

UNIVERSITY OF TENNESSEE AT MARTIN AT MARTIN
ADVISORY BOARD
MINUTES

The University of Tennessee at Martin Advisory Board convened on September 20, 2024, at the UT Martin campus, in 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, Dr. Tonya Reynoldson, Dan Strasser, Dr. Dan McDonough - Faculty Senate Representative, and Chayil Watkins – Student Representative (attended virtually)

John Woolfolk 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 Art Sparks began by reflecting on the state of affairs at UT Martin, expressing his optimism about the university's future. He noted the wealth of positive developments, from rising enrollment numbers to improving retention rates, and emphasized that the institution was in a better position than it had been in recent years. However, Sparks also cautioned that with growth comes responsibility, including anticipating challenges and managing the complex issues that arise with expansion.

On a more personal note, Sparks offered condolences to Chancellor Yancy Freeman on the recent passing of his brother and sister. He extended heartfelt sympathies on behalf of the board, noting the strength and resilience Chancellor Freeman had shown during such a difficult time.

Chancellor Yancy Freeman then provided a comprehensive update, beginning with his deep appreciation for the overwhelming support he received from the university community during his recent bereavement. He stated that this experience reinforced his belief in the firm, caring nature of the UT Martin family, which had rallied around him with compassion.

Freeman shifted focus to the university's achievements, expressing pride in the team of faculty, staff, and students who had contributed to the institution's success. He credited their collaborative efforts for UT Martin's positive momentum, particularly

in enrollment growth, campus activities, and academic improvements.

Chancellor Freeman took a moment to recognize Dr. Stephen Gentile, the Executive Director of the Tennessee Higher Education Commission (THEC), who was attending the meeting as a special guest. Freeman warmly welcomed Dr. Gentile, noting the critical role that THEC plays in supporting higher education across the state. He also promised to showcase UT Martin's unique "Martin Made" experience during Dr. Gentile's visit, highlighting the university's close-knit community and innovative spirit.

III. Approval of the Minutes from the Previous Meeting

Chairman Sparks proceeded to the approval of the minutes from the May 17, 2024 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.

Dr. Tonya Reynoldson moved to approve the minutes.

Dan Strasser seconded the motion.

The minutes were unanimously approved, as presented by a roll call vote.

IV. Election of Chairperson

Chairman Sparks explained that the board was due every two years for its routine chairperson election. Hal Bynum spoke first, nominating Art Sparks for reelection as chairman.

Dan Strasser seconded the nomination.

The board unanimously voted to reelect Sparks as Chairman by roll call vote. In accepting the position, Sparks shared personal anecdotes about his deep connection to the university, recalling how his father had begun teaching at UT Martin when Sparks was just three years old. He reiterated his dedication to serving the university, aiming to give back to the institution that had provided him and his family many opportunities.

V. Recognition of UT President Award Winners

The meeting continued with the recognition of the UT President Award winners. Chairman Sparks first acknowledged Jennifer Schlicht, who works with the UT Foundation. While Schlicht could not attend the meeting, Sparks emphasized her

significant contributions to the UT Martin community, mainly through her fundraising and alumni relations work. Despite her formal role with the foundation, Schlicht's efforts have been instrumental in advancing UT Martin's goals.

The board then honored Dr. Joe Ostenson, a beloved professor affectionately known by his students as “Dr. O.” Ostenson was the recipient of the prestigious Optimistic and Visionary Award for 2024 in recognition of his inspiring work with students and his innovative approach to education. Dr. Ostenson was present at the meeting, and Sparks took the opportunity to thank him for his dedication to his students and his contributions to UT Martin’s academic community.

VI. Welcome Weekend and Start of Semester Activities

Dr. Andy Lewter, Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs, provided a detailed report on the university’s Welcome Weekend and other campus activities that marked the start of the semester. Lewter was enthusiastic in his assessment, noting that the university had experienced a record-breaking year for housing. UT Martin’s residence halls were at full capacity, marking the highest occupancy rate in ten years. The surge in housing demand, he said, reflects the growing appeal of on-campus living and the university’s efforts to create a welcoming environment for new and returning students.

Dr. Lewter explained how logistical improvements to move-in day—such as assigning students designated time slots for arrival—help reduce traffic congestion and make the experience more organized for families. He also highlighted the Welcome Home Picnic, which drew over 1,400 attendees, including students, their families, and faculty members. The event featured food, games, and giveaways, all designed to foster community connections.

Dr. Lewter then introduced a new campus tradition, which was initiated in collaboration with Academic Affairs and the Student Success Center. During convocation, first-year students were given pins bearing the “Invest and Empower” inscription. These pins symbolize the students’ investment in their education. At the end of their academic journey, as they prepare to graduate, students will have the opportunity to present the pin to a faculty or staff member who played a pivotal role in their success. This tradition is meant to strengthen the bonds between students and their mentors, fostering a greater sense of community and shared achievement.

VII. Housing Update

Dr. Lewter then turned to campus housing and outlined UT Martin’s plans for future growth, driven by the university’s goal of reaching an enrollment of 10,000 students by 2030. A key component of this plan involves the demolition of Browning Hall, an outdated residence facility. In its place, the university intends to build a modern, 400-bed residence hall featuring pod-style, single-occupancy rooms with shared

bathrooms and common areas. Dr. Lewter noted that this design reflects student preferences for more private living arrangements while encouraging communal interaction.

The project is currently in the design phase, and construction is expected to be completed by fall 2028. Until the new residence hall is ready, the university will implement temporary housing adjustments, such as converting single occupancy rooms into doubles, to accommodate the growing student population.

Dr. Lewter also addressed the broader issue of housing shortages, acknowledging that while the university is committed to providing sufficient on-campus housing, it will also need to explore partnerships with local investors and property developers. Off-campus housing developments will likely be necessary to support the increased student population and the additional faculty and staff required to serve a campus of 10,000.

VIII. Enrollment and Retention Update

Next, Destin Tucker, Assistant Vice Chancellor of Enrollment Management, delivered an optimistic report on enrollment and retention figures. Tucker began by highlighting the 8% increase in total enrollment for the fall 2024 semester, with 7,507 students attending UT Martin. This represents an enrollment increase of 5.6% above the university's goal of 7,105 students. Tucker expressed excitement that UT Martin had enrolled its largest incoming class since 2013, with 1,220 first-year students.

In addition to new student growth, UT Martin also saw a 15.7% increase in transfer students, reversing a trend of declining transfer enrollments in recent years. Tucker attributed this increase to targeted efforts to streamline the transfer process and enhance partnerships with community colleges.

Retention efforts were another major success story. The first-year retention rate reached 77%, the highest rate in 25 years. Tucker emphasized that this achievement resulted from campuswide efforts to provide students with the academic and personal support needed to persist through their first year. Notably, retention rates among male students increased by 6.8 percentage points, and first-time Black students saw an improvement of 7.61 percentage points.

Dual enrollment also saw significant growth, with 1,823 high school students participating. Tucker noted that partnerships with school districts, particularly in Rutherford and Robertson counties, were instrumental in this growth. The dual enrollment program strengthens ties with local high schools and is a critical pipeline for future UT Martin students.

IX. Fiscal Year 2024 Recap

Petra McPhearson, Senior Vice Chancellor for Finance and Administration, provided a comprehensive overview of the university's financial performance for FY 2024. McPhearson reported that the university had successfully closed the fiscal year with a \$5.6 million surplus. However, she cautioned that the university faced shortfalls in some areas, particularly tuition and fees. The lower-than-expected revenue in this category was attributed to a decrease in students paying mandatory fees, such as those for debt service and technology. This shortfall was particularly pronounced among online and dual enrollment students exempt from many of these fees.

Despite these challenges, the university benefited from increased auxiliary revenues driven by growth in housing and dining services. Additionally, the university's success in securing grants and contracts helped offset some shortfalls, mainly through indirect cost recovery from research grants.

McPhearson also noted that the university would soon transition to a new accounting system, scheduled to go live in January 2025. This system is expected to improve financial reporting and streamline processes but will require careful management during the transition period.

X. Strategic Plan Update

Dr. Philip Acree Cavalier, Provost and Senior Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs, presented an update on the development of UT Martin's new strategic plan, which will guide the university through 2030. Dr. Cavalier explained that the strategic planning process began in early May 2024 and has been informed by input from a wide range of stakeholders, including faculty, staff, students, and community members.

The strategic plan is structured around four core themes:

- a. People – investing in faculty, staff, and students.
- b. Places – improving and expanding campus infrastructure.
- c. Partnerships – strengthening collaborations with external organizations like Ford and other industry leaders.
- d. Achievement – fostering academic and personal success for students, faculty, and staff

Dr. Cavalier emphasized that the plan aims to address the campus's growing needs as UT Martin works toward its goal of enrolling 10,000 students by 2030. He noted that the plan would include strategies for accommodating increased enrollment, such as expanding teaching spaces, enhancing student services, and addressing infrastructure needs, including housing and dining facilities.

The final version of the strategic plan is expected to be presented to the UT Board of

Trustees at their February 2025 meeting, and the Advisory Board will receive an advance copy for review in January.

XI. Comment by the Chancellor

In his closing remarks, Chancellor Freeman expressed his pride in the university's achievements, particularly in enrollment growth and retention. He commended the faculty and staff for their hard work and dedication, which contributed to the university's success in exceeding its enrollment projections and achieving the highest retention rates in decades.

Freeman also outlined his vision for international student recruitment: to increase the number of international students to 5% of the total student population. Once the university reaches its goal of 10,000 students, this would amount to approximately 500 international students. Freeman acknowledged that this would require significant investment in recruitment and support services, but he expressed confidence that the university could achieve this goal.

Freeman also announced plans to establish a Staff Council, providing a formal structure for engaging with exempt and nonexempt staff and addressing their concerns. This council would complement the existing Faculty Senate and Student Government Association, ensuring that all members of the UT Martin community have a voice in university decision-making.

XII. Closing Remarks

Chairman Art Sparks initiated the closing segment of the meeting by inviting additional comments and questions for Chancellor Yancy Freeman.

Sparks briefly touched on the progress of the university's new facilities and programs. He mentioned that since the last meeting, UT Martin had launched a new regional center in Springfield, Tennessee, in partnership with Volunteer State Community College. Freeman elaborated, explaining that the center recently received final approval from the Tennessee Higher Education Commission (THEC), officially making it UTM's sixth regional center. The center initially focuses on agriculture programs, with potential for expansion into other disciplines. Freeman described how unexpectedly large the turnout was for the center's ribbon-cutting ceremony, with 150 attendees from the community, including high school and FFA chapter members, demonstrating the center's strong local support.

Freeman then updated the board on the status of the TEST Hub project. He reported that construction will begin around April to June 2025 near Pacer Pond. The project is a collaborative effort between UTM, TCAT Henry/Carroll, and Dyersburg State, and the university has been finalizing programming with these partners. The TEST Hub

will provide valuable resources for students and the wider community.

Turning to the highly anticipated Business Building, Freeman noted that it is currently ranked second on the University of Tennessee's project priority list, just behind the Chemistry Building at UT Knoxville. The project has already secured a lead gift from a donor, but the university is now waiting for state funding to begin construction. Freeman emphasized that while they remain hopeful, it is a "wait-and-see" situation, with the next step depending on the state legislature's funding decisions.

Finally, Sparks revisited an earlier conversation about possibly holding future Advisory Board meetings at regional centers like Springfield or Somerville. Freeman expressed enthusiasm for the idea, explaining that these centers provide exceptional support to students and families. He welcomed the idea and suggested that logistical arrangements could be made, with Jake Bynum assisting in the planning.

Sparks thanked the board for re-electing him as Chairman and reminded members that their mission includes actively promoting UT Martin. He encouraged them to address any negative perceptions about the university and speak up in defense of UTM's achievements, which have garnered positive attention in Northwest Tennessee and the state.

XIII. Adjournment

With no further business, Chairman Sparks made a motion to adjourn.

Dan Strasser seconded the motion.

The motion to adjourn was unanimously approved by roll call vote, with Watkins being absent.