

TENNESSEE HIGHER EDUCATION COMMISSION

Minutes of the Winter Quarterly Commission Meeting

3rd Floor, TN Tower

312 Rosa L. Parks Ave.

Nashville, TN 37243

February 7, 2025

Chairwoman Scarlett called the meeting to order at 9:00 a.m. CST.

Member	PRESENT	ABSENT
Chairwoman Tara Scarlett	X	
Commissioner Whitney Allmon		X
Commissioner Skylar Brackett	X	
Commissioner Jimmy Matlock	X	
Commissioner Will Perry	X	
Commissioner John Rader	X	
Commissioner Mike Ragsdale	X	
Commissioner Robert Smith	X	
Commissioner Vernon Stafford, Jr.	X	
Commissioner Charles Wood	X	
Secretary Tre Hargett	X	
Treasurer David H. Lillard, Jr.	X	
Commissioner Sara Morrison	X	
Comptroller Jason Mumpower	X	

At the start of the meeting there were 12 voting members physically present and one member electronically present, constituting a quorum.

Adoption of Agenda

Chairwoman Scarlett asked the Commission to consider amending the agenda to move the Transmission of FY2024-25 Operating Budgets from the consent calendar to the regular calendar.

Commissioner Matlock made a motion to adopt the agenda as amended. Commissioner Ragsdale seconded the motion. A roll call vote was taken, and the motion passed unanimously.

Public Comments

Dr. Steven Gentile, Executive Director, stated that a public comment by Mr. Peter Maher was received and circulated to all Commission members ahead of the meeting and would be included in the minutes. The public comment is transcribed below:

TO: Tennessee Higher Education Commission

FROM: Peter Maher

RE: Public Comment for February 7, 2025 (Winter Quarterly Meeting) / Approved Minutes Inclusion

DATE: February 4, 2025

Today's agenda action Item includes a New Academic Program for a Middle Tennessee State University (MTSU) – Legal Studies, Master of Science (MS) program. Entertainment is one of the four recommended curriculum concentrations (for the MTSU Legal Studies, Master of Science program).

According to The Free Speech Center at Middle Tennessee State University, the Free Speech Center's focus is our community's high schoolers. In this current State of Tennessee taxpayer funded and public higher education program (focused on our community's high schoolers), MTSU already uses limited taxpayer resources to post, publish, and promote content specific to Entertainment legal topics. For example, this MTSU high schooler focused program posts, publishes, and promotes Entertainment issues including Adult Entertainment legal access issues, Adult Entertainment advocacy groups, and information (and an article) for an Adult Entertainment lawyer/legal association. Several examples of these State of Tennessee public higher education, taxpayer funded high schooler focused posts and promotions date to 2009. Several were recently updated (in 2024).

1. Our Tennessee Higher Education Commission needs to double check and clarify exactly what kind of Entertainment legal studies Middle Tennessee State University is planning to implement or offer. THEC needs to clarify age groups for which this Entertainment Legal Studies program (can or can't) recruit or instruct.
2. Should THEC provide approval for MTSU to teach (any form of Entertainment legal studies) to our community's high schoolers, then THEC should require MTSU Entertainment legal studies instructors earn a passing score on any related Entertainment (adult or otherwise) curriculum content assessments in our state's current Tennessee Department of Education Educational Testing Services K-12 Praxis Series. (link below to MTSU's Praxis Series Curriculum Content Testing Center).
3. As a result of MTSU's intentions for this Legal Studies program to be delivered in a Majority Online (Hybrid) learning environment, then THEC should require proper age requirements, safeguards, and parental or guardian permissions be in place.
4. Perhaps our THEC might also consider (or inquire about) a related and future New Academic Program concentration in First Amendment legal studies. Our state's public higher education institutions have, and are, eliminating those legal study curriculums.

Thank you for your service, time, help, and ear.

Respectfully,
Peter Maher

Approval of Minutes: November 6, 2024, Fall Quarterly Meeting

Commissioner Stafford made a motion to approve the November 6, 2024, Fall Quarterly Meeting Minutes. Commissioner Wood seconded the motion. A roll call vote was taken, and the motion passed unanimously.

Chair's Report

Chairwoman Scarlett delivered the Chair's Report. She emphasized the Commission's impact on the lives of first generation and rural college students. Chairwoman Scarlett spoke on the Master Plan development and aligning education with workforce needs.

Institution Report

Dr. Sidney McPhee, President of Middle Tennessee State University, provided an institution report stating that MTSU is career-focused and business-centric. The institution prides itself on staying innovative with coursework offerings that align with student interest and business support.

Executive Director's Report

Dr. Steven Gentile, Executive Director, recognized the college and university presidents in attendance and introduced three new staff members. Dr. Gentile spoke about the upcoming budget hearings, legislative session, and the importance of the new Master Plan bringing together all presidents and stakeholders across the state to bridge the intersection of workforce needs and education. Dr. Gentile then proposed two Special Called Meetings: one in March to vote on binding tuition ranges and one in July to approve new academic programs.

Consent Calendar

Commissioner Stafford made a motion to approve the consent calendar. Commissioner Brackett seconded the motion. A roll call vote was taken, and the motion passed unanimously.

Regular Calendar I

I. Transmission of the FY2024-25 Revised Operating Budgets *(Action Item)*

Treasurer Lillard, Chair of the Finance and Operations Committee, provided an overview of the Transmission of the FY2024-25 Revised Operating Budgets which included amending the Revised Operating Budgets by adding the following language, which was read by Mr. Scott Sloan, Chief Operating Officer and General Counsel:

"The Tennessee Higher Education Commission has reviewed the FY2024-25 Operating Budgets. The Commission expects that all operating budget data submitted are accurate, that all public institutions of higher education operate within their approved budgets, and that all public institutions of higher education maintain revenues and reserves sufficient to cover annual expenses. Furthermore, the Commission underscores the importance of adhering to the budget provisions outlined in Tennessee Code Annotated, Title 9, Chapter 4, and the appropriations bill."

Commission members asked questions, and a discussion was held.

Treasurer Lillard made a motion to approve the amended Transmission of the FY2024-25 Revised Operating State Budgets. Chairwoman Scarlett seconded the motion. A roll call vote was taken, and the motion passed unanimously.

II. New Academic Programs *(Action Item)*

Commissioner Ragsdale provided an overview of the three new academic programs offered by Middle Tennessee State University. Commissioner Ragsdale stated that the Access, Academics, and

Student Success Committee passed two of the programs unanimously, but the Legal Studies program passed with five ayes and one nay after much discussion.

Commission members then voted on each program separately.

A. Middle Tennessee State University- Biomedical Sciences, Master of Science (MS)

Commissioner Ragsdale made a motion to approve the Biomedical Sciences, Master of Science degree program. Secretary Hargett seconded the motion. A roll call vote was taken, and the motion passed unanimously.

B. Middle Tennessee State University, Digital Media, Master of Science (MS)

Secretary Hargett made a motion to approve the Digital Media, Master of Science program. Commissioner Stafford seconded the motion. A roll call vote was taken, and the motion passed unanimously.

C. Middle Tennessee State University, Legal Studies, Master of Science (MS)

Commissioner Ragsdale made a motion to approve the Legal Studies, Master of Science program. Secretary Hargett seconded the motion. The floor was opened to discussion.

Commission members asked questions, and a discussion was held. Dr. Amy Aldridge, Vice Provost for Academic Affairs at MTSU, responded to the Commission members' questions.

Commissioner Ragsdale withdrew his motion for approval. Commissioner Ragsdale then made a motion to defer the decision of this academic program until the next commission meeting. Chairwoman Scarlett seconded the motion. A roll call vote was taken, and the motion passed unanimously.

III. Committee Appointment (Action Item)

Chairwoman Scarlett made a motion to appoint Commissioner Smith to the Finance and Operations Committee. Secretary Hargett seconded the motion. A roll call vote was taken, and the motion passed unanimously.

IV. Update on 2025 Master Plan (Information Item)

Ms. Amanda Klafehn, Chief Strategy Officer, provided an overview of the Master Plan, including statutory authority, the planning process, and what the Commission can expect from THEC staff during the process.

Commission members asked questions, and a discussion was held.

V. Student Success Initiatives (Information Item)

Mr. Brett Gipson, Chief Access Officer, provided an overview of Student Success Initiatives and introduced Dr. Celeste K. Carruthers, William F. Fox Distinguished Professor of Labor Economics at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville Boyd Center for Business and Economic Research. Dr. Carruthers gave an overview of the Navigate Reconnect 2024 Annual Report.

Mr. Gipson then introduced Dr. Russ Deaton, Executive Vice Chancellor for Policy and Strategy at the Tennessee Board of Regents. Dr. Deaton provided an overview of how TBR is connecting Labor

Market outcomes to provide innovative student success programs such as TN Coaching Project, Corequisite Support, and Reimagining the Community College Experience. Dr. Deaton then introduced Dr. Amy Moreland, Vice Chancellor of Policy and Strategy at TBR. Dr. Moreland provided information on the Coaching Project, which works with underprepared students within their first year of their college experience. Commission members asked questions, and a discussion was held.

Mr. Gipson then introduced Ms. Krissy DeAlejandro, President and CEO of tnAchieves. Ms. DeAlejandro provided an overview of tnAchieves, including their Summer Bridge and Summer Institute programs. Ms. DeAlejandro also provided information on pilot programs with Knox County which includes Advance865, Knox Access, job shadowing, and initiatives to increase the number of students that transfer from a community college to a four-year institution. Commission members asked questions, and a discussion was held.

VI. Recent College Athletics Change Overview *(Information Item)*

Dr. Gentile introduced Mr. Gerald Harrison, Vice President and Director of Athletics at Austin Peay State University. Mr. Harrison provided a legal overview and discussed potential impacts on Title IX and university business offices. Commission members asked questions, and a discussion was held.

VII. Capital Process Formula *(Information Item)*

Mr. Paul Marshall, Senior Director of Facilities Planning and Preparedness, provided an overview of the current capital process formula and the proposed formula model that would make the capital process more predictable.

VIII. Other Business

Commissioner Smith spoke on the uncertainty of the status of the Department of Education and availability of Tennessee lottery funds. Commissioner Smith requested that THEC monitor institutional viability and re-evaluate the previous viability study.

Chairwoman Scarlett asked if any presidents wanted to speak on their institutions. Comptroller Mumpower called on Dr. Dwayne Tucker, Interim President of Tennessee State University. Dr. Gentile informed Comptroller Mumpower that President Tucker had to step away for another engagement.

Comptroller Mumpower then called on Dr. Brian Noland, President of East Tennessee State University, to speak on the current environment of ETSU. Dr. Noland provided an update on how Hurricane Helene affected students and staff.

Chairwoman Scarlett adjourned the meeting at 12:47 p.m.

NEXT THEC COMMISSION MEETING:

Thursday, May 15, 2025, in Nashville, TN.

THEC Chairwoman Tara Scarlett

THEC Secretary Whitney Allmon