

THE UNIVERSITY OF TENNESSEE

September 10, 2026

Members present: Rocconi, L. (Graduate Council Chair); Thompson, P. (Graduate Council Co-Chair); Aydeniz, M., Bertling, J., Brown, C., Bryan, T., Coe, D., Crouch, C., Crowley, J., Dhar, M., Dickerson, A., Donovan, P., Fussell-Ware, D., Garvey, A., Heck, H., Higdon, M., Huang, T., Jalata, A., Joubert, J. (Graduate Student Senate Vice President), Lang, M., Love, A., Lucio, R., Meschke, L., Newkirk, K., Ohnesorg, S., O'Leary, E., Ostrowski, J., Ownley, B., Reynolds, T., Sawyer, G., Schaur, G., Shum, K., Strickland, C., Vogiatzis, K., Wang, T., Washington, T., Weber, T. (Graduate Student Senate President), Whitlock, B.

Ex-Officio members present: Ambroziak, K., Anderson, D., Cahill, K., Cathey, A., Childers, C., Danquah, M., Dzikus, L., Higdon, M., Mallicote, M., McConville, B., Mesick, J., Odoi, A., Stazyk, E., Stier, J., Tran, L., Vllasi, E.

Other attendees present: Graduate School: Van Puymbroeck, M., Otto, R., Noble, C., Bruner, M., Morrow, J., Smith, J., Cheatham, M. Cox, C. (Graduate Council Liaison), Favier, G., Hammock, H., Harden, J.; Digital Learning: Ely, A.; SACSCOC: Hartman, H. (Institutional Accreditation Liaison); Browning, A. (Assistant Director of Accreditation); Foster, B., Vice provost for Academic Affairs; Faculty Senate: Laughter, J. (FS President), Roessner, A. (FS President Elect)

College/Unit attendees: College of Arts and Sciences: Mitchell, L., Cox, C.; College of Education, Health and Human Sciences, Slaton, L.

1. Call to Order and Welcome (Louis Rocconi, Graduate Council Chair)

The Graduate Council Zoom meeting was called to order by Graduate Council Chair, Louis Rocconi, on Thursday, September 10, 2026, at 3:00 p.m.

- Welcome to the first Graduate Council meeting for this academic year. Thank you to both new members and continuing members for serving on Graduate Council.

2. Minutes of the Preceding Meeting

Rocconi reported the April 23, 2026, Graduate Council Minutes were approved electronically on April 25, 2026.

3. Welcome by the Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School (Marieke Van Puymbroeck)

Dean Van Puymbroeck welcomed members and noted the recent Enrollment Summit, a joint effort of Enrollment Management, Digital Learning, and the Graduate School to strengthen graduate-student recruitment and enrollment. Highlighted the Graduate School's expanded leadership team and staffing and said the changes are intended to improve support for academic units, Graduate Council, and its committees. Welcomed the Graduate Student Senate leadership and thanked members for their service.

4. Guest Speakers: Heather Hartman, Institutional Accreditation Liaison and Ashley Browning, Assistant Director of Accreditation.

Hartman reported that the accreditor formerly known by the SACSCOC acronym is using the name Commission on Colleges and Universities, referred to as "the Commission." Emphasized that substantive-change requirements arise from federal regulation and that failure to report qualifying changes can jeopardize institutional accreditation.

Covered changes include new programs, program closures, delivery modalities, instructional locations, and other high-impact or high-risk institutional changes.

A new program generally requires approval before students may be enrolled. For a fall 2027 launch, a prospectus should be submitted to the Commission by March 2027 to allow time for review and follow-up questions.

The content threshold increased from 25 percent to 50 percent or more new content. Changes involving 25–49 percent new content no longer require notification solely on that basis.

Increasing the level of an existing program requires approval regardless of the percentage of new content. Reopening a program more than five years after an approved closure is treated as a new-program approval.

Program closures require approval before admissions stop. There is no hiatus category: a program is either open or closed. A teach-out plan is required even when a program has never enrolled students.

Offering 50 percent or more of a program through a new delivery method or at a new instructional location generally requires notification. Implementation may begin once the notification is submitted and accepted; prior approval is not required for a notification.

Closing a program at one location is treated as a program closure even if it continues elsewhere. Closing the final program at an instructional site also requires prior approval.

Browning explained that substantive-change screening questions were added to the add-program and revised-program dynamic-change workflows. Units should consult Institutional Effectiveness early, use the new guidance document, and provide evidence of consultation with proposals. Browning will work with units on submissions; Hartman will conduct a final review and submit materials to the Commission.

Commission and Tennessee Higher Education Commission processes may proceed concurrently when appropriate. Units and the Graduate School will be notified when acceptance or approval is received so catalog and admissions work can continue.

Hartman also noted a review of the Principles of Accreditation, a two-year workforce initiative, and work on a transfer-credit consortium intended to reduce credit loss between institutions.

Questions and Clarifications on Substantive Change

New degree programs. Dean Van Puymbroeck clarified that new degree programs follow a more complex institutional pathway and must begin with the Graduate School before routing to Institutional Effectiveness.

Accelerated programs. A proposed 4+1 arrangement will be audited like other programs. If both component programs already exist and no new content is added, Commission action is unlikely to be required.

Concentrations. Revisions to concentration structures will be audited through the appropriate dynamic-change proposal. Ending some concentrations while the degree and other concentrations continue is generally not a substantive change. Concentrations with 50 percent or more new content may require action.

Definition of program. Hartman stated that the substantive-change definition generally covers offerings for which academic credit is awarded, including certificates but not minors. Members were reminded not to use the graduate Add-Program proposal to add concentrations.

5. Guest Speaker: Hunter Hammock – GSS Program Coordinator

Reported the modernization of the Graduate Student Senate travel funding program, now called the GSS Travel Grant Program. The program is intended as supplemental funding, a grant-writing and peer-review learning opportunity, and a means to showcase graduate and professional scholars' work. The Graduate School currently funds the program at \$350,000 annually; individual awards generally range from \$500 to \$1,000. Eligibility has broadened beyond a traditional STEM framework to include the arts, humanities, creative performance, professional fields, and competitions.

- The calendar now uses four fiscal-year quarters, replacing priority deadlines and rolling extensions. Fiscal year 2027 deadlines reflect the August launch and will be adjusted for fiscal year 2028.

- The program receives approximately 300–400 applications per quarter and is increasingly competitive. About 30 percent of applications were not funded in the prior year.
- Applicants should plan six to twelve months ahead, coordinate first with advisers, departments, colleges, and business managers, and write for a broad educated audience rather than paste a technical abstract.
- Review will use a defined rubric and an NSF-informed peer-review framework intended to improve consistency, transparency, fairness, and bias safeguards.
- Recipients must submit travel expenses and a post-travel GSS report, including a short impact statement and supporting photo or video, within 30 days to maintain eligibility.
- Additional technology and vendor improvements are planned for later phases of the application, review, and signature workflow.

Discussion arose on long-standing student concerns about inconsistent awards, including different outcomes for students in the same laboratory or attending the same conference. Hammock said funding decisions consider documented need, other available resources, application quality, and the impact statement. He acknowledged year-to-year variation under prior student-led administration and said the coordinator role and revised rubric are intended to improve continuity. A member asked about independent review of related applicants; Hammock reiterated that the new review framework is designed to reduce bias. In response to questions, Hammock said the post-travel report will support communication and demonstrate program impact. He also confirmed that the \$350,000 is recurring Graduate School funding and that advancement and alumni-related opportunities to grow the fund are being explored.

6. Committee Reports:

Rocconi reported there are no committee reports as this is our first meeting for the 2026-27 academic year.

7. Administrative Reports and Announcements:

Dean's Update (Marieke Van Puymbroeck)

Dean Van Puymbroeck introduced members of the expanded Graduate School leadership team: Ryan Otto, Chief of Staff and Strategy; Jessie Smith, Associate Dean for Scholar Development and Well-Being, whose portfolio also includes postdoctoral affairs; and Jennifer Morrow, Associate Dean for Curricular Innovation and Program Vitality. Morrow said she will partner with department heads, deans, and program coordinators on accelerated programs, microcredentials, stackable credentials, new programs, needs assessment, and program vitality.

Graduate enrollment dashboards comparable to undergraduate dashboards are nearing launch and are expected to be demonstrated at the next meeting.

Jennifer Morrow's faculty-fellow work produced Director of Graduate Studies onboarding resources and a handbook based on DGS feedback; implementation is underway.

Angela Wozencroft completed an extensive policy audit and will continue as a faculty fellow. The Academic Policy Committee should expect significant work aimed at removing outdated barriers and clarifying requirements.

Mehmet Aydeniz's data fellowship mapped Graduate School data needs and possible solutions. The Graduate School is hiring a data analyst to continue this work.

Jeannie Lim developed graduate student handbook modules; the Graduate School is determining how best to launch them for program use.

The Dean asked units to identify ways the expanded staff can better support programs and students and emphasized the Graduate School's increased capacity to respond quickly.

Graduate Student Senate (Taylor Weber, Graduate Student Senate President)

Weber introduced herself as the 2026–2027 GSS President and introduced Vice President Jeandre Joubert, a master's student in public health. Weber reported that GSS held its first full Senate session, was finalizing program representation, had confirmed most of its executive team, and was establishing committees.

A principal priority is stronger two-way communication between graduate students and university leadership.

A new ad hoc research committee will collect recurring feedback from senators about resource awareness, barriers, support needs, and emerging program issues, with the goal of identifying university-wide patterns.

GSS invited Graduate Council members to request student input, help communicating information to students, or questions for senators.

Weber highlighted graduate student participation in Torch Night as an example of increasing integration into the broader university community and thanked Dean Van Puymbroeck for the partnership.

Graduate Council Chair (Louis Rocconi, Graduate Council Chair)**Graduate Council Bylaws and Committee Documents**

Rocconi reported that Graduate School leaders reviewed the Graduate Council bylaws and standing committee documents and drafted revisions. Many proposed changes to update unit names, document existing practices, clarify responsibilities, and streamline administrative procedures. Because amendments require a two-third Graduate Council vote and Faculty Senate approval, Rocconi proposed that the Graduate Council Executive Committee—chair, chair-elect, past chair, and standing committee chairs—review the drafts first and make recommendations to the full Council. A tracked-changes version will be shared to support transparency.

S. Ohnesorg, Academic Policy Committee Chair, supported the review and suggested distinguishing durable policy provisions from procedures that may require more frequent revision, similar to the approach used for appeals documents.

8. Items from the Floor:

Rocconi asked for items from the floor. None came forward.

Adjournment and Committee Breakouts

No additional business was offered. Catherine Cox, Graduate Council Liaison explained that Graduate Council members and designated proxies should join one of four standing committee rooms: Appeals, Academic Policy, Curriculum, or Graduate Student Research Awards. The general Graduate Council meeting then adjourned, and committee breakout sessions began.

Items from the Floor: with no other items coming forward, the meeting was adjourned.

The Graduate Council meeting adjourned at 4:15 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Catherine Cox
Graduate Council Liaison