



BOARD OF TRUSTEES

Academic Affairs Committee

April 22, 2025

Minutes

9:30 AM

President's Boardroom, Horace Mann Center

A live stream of the meeting for public viewing will also take place at the following link: <https://www.westfield.ma.edu/live>

MEMBERS PRESENT: Committee Chair Chris Montemayor, Vice Chair Jason Queenin, Secretary Daniel Currier, Trustee Michael O'Rourke, and Board Chair Ali Salehi, ex-officio member.

MEMBERS PARTICIPATING REMOTELY: Trustee William Reichelt

ABSENT MEMBERS: Trustee George Gilmer

Also present and participating were Westfield State University President, Dr. Linda Thompson; Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs, Dr. William Salka; and Assistant Provost of Educational Excellence and Retention, Dr. Hillary Sackett-Taylor.

Committee Chair Montemayor called the meeting to order at 9:30 AM and a roll call was taken of the committee members participating as listed above. It was announced that the meeting was being livestreamed and recorded.

MOTION made by Trustee O'Rourke seconded by Trustee Currier to approve the minutes of the February 20, 2025 meeting. There being no discussion, **ROLL CALL VOTE**, motion passed.

Update on SUCCESS Money

Dr. Sackett-Taylor presented a strategic retention framework for planning year one and year two of the SUCCESS Grant funding.

- Baseline Data (2024) from Performance Measurement Reporting System
 - On-time credit accumulation: 59% of first and second-year students meet the requirement (23 credits in the first year, 54 credits by the end of the second year). The State University average is 71%, and the Department of Higher Education's (DHE) 2033 target is 80%.
 - Retention after the first year: Westfield State University has an 86% first-year retention rate, which is the State University average. The DHE's 2033 target is 90%.
 - Six-year graduation rate: Westfield State University's rate is 71%, higher than the state university average of 60%. The DHE's 2033 target is 80%.

- SUCCESS Grant Focus
 - The greatest opportunity to impact student success is in on-time credit accumulation.
 - The SUCCESS Grant is funded by the Healy Driscoll administration for three years to support wraparound services and improve at-risk student outcomes.
 - Initiatives are directed towards improved persistence, retention, on-time credit accumulation, and graduation rates, with a focus on reducing equity gaps.
- Year One Grant Priorities
 - Data Ecosystem: Systemizing the way student progress is tracked to ensure timely intervention and collaboration across campus units.
 - Hiring an Assistant Director of Retention Analytics.
 - Investing in professional development for student support staff.
 - Consulting Contract with Huron: Optimizing Starfish 360 software for student appointments and raising flags for at-risk students.
 - A meeting was held with the other nine state universities at Worcester State University to learn about their Success Grant initiatives.
- Strategic Retention Framework
 - Research suggests barriers to success can be organized into six categories: academic challenges, financial barriers, work life, school balance, a lack of college know-how, and institutional policies.
 - This framework will be used to develop comprehensive programs that integrate different strategies and address each of these five barriers, sustained over time.
 - Economic mobility is one of the strategic directions for the commonwealth.
- Addressing Academic Challenges
 - Target student populations: first year students, transfer students, exploratory students, and students on academic warning.
 - Initiatives include peer mentors in first year courses and faculty development.
 - Transfer Success Program: two professional advisors and embedded transfer peer mentors.
 - Pathfinder Program for exploratory students: connecting students with faculty advisors to explore options and career pathways. Goal: declare a major by their third semester.
 - Expanding support in the Care Center with professional tutors and a new success coaching program. Success coaching focuses on learning skills, time management, and resilience.
- Addressing Financial Barriers
 - Formalizing the Office for Student Access and Support to support low-income students, current and former foster youth, and international students.
 - Providing a point person and case manager for students experiencing basic needs insecurity.
 - Support includes food pantry, housing assistance, transportation assistance, childcare support, and emergency micro grants.
- Addressing Work, Life, School Balance
 - Focus on low-income students, graduate students, and the culturally diverse community.
 - Providing more on campus work opportunities (peer tutors, peer mentors, graduate assistantships).
 - Rebranding the center for Belonging, Inclusion and Learning to the center for Belonging, Values and Impact.
 - Expanding campus wide education, training, and cultural programming.
 - Developing a new course called College 101.

- The goal is to help students, especially first-generation students, transition from high school to college.
- New learning tools and success coaches will be provided to ensure a smooth transition.
- A dual advising model will be rolled out in the Center for Advising and Transition.
- First and second-year students will have a faculty advisor and a professional advisor.
- Professional advisors can assist with internships, career planning, and study abroad.
- The Transfer Success Program will be expanded for students coming from community colleges.
- College 101 Course
 - College 101 will address academic success, independent living, time management, homesickness, conflict resolution, and roommate situations.
 - It aims to be a wraparound program addressing both academic and living experiences on campus.
 - The SUCCESS grant will support course development.
 - The course will be accessible to first-year students, transfer students, and students who had a challenging first year.
 - It will be student-centered, addressing gaps in knowledge and skills and connecting students to resources.
 - The course is not credit-bearing and is optional for students.
 - It will be workshop-based and hands-on.
 - Referrals may come from advisors, coaches, or faculty members.
 - Workshops will be available during the fall semester.
 - Lifestyle development and navigating life situations will be addressed.
 - Peer pressure and behaviors outside the classroom will be considered.
- Institutional Barriers
 - Policies and procedures will be reviewed to ensure they support student success.
 - A thorough review of academic standing policies, the university withdrawal process, account holds, and case management referrals will be conducted this summer.
 - Digital accessibility compliance will be addressed to meet the DOJ's updated Title 2 of the Americans with Disabilities Act guidelines by 2026.
 - Additional support staff will be hired, and software will be invested in to ensure web presence and online course materials comply with digital accessibility mandates.
 - The goal is to structure the student experience and guide them through challenging aspects, such as academic warnings or considering withdrawal.
 - The aim is to keep students enrolled, promote persistence and retention, and facilitate graduation by aligning policies and procedures with these goals.
- Proposal Review Process
 - Proposals are being collected and reviewed with Provost Salka on a rolling basis.
 - Proposals are assessed based on the barriers they address, sustainability, alignment with strategic goals, and foundation within the retention framework.
 - Proposals are aligned with the state budget.
 - Final proposals will be presented to Cabinet for approval.
 - Initiatives will be operationalized as early as this summer, with data-driven assessment throughout.
 - Proposers submit information on barriers addressed, student population served, success measurement, and one-year, three-year, and five-year plans.
 - Assessment protocols are in place to track outcomes strategically.
 - Reports will be submitted to the state, with the first report due within the next month.

- The first report will focus on data infrastructure and personnel additions.
- Future plans include continuing initiatives and building on strengths from year one.

Discussion Points:

- How the passing rates differ between in-person and online classes in a future board meeting.
 - It was noticed that students with four online classes and no in-person classes tend to daydream.
 - There's concern about the percentage of online classes.
- Revising academic policies, especially around academic standing, without compromising academic quality.
 - Dr. Salka is working with Monique Lopez (registrar) to gather data and understand the stories behind the numbers.
 - Focus groups with students and faculty are planned for the fall to understand what the numbers don't reveal.
 - A mixed-methods approach will be used, combining quantitative data with qualitative insights.
- If there is something similar to the first-year journey clause.
 - The first-year journey clause has a lot of content in it.
 - Students need all the support that can be provided.
 - This is a global issue, not specific to Westfield State University.
- 59% accumulation rate in the first year versus other universities at 75%.
 - In 2017, the on-time credit accumulation rate was about 80%.
 - Lowering admissions standards (GPA) has since lowered the on-time credit promotion.
 - Students with lower GPAs may need additional support.
 - First Year Journey, peer mentors, Transfer Transition Success program, Pathfinder program, and College 101 aim to provide resources to make students college-ready.
 - Helping students understand grading and withdrawal policies is important.
 - College 101 will help students communicate with professors and advocate for themselves.
- Modifying the program to support students who may not have been quite ready.
 - Summer courses allow students to complete 15 credits a semester.
 - Summer bridge program will prioritize gateway courses like early math and English composition.
 - Emergency micro-grants will be used for students who need to retake a course.
 - Grants will cover tuition costs for retaking courses.
 - Predictive analytics will identify students at highest risk and offer them the opportunity to take the course with a grant.

MOTION made by Trustee Currier seconded by Trustee O'Rourke: Academic Affairs recommends the full board approve granting promotions to the rank of Professor, effective September 1, 2025; Dr. Shirley Acquah, Communication; Dr. Leonardo Andrade, Psychology; Dr. Erol Bailey, Education; Dr. Maria Farina de Parada, Social Work; Dr. Jesse Johnson, Mathematics; Dr. Kelly Anne McKeown, Biology; Dr. Dristi Neog, Geography & Regional Planning; Ms. Leah Nielsen, English; Dr. Hillary Sackett-Taylor, Economics; Dr. Miriam Tague, Education.

To approve the granting of promotion to the rank of Associate Professor, effective September 1, 2025, to: Dr. Subramarian Vaitheeswaran, Chemical & Physical Science; Dr. Kathryn

Weglarz, Biology. There being no discussion, **ROLL CALL VOTE**, motion passed.

Faculty Promotions

- Dr. Shirley Acquah (Department of Communication): Joined in 2012, tenured and promoted to Associate Professor in 2018. She is described as her teaching as exceptional.
- Dr. Leonardo Andrade (Psychology): Joined in 2014, tenured and promoted in 2020. Chair describes him as a talented and committed teacher.
- Dr. Erol Bailey (Education Department): Joined in 2012, tenured in 2018, and promoted in 2017. Career is deeply rooted in teaching excellence.
- Dr. Maria Farina de Parada (Social Work): Joined in 2014, tenured and promoted in 2020. Granted the John F. Nevins Outstanding Educator Award.
- Dr. Jesse Johnson (Mathematics Department): Joined in 2014, tenured and promoted in 2020. Described as an outstanding teacher.
- Dr. Kelly Anne McKeown (Biology): Joined in 2010, tenured in 2016, promoted in 2017. High impact teaching practices improved her evaluation scores.
- Dr. Dristi Neog (Geography Planning and Sustainability): Joined in 2014, tenured and promoted in 2020. Praised for emphasizing critical thinking.
- Ms. Leah Nielsen (English): Joined in 2006, promoted in 2013. The department chair describes her teaching as exemplary.
- Dr. Hillary Sackett-Taylor (Economics Department): Joined in 2012, tenured and promoted in 2018. Described as a dedicated and exceptional educator.
- Dr. Miriam Tage (Education Department): Joined in 2015, tenured in 2021, promoted in 2020. Demonstrates high level of teaching engagement.
- For promotion to Associate Professor:
 - Dr. Subramarian Vaitheeswaran (Chemical and Physical Science): Joined in 2022. PEC describes him as a very effective instructor.
 - Dr. Kathryn Weglarz (Biology): Joined in 2020. PEC notes she is an effective and innovative educator.

MOTION made by Trustee O'Rourke seconded by Trustee Queenin: Academic Affairs Committee recommends full board approval granting of tenure effective September 1, 2025 to: Dr. Arne Christensen, Biology; Dr. Charles Distefano, Political Science; Mr. Anthony Furnelli, Marketing & Management; Dr. Princy Mennella, Psychology; Dr. Mao-Lun Weng, Biology.

Academic Affairs Committee recommends full board approval granting of tenure effective September 1, 2025, to: Dr. Jennifer Pappas, Nursing; Mr. George Ramirez, Art; Dr. Brian Selgrade, Sports Medicine & Human Performance. There being no discussion, **ROLL CALL VOTE**, Trustee Currier abstaining, motion passed.

For Tenure

- Dr. Arne Christensen: Joined in 2019, promoted in 2023. Described as a very effective teacher.
- Dr. Charles DiStefano: Joined in 2019, promoted in 2020. Praised for teaching and commitment to educating students.
- Mr. Anthony Furnelli: Joined in 2019, promoted in 2023. Described as an outstanding instructor.
- Dr. Princy Mennella: Joined in 2019, promoted in 2023. Referred to as a dedicated and talented educator.

- Dr. Mao-Lun Weng: Joined in 2019, promoted in 2024. Student evaluations indicate he is an exemplary professor.

Tenure with Automatic Promotion

- Dr. Jennifer Pappas (Nursing): Joined in 2019. Highly praised as an outstanding instructor.
- Mr. George Ramirez (Art department): Joined in 2019. Expertise and talent as a visual artist helps provide a meaningful learning environment.
- Dr. Brian Selgrade (Sports Medicine and Human Performance): Joined in 2019.

Excellence in Teaching, Advising, and Service awards (Student nominated)

- Excellence in Teaching Award: Dr. Kimberly Tobin, Criminal Justice (started in 1998).
 - Students highlighted her dedication to teaching critical thinking skills.
- Excellence in Advising Award: Madeline Ken Cahill, Communication (started in 1995).
 - Student highlighted her flexibility, availability, career advice, preparedness, knowledge of campus services, course selection assistance, and support for non-traditional students.
- Excellence in Service Award: Dr. Kimberly Tobin.
 - Active on campus and willing to serve on various projects.

There being no further discussion.

MOTION made by Trustee Currier seconded by Trustee O'Rourke to adjourn the meeting. There being no discussion, **ROLL CALL VOTE**, motion passed by majority.

Meeting adjourned at 10:32 AM.

Attachments presented at this meeting:

- a) Minutes of February 20, 2025
- b) Success money Presentation
- c) b. Promotion Candidate Summaries
- d) c. Promotion Personnel Action
- e) d. Motion for Faculty Promotion
- f) e. Tenure Candidate Summaries
- g) f. Tenure Personnel Action
- h) g. Motion for Tenure Promotion

Secretary's Certificate

I hereby certify that the foregoing is a true and correct copy of the approved minutes of the Westfield State University Board of Trustees Academic Affairs Committee meeting held on April 22, 2025.

Daniel Currier, Secretary

Date