

**UNIVERSITY OF TENNESSEE AT MARTIN**  
**ADVISORY BOARD**  
**MINUTES**

The University of Tennessee at Martin Advisory Board convened on May 16, 2025, at the UT Martin campus, in the Boling University Center, Room 206 AB, with Chairman Art Sparks presiding. The meeting commenced at 1:00 PM CST.

**I. Roll Call**

The meeting opened with a roll call led by Secretary Jake Bynum, who confirmed the presence of the following members: Art Sparks, Chairman, Hal Bynum, Dan Strasser, Stefan Maupin, Dr. Dan McDonough - Faculty Senate Representative, and Chayil Watkins – Student Representative

Dr. Tonya Reynoldson was absent. With six of the seven members present, Chairman Sparks confirmed that a quorum was established, allowing the meeting to proceed.

**II. Opening Remarks**

Chairman Sparks opened the meeting by acknowledging its importance given the substantial items requiring discussion and approval. He welcomed Mr. Stefan Maupin as the newest member of the board, officially replacing Mr. Johnny Woolfolk, and confirmed with Secretary Bynum that Mr. Maupin was now a voting member. The Chairman emphasized the board's role as ambassadors and cheerleaders for UT Martin, encouraging members to promote the university in their communities and help attract prospective students. He noted that once students visit UT Martin, they typically choose to stay, making initial recruitment crucial. With characteristic humor, he encouraged board members to ask challenging questions of presenters, noting he would be "perfectly happy" if they could stump someone, as it would encourage everyone to think more deeply about improving the university.

Chancellor Freeman expressed his pleasure at seeing everyone gathered and characterized this as a particularly enjoyable meeting following the successful completion of spring commencement. He reported that over 700 students were on the graduation roll for the May 3rd ceremonies, with both events drawing standing-room-only crowds. The Chancellor described commencement as representing "the best of who we are and the best of what we do," emphasizing that seeing students graduate and achieve their educational goals before going on to do "amazing, wonderful things" was the fundamental reason for the university's work.

### **III. Approval of the Minutes from the Previous Meeting**

Chairman Sparks proceeded to approve the minutes from the January 24, 2025, Advisory Board meeting. The minutes had been distributed to the board members in advance of the meeting for their review. Sparks asked if there were any corrections or amendments to be made. Hearing none, the floor was opened for a motion to approve.

**Motion to approve the minutes:** Dan Strasser

**Second:** Chayil Watkins

**Vote:** Approved unanimously

### **IV. Enrollment and Retention Update**

Dr. Destin Tucker took the podium to present the enrollment and retention update. Chancellor Freeman took a moment to acknowledge that Dr. Tucker had recently completed her PhD from the University of Memphis, a fact he noted he mentions "every chance he gets."

Dr. Tucker began by reporting that, as of the previous week, 690 students had graduated, although she noted that this number was fluid as students continued to submit final requirements. She anticipated the final count would exceed 700. She emphasized that graduation remains the ultimate goal driving all enrollment efforts.

The retention report brought particularly encouraging news. Dr. Tucker presented data showing that first-time, full-time student retention stood at 82.6%, a tenth of a point ahead of the previous year's record-setting performance. Chairman Sparks interrupted to point out what appeared to be reversed numbers in the presentation, which Dr. Tucker acknowledged and corrected with good humor, thanking the Chairman for his attention to detail.

New transfer student retention showed even more impressive growth at 80.1%, representing a two-point increase. Dr. Tucker attributed this improvement to the focused efforts of the Student Success Center, including the designation of a dedicated transfer student success counselor and the enhancement of programming during National Transfer Student Week. Overall undergraduate retention had increased by 2.5 points, which was positively reflected in the overall fall 2025 enrollment for class registration.

A significant new initiative, Dr. Tucker described, was the Bridge Scholarship pilot program. Two years prior, the university had lowered the GPA requirement for merit scholarship retention from various levels to a uniform 2.75, aligning with the requirements of Tennessee's HOPE Lottery scholarship. This year, the university was piloting Bridge Scholarships for first-year students who lost their scholarships but

remained in good academic standing with GPAs between 2.0 and 2.74. These students would receive \$250 Bridge grants for the fall semester, along with messaging that the university still believed in them and wanted them to succeed. The program included connections to advising resources to help students retake courses, improve their GPAs, and potentially regain their scholarships. The offer had been extended to 138 students, with outreach efforts ongoing through the Student Success Center and the Financial Aid Office.

On the undergraduate admissions front, Dr. Tucker reported strong performance across multiple metrics. The university was tracking ahead of two years ago on FAFSA submissions, deliberately comparing to that timeframe rather than the previous year due to what she diplomatically referred to as "a blip on the FAFSA radar that we don't talk about anymore." She emphasized that FAFSA submission was a critical indicator, as 98% of first-year students typically submit the form due to Tennessee HOPE Lottery requirements, and students who haven't submitted are very unlikely to enroll regardless of their stated intentions.

Housing applications raised some concerns, although Dr. Tucker explained that changes in the housing application process had affected year-to-year comparisons. Despite this, the university was working toward an ambitious goal of 1,281 first-year students, representing a 5% increase over the previous year.

Transfer recruitment was progressing more slowly, although Dr. Tucker noted that this was typically the time when transfer students began applying heavily as they completed their courses at other institutions. The goal of 402 transfer students seemed achievable, particularly with anticipated transfer athletes contributing as they had the previous year. International student recruitment faced challenges with visa approvals, but continued working toward the strategic plan goal of 500 international students by 2030, with a current-year target of 25 non-athlete international students.

When Mr. Dan Strasser inquired about international recruitment efforts, Dr. Tucker explained the university's partnership with Better Ways, an agency based in Dubai that also worked with UT Health Science Center. She acknowledged the need to build UT Martin's brand internationally while leveraging the broader recognition of the University of Tennessee.

Chairman Sparks pressed for information about remaining barriers to enrollment. Dr. Tucker identified helping first-generation students navigate financial aid as a primary challenge, along with reaching adult learners who have some college education but no degree. She expressed frustration that, while the state frequently discussed these potential students, universities lacked access to their contact information for targeted outreach efforts.

The discussion of graduate programs revealed significant infrastructure improvements, including the launch of a new centralized application system in March and enhanced communication plans. Dr. Tucker emphasized that graduate students

typically choose the institution that accepts them first, making efficient operations crucial. The goal of 179 new graduate students appeared achievable given these improvements.

When Mr. Maupin inquired about the graduate program's capacity and demographics, Dr. Tucker confirmed that most graduate students were UT Martin alumni and that the programs had room for growth, with only the counseling program at capacity. Chancellor Freeman added that a new Master of Social Work program was launching in response to regional demand identified during his listening tour across West and Middle Tennessee. He emphasized the opportunity to recruit recent graduates into graduate programs and partner with regional employers who offer educational benefits to employees.

## **V. Strategic Plan Update and Monitoring**

Chancellor Freeman then presented an update on the implementation of the strategic plan, displaying sample screenshots of the accountability dashboard being developed by the institutional research team. The plan, titled "Watch Us Soar," encompasses five goals, 24 strategies, and 55 specific targets. The Chancellor emphasized his commitment to developing a "living, vibrant, changing" plan with regular reporting and accountability.

The dashboard would feature tabs for each of the five goals, with color-coded indicators showing progress: green for exceeding the target, yellow for being in progress, red for falling below the target, and blue for data still being collected. Despite the Chancellor's joking attempt to convince the institutional research team to "make all of them green," the system would provide an honest assessment of progress. Additional features would track specific populations, including first-generation students and veterans, with detailed information available through clickable links explaining each metric and target.

The Chancellor emphasized his seriousness about meeting all 55 targets, with regular reports to the advisory board on progress. The dashboard was expected to go live by the beginning of the fall semester, with enrollment numbers updated after the 14th day census.

Chairman Sparks inquired about public accessibility, and Secretary Bynum confirmed that the dashboard would be publicly available once it was fully operational. The Chairman then shared his experience at the Board of Trustees meeting where the strategic plan was presented, noting that trustees were particularly complimentary of Chancellor Freeman's specific, measurable goals compared to the "more vanilla" plans from other campuses. Mr. Maupin, having reviewed many strategic plans, added his compliments on creating a truly workable document that would serve as an asset to the university.

## VI. 2025-26 Budget Overview and Approval

Petra McPhearson, Senior Vice Chancellor for Finance and Administration, presented the FY 2026 budget proposal with careful attention to detail, even bringing a "tin key" calculator as backup to her primary device. The anticipated budget of \$141.5 million relied primarily on tuition and fees as the largest revenue source, followed by state appropriations. Expenses would be allocated with 61% to salaries and benefits and 39% to operating costs.

State appropriation increases totaled \$1.5 million, although McPhearson explained that the funding formula's three-year rolling average resulted in approximately zero growth and performance, as decreased growth offset performance gains of half a million dollars. When Chairman Sparks questioned the growth calculation given increased enrollment, McPhearson clarified that the formula considered multiple milestones beyond simple headcount, including student progression through 30, 60, and 90 credit hours, the number of degrees awarded, and various premium categories. The three-year averaging meant that one anomalous year could affect funding for up to three years, as it cycled through the system.

The state provided \$1 million toward a 2.6% salary pool, though the university would need \$1.5 million to fully fund salary and benefit increases at that level. Additional investments included funding for fixed costs, such as IT contracts and property insurance, as well as increased scholarship and waiver funding to match enrollment growth and tuition increases. New positions were created in grounds maintenance, HR employee relations, and a shared veterinary faculty position with Weakley County. The new enrollment and communications operations area, including international recruitment efforts, also required investment.

The proposed tuition structure included a 3% increase in maintenance fees (in-state tuition) for both undergraduate and graduate programs, with no increases in mandatory fees, resulting in net increases of 2.5% for undergraduates and 2.6% for graduates. A significant change involved re-establishing an international out-of-state rate at 200% of in-state tuition, aligning with UT Health Science Center's methodology to support scholarship offerings and international recruitment efforts.

Two new course fees for veterinary technology would enable students to cover national exam costs and rabies vaccinations through financial aid, rather than making out-of-pocket payments. McPhearson presented extensive peer comparisons showing UT Martin's rates positioned competitively in the middle of both approved and aspirational peer institutions for in-state, out-of-state, and international tuition.

When Chairman Sparks inquired about research budget cuts affecting other campuses, McPhearson reported minimal impact at UT Martin, with only three affected grants. Dr. McDonough sought assurance that no mandate against tuition

increases existed, which McPhearson confirmed, noting the proposal fell well within THEC's recommended 0-5.5% range.

**Motion to approve the minutes:** Hal Bynum

**Second:** Dan Strasser

**Vote:** Approved unanimously

## **VII. Appointment of Student Representative**

The board formally thanked outgoing student representative Chayil Watkins for his exceptional service, with Mr. Dan Strasser particularly noting his appreciation for serving alongside such an outstanding young man. Chairman Sparks encouraged Watkins to continue attending meetings and staying connected with the board.

The nomination of Darby Self as the new student representative was presented. Although she was studying abroad in Paris and unable to attend, Chancellor Freeman described her as an active member of the University Honors Program and the Student Government Association, who had emerged as the top candidate through the SGA nomination process and interviews with him and Dr. McDonough. Mr. Watkins endorsed her selection.

**Motion to approve the minutes:** Dan Strasser

**Second:** Stefan Maupin

**Vote:** Approved unanimously

## **VIII. Comment by the Chancellor**

Chancellor Freeman then provided extensive updates on campus developments. Multiple capital projects were underway, prompting him to suggest the next university publication be titled "Pardon Our Dust." The Hall-Moody renovation was in phase two, with both phases now being completed simultaneously, rather than the original plan of moving occupants back and forth between phases. Completion was expected in Q1 2026.

The College of Business and Global Affairs building had received full funding, with a designer selected and an anticipated completion date of 2029. The Tennessee Entrepreneurial Science and Technology (TEST) Hub, a \$18 million project in partnership with Dyersburg State Community College and TCAT McKenzie, is set to

break ground by late summer, located behind the campus recreation center. This represented the first partnership of its type in Tennessee, bringing together all three institutional types with the goal of generating patents through its makerspace facilities.

Housing remained a critical need, with applications still exceeding available beds despite a 4% decrease. A new 400-bed residence hall would replace the aging Browning Hall, with programming nearly complete, and construction is expected to be finished by Fall 2028. The facility would primarily house first-year students in living-learning communities.

The Chancellor announced a new partnership with Nashville State Community College's Waverly campus to offer a 1+3 Agricultural Business program, in which Nashville State will teach the first-year courses and UT Martin will provide the final three years of major coursework. He expressed enthusiasm about expanding UT Martin's footprint in Middle Tennessee with aspirations to eventually reach East Tennessee.

Several leadership transitions were announced with mixed emotions. Andrea Yanego would join as the new Human Resources Director on July 1, coming highly regarded from Minneapolis. Dean Ahmad Tootoonchi of the College of Business and Global Affairs was retiring after leading the college to full AACSB reaccreditation and spearheading the new building project. The board acknowledged his service with a round of applause. Dean Cindy West, a thirty-year veteran who has led the College of Education, Health, and Behavioral Sciences, will retire in December, having initially attempted to retire in July.

Most significantly, Provost Phil Acree Cavalier had accepted appointment as President of Kutztown University in Pennsylvania. Chancellor Freeman praised his seven years of service, particularly his support during the Chancellor's first 19 months and his interim leadership following Chancellor Carver's departure. The Chancellor announced plans to appoint a "transitional" rather than "interim" provost to maintain momentum on strategic initiatives while conducting searches for permanent leadership.

Chancellor Freeman concluded with the announcement that 2025 marked UT Martin's 125th anniversary since its founding in 1900 as the Hall-Moody Institute. Celebration plans were being developed for the academic year.

## **IX. Closing Remarks**

Chairman Sparks took the opportunity to recognize Kurt McGuffin's service as Chairman of the NCAA Softball Committee, noting the visibility this brought to UT Martin. More importantly, he highlighted the extraordinary academic achievement

among student-athletes: of approximately 400 athletes, 290 achieved a GPA of 3.0 or higher, 94 achieved a 4.0, and the overall athletic GPA stood at 3.37, marking the 11th consecutive semester with a GPA above 3.2. Only one sport fell below 3.15 GPA. The Chairman praised the athletic department for recruiting students who excel both athletically and academically, noting that this aligns with UT Martin's educational mission, despite also winning four consecutive OVC Football Championships.

Mr. Dan Strasser offered condolences on behalf of the board for the passing of Mrs. Reams, the wife of Dr. Reams.

**X. Adjournment**

With no further business,

**Motion to adjourn:** Hal Bynum

**Second:** Dr. Dan McDonough

**Vote:** Approved unanimously by roll call vote