Spring Meeting

Saturday, April 18, 2026 | 9:00 am – 12:00 noon CT

Member Institutions Present

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

Absent

- East Tennessee State University (ETSU)
- UT Southern
- University of Memphis

Meeting Proceedings

1. Welcome and Introductions

TUFS President called the meeting to order at 9:00 AM and thanked attendees for joining on a Saturday. Members introduced themselves by name, institution, and role. Several institutions noted upcoming leadership transitions, with new Faculty Senate presidents taking effect June 1 or July 1 at multiple campuses.

2. Approval of the Agenda

The agenda was approved unanimously.

3. Approval of the February 2026 Meeting Minutes

The February 2026 meeting minutes were approved with minor corrections submitted by the UTHSC representative regarding the UTHSC section. Approval was by unanimous consent.

4. Updates from Tennessee Higher Education Commission (THEC)

The THEC Chief Academic Officer was unable to attend due to a conference conflict.

5. Tennessee State University – Special Update

The TSU Faculty Senate Chair provided a detailed update on several significant issues at TSU, seeking feedback from TUFs members.

Voluntary Separation Program (VSP)

TSU has initiated a voluntary separation program for faculty with 5+ years of service at the institution. Key features include a one-year salary and benefits package paid as a lump sum, plus activation of TCRS retirement benefits. The administration's target is approximately 80–100 faculty departures (roughly 40% of tenured faculty). Applications are due the following week; approvals will be announced by end of May, with priority given to maintaining accreditation-required faculty ratios. Final participation data will not be available until end of May.

Proposed New Tenure Policy

TSU's administration has proposed a revised tenure policy with three major changes, presented simultaneously with the VSP announcement, which raised faculty concerns:

- Removal of due process protections for tenure-track faculty: Under current policy, tenure-track faculty facing disciplinary action receive the same hearing rights as tenured faculty. The proposed policy would eliminate this protection.
- Enrollment-contingent tenure: Tenure decisions would be tied to a 3-year enrollment average at the department or program level. If a program's enrollment does not meet established thresholds, tenure would not be awarded to faculty in that program. If a program is sunset, tenured faculty in that program could be reassigned or separated, as tenure letters specify the department and college in which tenure is held. Administration indicated it would attempt to accommodate affected faculty in comparable positions elsewhere.
- Presidential authority language: The existing policy language giving the president final authority on tenure decisions would be clarified to specify that presidential decisions follow due process and committee recommendations. Administration has committed to revising this language.

An appeal process is included in the proposed policy: faculty may appeal unfavorable tenure decisions between March and April, with a three-member appeal committee drawn from relevant areas of expertise.

Discussion raised several concerns: the appropriateness of allowing faculty to proceed through the tenure process without disclosure of potential enrollment thresholds that could block the award; questions about whether tying tenure to enrollment would violate SACSCOC standards or other accreditation requirements; and whether faculty salary increases associated with promotion (not tenure itself at TSU) could be legally tied to enrollment metrics. Members encouraged TSU to closely examine appeal process details and ensure faculty have clear information about any enrollment thresholds before initiating the tenure process.

Legislative Funding

The legislature approved \$250 million over 5 years (approximately half of the estimated \$544 million historical underfunding of TSU) to support financial liquidity. An initial \$34 million has been allocated, which resolved an August payroll crisis. TSU expressed gratitude to the legislature for this support.

Leadership Transitions

The provost has stepped down; an interim provost is in place and a search is expected. The faculty trustee position has also transitioned, with the outgoing Faculty Senate Chair elected to serve as the new faculty trustee on the Board of Trustees effective May 1.

SACSCOC and Research Office

TSU submitted its 5-year interim SACSCOC report. Separately, the Faculty Senate Executive Committee is continuing to review raw data provided by the administration regarding a previously disputed extramural research funding claim. The Senate is seeking data transparency and confirmation of accurate reporting.

6. Faculty Senate Reports

Reports were received from eight institutions present at the meeting. The University of Memphis submitted a written report but was not represented. ETSU and UT Southern were absent with no reports submitted.

Middle Tennessee State University (MTSU)

- Faculty Senate held a special meeting on March 23 and passed a tenure resolution; the final document is available upon request.
- Considering a new system for evaluating academic deans, to be voted on at the final Senate meeting of the year.
- Developing a proposal requiring deans and department chairs to provide written justification for hiring decisions, to improve transparency and accountability.
- Long-serving university president announced retirement at end of calendar year 2026; Board of Trustees has engaged a search firm. Faculty Senate has requested the ability to communicate directly with the board about faculty representation on the search committee.
- SACSCOC main review site visit completed successfully with no violations noted; however, Faculty Senate leadership was not interviewed during the visit.
- State budget allocation to MTSU was less than \$1 million, insufficient to cover fixed cost increases; budget cuts are possible depending on fall enrollment, retention, tuition decisions, and discount rates. Faculty raises, if any, are expected to be minimal. The legislature folded salary funds into a general appropriation rather than earmarking them, giving administrations discretion over distribution.
- New Faculty Senate President-Elect elected at the April 6 meeting.
- Institutional neutrality policy under review; Senate concerns noted.

Tennessee Technological University

- SACSCOC accreditation review went extremely well; Faculty Senate was involved in the process. New vice president positions were filled with Faculty Senate participation in hiring.
- Project Talon (Oracle) went live January 26, 2026; causing stress across campus, though TTU successfully balanced the books for the fiscal year.
- ADA/accessibility compliance: TTU met its compliance goal by the April 24 deadline, with ongoing support through the Center for Innovation in Teaching and Learning.
- Concerns raised about 9-month faculty being asked to perform summer duties without compensation; a survey was conducted, yielding substantial responses. A task group will analyze the data further in AY 2026–27.
- Faculty Ombudsperson proposal: faculty reviewed and provided feedback; a discussion and vote are planned for the first business meeting of the new year.
- Tenure resolution supporting tenure passed via email vote on April 17, 2026, and will be posted to the TTU Faculty Senate website.
- Canvas transition begins August 2026; D2L/Brightspace contract ends December 2026. K16 Solutions engaged to archive and migrate course materials. Extensive training available.
- Faculty Handbook overhaul underway; new Academic Integrity Policy (formerly Student Academic Misconduct Policy) in effect, centralizing the process through the Provost's office. School of Computing task force underway.

Austin Peay State University (APSU)

- Large turnover in Faculty Senate membership; significant onboarding and orientation work underway, including one-pagers for executive committee positions, a Robert's Rules reference guide, and website updates.
- Curriculum course cap policy reviewed and recommendations forwarded to provost; concern was that upper-division courses with naturally smaller enrollments were being pressured for cancellation without recognition of institutionally appropriate class size norms.
- Office hours policy study completed; recommendations address standardization across colleges, online faculty requirements (some fully online faculty were required to hold up to 8–9 hours of on-campus office hours despite serving primarily remote students), and modernization of the concept.
- New staff bonus policy approved through policy channels, allowing departments to recognize high-performing or over-burdened staff.
- Ongoing discussion about reorganization of the Honors Program and University College; Faculty Senate will have a task force and will be involved in the process.
- HB2194 (tenure/misconduct bill): APSU administration, recognizing the law's vagueness, agreed to work with Faculty Senate to develop a new misconduct policy. Faculty will define misconduct parameters; administration retains authority over termination decisions. An interim version must be in place by July 1 to meet the legislative deadline; a full faculty-developed policy will follow over the next 6–12 months. The outgoing APSU Faculty Senate President-Elect noted that legal counsel confirmed the vague language actually creates opportunities for institutions to develop strong faculty-inclusive policies.

University of Tennessee Health Science Center (UTHSC)

- The Tennessee General Assembly passed the state budget on April 16, 2026, including \$311 million for a new College of Medicine Interdisciplinary Building at UTHSC — the single largest capital investment in higher education in state history. This reflects a long-term commitment to strengthening Tennessee’s health care workforce pipeline.
- The Tennessee Rural Health Care Center of Excellence, established in 2025 with a \$12 million grant from the Tennessee Department of Health, awarded seven grants totaling approximately \$1.75 million to organizations across the state addressing rural health care needs (March 2026).
- Leadership transition in the Office of Advancement: the Vice Chancellor for Advancement retired; a new Chief Development Officer and Associate Vice Chancellor for Advancement has been named.
- U.S. News & World Report 2026 rankings: College of Pharmacy ranked #16 nationally; audiology program (College of Health Professions) ranked #18; Doctor of Nursing Practice program (College of Nursing) ranked #24.

University of Tennessee at Chattanooga (UTC)

- New chancellor continues to settle in after a turbulent first semester. Provost announced plans to step down at end of June; an interim provost will be named and a national search conducted.
- Enrollment up; budget outcome from the new state funding formula was better than many institutions but still represents a reduction compared to prior years.
- Merit pay process being implemented for the first time at UTC (all other UT campuses already use it). With the state providing only a partially funded 1.5% salary pool, department heads and deans are working to develop metrics for merit distribution — a challenge given the small pool. UTC expects to fully fund the 1.5% through a tuition increase pending board approval.
- HB2194: UTC’s legislative representative indicated the bill allows UT to utilize existing misconduct definitions from current policies, does not eliminate due process, and does not affect tenure granting or awarding processes — only misconduct procedures. Faculty Senate leadership at UTC anticipated having some opportunity for input on policy language.

University of Tennessee, Knoxville (UTK)

- DASH (Oracle) system: Academic Year 2025 books closed in March after significant delays. Budget oversight issues discovered: some expenditures were not consistent with RCM model guidelines, requiring some colleges to return funds or draw on reserves. Two major initiatives — cluster hires and the “Rockstar Initiative” — are cited as contributing factors. A respected former budget officer has been brought out of retirement to assist.
- DASH and federal grant compliance: DASH’s configuration created concerns about whether grant expenses can be properly categorized per federal requirements, raising audit risk for STEM faculty with federal grants.

- Research space allocation: A space audit is underway. Faculty whose research requires significant specialized equipment are concerned about a proposed policy requiring a minimum level of external research funding per square foot to retain dedicated research space. This issue is partly driven by the need to accommodate “Rockstar” faculty hires who require substantial space.
- ADA compliance: April 24 deadline being treated as a soft date; extension expected. Concern raised particularly for Extension faculty with large PDF libraries, which may need to be migrated to Canvas.
- Faculty Senate resolution requesting an additional 1% salary increase above the state’s 1.5% was rejected at the administration level; colleges do not appear to have resources to supplement independently given concurrent budget pressures.
- Graduate student stipends now at \$37,531 (50% stipend), one of the highest in the country outside of unionized institutions, driven by Knoxville’s significant housing cost increases.
- Interim administrators being made permanent without a search is a concern noted among faculty.
- AI training workshops and seminars are ongoing; faculty AI policy remains at the discretion of individual faculty, with the requirement that it be addressed in syllabi.
- HB2194: Faculty Senate at UTK expected to seek involvement in defining misconduct policy language, though administration had not yet confirmed faculty participation.

University of Tennessee at Martin (UTM)

- New Provost is in place and actively meeting with deans, department heads, and Faculty Senate leadership to assess campus priorities before introducing major initiatives.
- HB2194 is on the Governor’s desk; campus is monitoring and preparing for Faculty Handbook changes that will be required upon passage. (Note: the bill was signed into law by Governor Lee on April 16, 2026, as confirmed in the meeting chat.)
- ADA accessibility compliance training underway; faculty advised to begin with summer course materials.
- Budget: pursuing a 3% tuition increase (maximum currently set at 2.5%) to offset a shortfall in formula funding; 1.5% salary pool is underfunded and the source of the funds remains under discussion.
- DASH: Academic Year 2025 books closed successfully.
- Faculty Senate presidential succession: the president-elect stepped down; a special election for a new Senate president to begin July 1 will be held the following week. Two nominees are in the field.
- Spring graduation: May 2, 2026, with approximately 600 graduates.

Tennessee State University (TSU)

No additional faculty senate report beyond the detailed special update provided earlier in the meeting (see Item 5).

University of Memphis

- Faculty Senate passed a motion outlining the value of tenure to the State of Tennessee.
- HB2194/SB2259: University Counsel attended the most recent Senate meeting to discuss the bill; counsel offices across the state are coordinating to interpret and implement it while preserving existing due process protections.
- Revisions to Articles of Authority continue; steady progress reported.
- New Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences named.
- Enrollment: admitted and confirmed student numbers up; average ACT scores of incoming students also up.

7. Discussion: Value of Tenure and Collaboration with Community Colleges

The TUFs President opened discussion on two related topics: the development of a TUFs statement on the value of tenure, and potential collaboration with community college faculty senates.

Value of Tenure Document

[HB2194 was signed into law by Governor Lee on April 16, 2026](#), separating faculty disciplinary processes from tenure and streamlining disciplinary procedures. While two more anti-tenure bills were successfully stopped this session through sustained advocacy, members agreed that proactive preparation for future legislative cycles is essential.

Discussion:

- A document affirming the value of tenure remains worth producing, but timing and framing are critical. The group agreed that releasing a document reactively in the immediate wake of HB2194 could cause more harm than good.
- Effective framing should emphasize workforce development, economic competitiveness, research and innovation, institutional quality, and the protection tenure provides to administrators themselves — not primarily academic freedom, which has become a politically charged term that does not resonate with the target audiences.
- Tenure should be framed as an employment contract and talent attraction tool: academia accepts lower compensation than industry in exchange for job security; without tenure, institutions cannot attract faculty who accept below-market salaries to do long-horizon research that private industry will not fund.
- Different audiences require different documents: the framing appropriate for legislators and board members (business case, economic impact) differs from that needed for the general public (local quality of education and workforce) or for faculty (academic freedom, due process).
- Local education is the most effective lever: constituents calling legislators about local concerns drive legislative behavior more effectively than statewide advocacy alone. Documents should be designed to help local communities understand why tenure matters for their universities.
- Post-tenure review may be the next legislative front and having documents in place that affirm tenure's value will be important in that discussion.
- The incoming TUFs President will take up this work when transitioning into the role in July, beginning by engaging government relations representatives at member institutions to understand what information would be most useful to them and coordinating TUFs's

contribution accordingly. Individual institutions are encouraged to continue developing their own tenure advocacy documents in the interim (MTSU's resolution is available as a model).

Collaboration with Community Colleges

Community colleges in Tennessee also hold faculty tenure and are affected by HB2194. They have been largely outside TUFS's networks on legislative and governance issues, despite facing many of the same pressures. Mississippi State Community College was noted as particularly active in organizing faculty response.

Members expressed general support for inviting community college representation to a future TUFS meeting or for the TUFS Executive Committee to meet with community college faculty senate representatives. Members also noted that while there is common ground, important differences exist between four-year university and community college faculty contexts, particularly around research expectations and the role of academic freedom in research.

No formal action was taken; the incoming TUFS President will consider how to incorporate community college engagement into the organization's work going forward.

8. Next Meeting – Summer Meeting

Rather than setting a fixed date, the group agreed on the following approach for scheduling the Summer 2026 meeting:

- The TUFS President will reach out to government relations representatives (including UT System, MTSU, University of Memphis, and Tennessee Tech) to identify their availability in June and July.
- The summer meeting will be scheduled around GR availability to ensure the right people are in the room for the tenure advocacy conversation.
- Incoming faculty senate presidents (taking office July 1) should be prioritized for scheduling; outgoing presidents noted they should not be the primary scheduling constraint.
- A weekday meeting may be considered if it improves attendance by key guests.
- The TUFS President will send a poll to all members once GR availability is known.

9. Such Other Matters

It was confirmed in the meeting chat that HB2194 was passed by the legislature and signed into law by Governor Lee on April 16, 2026.

10. Adjournment

The TUFS President thanked all attendees for their participation on a Saturday. The meeting was adjourned ahead of schedule at approximately 10:55 AM CT.