

**TENNESSEE HIGHER EDUCATION COMMISSION**  
**Minutes of the Master Plan Statutory Committee**

[Virtual Meeting](#)

May 21, 2025

Ms. Amanda Klafehn called the meeting to order at 1:33 p.m.

| <b>Member</b>                                 | <b>PRESENT</b> | <b>ABSENT</b> |
|-----------------------------------------------|----------------|---------------|
| Steven Gentile                                | <b>X</b>       |               |
| Catherine Haire                               |                | <b>X</b>      |
| Bill Hardgrave                                | <b>X</b>       |               |
| Gary Hicks                                    |                | <b>X</b>      |
| Jessica Himes                                 |                | <b>X</b>      |
| Mike Licari                                   | <b>X</b>       |               |
| Mary Hoffschwelle, Designee for Sidney McPhee | <b>X</b>       |               |
| Brian Noland                                  | <b>X</b>       |               |
| Philip Oldham                                 | <b>X</b>       |               |
| Matthew Veach, Designee for Jason Mumpower    | <b>X</b>       |               |
| Dwayne Tucker                                 | <b>X</b>       |               |
| David Miller, Designee for Randy Boyd         | <b>X</b>       |               |
| Jim Bryson                                    | <b>X</b>       |               |
| Russ Deaton, Designee for Flora Tydings       | <b>X</b>       |               |
| Bo Watson                                     |                | <b>X</b>      |
| Chair Dawn White                              |                | <b>X</b>      |
| Chair Mark White                              |                | <b>X</b>      |
| Cameron Conn                                  | <b>X</b>       |               |

At the start of the meeting there were ten members participating virtually. Philip Oldham joined the meeting at 1:44 p.m. Mary Hoffschwelle joined the meeting at 1:45 p.m.

Ms. Amanda Klafehn, Chief Strategy Officer, thanked everyone for participating in the Master Plan Statutory Committee meeting.

**Public Comment**

There were no public comments.

**Executive Director Report**

Dr. Steven Gentile, Executive Director, opened the meeting by expressing his appreciation to all participants and acknowledging the presence of attending Presidents.

Dr. Gentile emphasized the critical importance of the Master Plan and noted that these meetings are intended to guide the direction of higher education in Tennessee. Dr. Gentile highlighted that multiple breakout groups have occurred – and will continue to occur – focusing on the development of the Master Plan’s “North Star” and examining key areas such as finance, academic success, workforce development needs, and data. These meetings have involved institution representatives,

state agency partners, and others. Dr. Gentile reiterated that the Master Plan needs to address the declining perception of higher education. Issues to be addressed through the Master Plan include better alignment and simplification of Tennessee's higher education system through effective communication and a unified objective for all higher education in the State.

### **Master Plan Meeting**

Ms. Klafehn provided an update on the progress of the Master Plan. Ms. Klafehn stated that it is currently in Phase II of development, which centers on collaboration and consensus-building among key stakeholders. Ms. Klafehn reminded the group that THEC has partnered with Education Strategy Group in the planning process.

With feedback from THEC/TSAC staff and the Statutory Committee, THEC introduced an additional activity to phase II of their Master Planning process, focus groups. This is an opportunity to hear from individuals working on the ground, those outside of higher education, and students.

Ms. Klafehn outlined that there have been four topical working groups held thus far, focused on:

- Defining the North Star
- State Investment and Affordability
- Access and Student Success
- Emerging Workforce Needs

A focus group of financial aid administrators was also hosted in spring 2025.

Ms. Klafehn shared next steps in the planning process will include:

- Hosting a fifth topical working group regarding Evidence Building
- Conducting focus groups and stakeholder interviews

Ms. Klafehn shared an overview of the first topical workgroup, State Investment and Affordability, including meeting objectives, presentations, meeting activities, takeaway themes, and discussion.

This segment culminated in a question to the group: How do we know that our institutions are doing well?

- Miller: The UT System is monitoring and reporting its financial status at every board meeting (e.g., cash on hand, liquidity, and CFI). The Board of Trustees ("BOT") drives this expectation.
- Hardgrave: Similar approach at UoM. Historically, institutions did not discuss cash flow, but he is interested in incorporating that into regular board updates.
- Miller: Reiterated BOT input and expectation-setting from them for this information.
- Gentile: Knowing that BOT are asking the tough questions. It is helpful to know from our role in training board members too. The nature of this conversation is connected to the situation at Tennessee State University. Clarification on the things that took place at TSU and understanding the expectation for governing boards is helpful. Opportunities for THEC to maintain good advocacy for operating and outcomes. Capital maintenance is an area we've tried to advocate. THEC can better support the states' understanding on why colleges require reserves.

- Licari: Discussed the balance of stewarding resources well and stowing money away. Affirmed an interest in THEC's support and efforts to strengthen understanding at state level.

Ms. Klafehn asked how these issues and topics resonate with the group.

- Hardgrave: We need to think about the ROI and asking these questions from the campus perspective (e.g., does this further research and development, attract more students, etc.). As a state, we need to have a set of metrics demonstrating that when we make these investments, here is the return. Need to be better stewards of the investment.
- Noland: Part of this is how we frame the plan. Access lens (accessible), affordable lens, completion lens, etc. Asked how we will be framing this plan.
- Ms. Klafehn responded that this is something we are continuing to develop and will continue to develop with time. Helpful to pivot to the next topical workgroup and the North Star goal and vision.
- Gentile: Commented on ideas generated by the Access and Success topical workgroup and the themes that rise from these points. Value and making higher education a more valuable system for Tennesseans.

Ms. Klafehn then provided a summary of the second topical workgroup, Defining a North Star Goal. This summary included meeting objectives, presentations, meeting activities, takeaway themes, and discussion.

In summarizing the themes from the day, Ms. Klafehn reviewed the "If, Then" activity from the day which had the workgroup develop vision statements for higher education. Ms. Klafehn shared themes from the various vision statements created. This segment culminated in the question: What are the key elements of postsecondary value to you?

Committee members discussed the distinction between personal value and return on investment for college students.

- Conn: Raised that she participated in the conversation and was grateful for discussion around the focus on personal fulfillment in addition to the credentials of value (ROI).
- Hardgrave: Shared perspective from UoM — Their north star is a successful outcome for every student. Students are looking for ROI. This needs to have an outcomes focus. Need to get them to the finish line.
- Gentile: Lots of discussion around credentials of value. Referenced the balance between high wages, in-demand jobs, and a life well led. Example of jobs that are not high wage, but lead to a life well led.
- Oldham: Need for it to be relevant. Feedback that we are not necessarily talking to the right people to know what is relevant. Students make decisions about what they think they need. Employers have ideas too. Need to hear from customers and need to differentiate that for the campuses. Does not feel excited about the proposal as it's laid out.
- Hardgrave: Mention the long-term picture. Changing demographics. Competition between states for students and population. Opportunity for how to have brain gain.

- Conn: Agreed with Hardgrave's phrase "brain drain."
- Gentile: Asked for clarity on the point about excitement. Clarified that this is not the goal itself, but themes from a vision setting exercise.
- Oldham: Responding to the excitement question, he emphasized a need for a north star goal to be forward-thinking and ambitious. How is the State of TN positioned as competitive and successful for the future? What is the next thing? How do we strategically invest in ways to prepare for future competition. The challenge we face is that there will be jobs that we don't even know about yet. Need to leverage new systems and approaches to better anticipate the future.
  - Raised concerns about the parameters we've established for general education. Rethink general education and address some of the issues that are not helpful in the future. Desires a strategic plan that provides flexibility.
- Bryson: Likes the idea of a north star goal. Called out the complexity of the higher education landscape and the endeavor to simplify this complexity. Have we collected the mission statements from the institutions? Would like to see a way to incentivize and promote ways to make things better, not necessarily bigger. Consider how we need to revisit the challenges that make it difficult for higher education to respond/adapt. Desire to find our 'why' and the advantages that come with these points.
- Miller: Agreement from UT System. Focus on activities and tactics, not goals. Need to focus on the goals, not necessarily the activities.
- Gentile: Clarified the purpose of this meeting and the focus on the audacious goal (not necessarily the vision statement exercise). Higher education works well and is also in need of improvement. Develop a goal that is numeric and further the infrastructure to help our institutions get there.
- Oldham: Opportunity to let innovation lead. Socializing the plan and timing is tricky with change of administration. Needs to be incorporated in the next governor's agenda.
- Gentile: Acknowledged this comment and voiced that the gubernatorial transition and other entities' strategic plans are being considered in the Master Plan process.

## **Conclusion**

Ms. Klafehn discussed next steps and notified the committee of a working session that will take place on August 18 for committee members and concluded the discussion.

The meeting adjourned at 2:39 p.m.