

THE UNIVERSITY OF TENNESSEE

April 24, 2025

Members present: Laursen, S. (Graduate Council Chair), Akerman, J., Alshibli, K., Aydeniz, M., Ayo, A., Bettaieb, A., Bishop, W., Castillo-Rodriguez, M., Cho, M., Dhar, M., Down, I., Finotti, L., Han, L., Hembree, D., Hewett, K., Higgins, P., Hines, M.; Holztrager, J.; Kaplan, G. (Graduate Council Chair-Elect), Lang, M., Love, A., Mahero, M., Marshall, S., Maslar, D., McCord, R., Mills, J., Montgomery, K., Okafor, C., Ownley, B., Oyetunji, I. (Graduate Student Senate President), Palies, P., Patrick, J., Rocconi, L., Rosenbaum, B., Su, S., Summers, J., Wang, T., Whiteside, E., Wilson, D., Zhang, Z.

Ex-Officio members present: Ambroziak, K., Anderson, D., Cho, M., Danquah, M., Dzikus, L., Gould, E., Lane, I., McConville, B., Odoi, A., Stier, J., Tran, L., Truster, T.

Other attendees present: Guest speaker: Yolanda McCaffrey, Student Health Center, Graduate School: Cathey, A. (Interim Dean), Favier, G.; Graduate Council Liaison, Cox, C.; Distance Learning: Steele, J.; Browning, A. (SACSCOC)

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 (Siris Laursen)

The Graduate Council Zoom meeting was called to order by Graduate Council Chair, Siris Laursen on Thursday, April 24, 2025, at 3:00 p.m.

2. Minutes of the Preceding Meeting

Laursen reported the March 13, 2025, Graduate Council Minutes were approved electronically on April 3, 2025.

3. Guest Speaker: Yolanda McCaffrey, Student Health Services

Yolanda was invited to our April meeting because of the health insurance questions at our March meeting.

Yolanda shared the following information:

- The current student health insurance is \$244.00 monthly, with a \$500.00 deductible.
- The insurance is included for graduate students on assistantships.
- International students are required to have insurance when they are enrolled at UT. And they are required to have the insurance through the entire academic year (August 1 – July 31).

Questions:

Is it possible for a department to sponsor graduate students' health insurance?

- Yes, departments can pay for the UT health insurance on the student's behalf. But the student would have to meet the eligibility requirements, which are: 1) be degree seeking at UTK, 2) be enrolled in a minimum of 3 graduate credit hours, and 3) must be Knoxville Campus. Distance Education students are not eligible.

If a graduate student goes on Leave of Absence, can they keep their insurance?

- Yes, because this is a student plan, if a graduate assistant goes on leave during their academic year (August 1 thru July 31), they may continue their insurance at the same rate (\$244.00 a month). There is no upcharge for a student to continue their insurance. But the insurance would expire at the end of that academic year on July 31. After July 31, the student and the insurance company would have to have a conversation about continuing the insurance.
- The same is true if a graduate student assistant graduates in December and has not found a job. They can purchase the insurance through the end of the academic year, July 31, even though they are not enrolled in classes because they met the eligibility at the beginning of the academic year.

Dependents: Dependents are not covered under the student's plan. A separate policy is required for all dependents. Dependents may not be seen at the UT Student Health Center. Dependents must find in-network providers off campus.

International students: For international students, enrollment in the insurance plan is mandatory.

4. Committee Reports:

Academic Policy Committee – no meeting, no report.

Appeals Committee (Greg Kaplan, Chair) - No appeals report for this meeting.

Curriculum Committee (Mehmet Aydeniz, Chair) – no meeting, no report.

Graduate Student Research Awards (Amy Cathey, Interim Dean)

- 84 applications were received from 9 colleges/units.
- 26 applications received funding. Those that received funding were from: Arts and Sciences (10), Education Health and Human Sciences (3), Agriculture (7), Engineering (6).
- Letters to both funded and not funded applications will be sent out by Friday, April 25.

5. Administrative Reports and Announcements:

Dean's Update (Amy Cathey, Interim Dean)

- As a reminder, the Doctoral Hooding Ceremony will take place on Thursday, May 15, 4:00 p.m., at Thompson Boling Arena. As you are probably aware, the ceremonies were realigned this year. The master's and EdS students will attend their college ceremony. The Doctoral Hooding Ceremony is only for doctoral candidates where we can celebrate this exciting achievement. For this new ceremony one of the hooding faculty will be recognized as the inaugural doctoral faculty mentoring award winner. We received over 40 nominations. After the applications were consolidated and we confirmed the faculty member was hooding a student for spring, this narrowed the nominations to 13 for the selection committee. Our plan is to have this award every semester. The Graduate School also has a gift for each doctoral candidate.
- Graduate student VISA issue update: the Faculty Senate sent a message earlier today complementing the work and empathy of our faculty. Also, remember, even if/when a graduate student has a VISA status change, they are still our graduate students, and we should be mindful these students are miles away from their family and need our support. For questions you may have, contact the Center for Global Engagement or the [International Student and Scholar Services \(ISSS\)](#) office which is within CGE. The ISSS office has been extremely valuable and helpful in closely monitoring the immigration updates.
- If a student has their VISA status changed, they can no longer be employed. They will be terminated from the graduate assistantship. However, they do remain enrolled. They are not terminated from enrollment. They are only terminated from employment. So, a student graduating this semester will remain enrolled. If a student is graduating soon, the DGS or major professor should contact Marla Bruner in the Graduate School or myself to determine next steps and options available for those students.
- As this is the last Graduate Council meeting for this academic year, I want to express I have truly enjoyed serving as the interim dean. I anticipate an announcement will be made in the next couple of weeks of the new dean. Thank you for the support you have shown me during this interim role.
- Link for Immigration Updates: <https://international.utk.edu/international-students-and-scholars-services/iss-about-us/immigration-updates/>
- Link for American Immigration Lawyers Association (AILA): <https://ailalawyer.com/>

Graduate Student Senate Update: (Iyanuoluwa Oyentunji, GSS President)

- We have had two Senate sessions since the last meeting
 - Vice Provost Gretchen Niesler and Vice Chancellor Frank Cuevas joined one of those meetings.
 - Dr. Niesler provided immigration updates, specifically with SEVIS termination, while Dr. Cuevas provided updates on other matters, including insurance benefit review (currently ongoing with the Hildreth Agency), Graduate Housing, and Childcare.
 - In regular attendance at our meeting are the chair of the Graduate Council, Dr. Siris Laursen; the interim Dean of the Graduate School, Dr. Amy Cathey; and the Faculty Senate president and president-elect, Drs. Derek Alderman and Charles Noble.
- Election
 - We had 4 presidential and 3 vice-presidential candidates before the deadline.

- Harkeet (Kittu) Pannu, a doctoral student from Psychology, and Chasidy Harris, a doctoral student from Sociology, have been voted in as the next GSS President and Vice President, respectively.
- Their term will start on June 1.
- Events/Meeting
 - Since the last meeting, we have had Distress with GSS at Sugar Queen Creamery on 3/18, GSS Appreciation Brunch on 4/7, and an event with MGSO at Main Event on 4/11.
 - We have a final event for the semester on May 3 - Pickleball and pizza. We plan to have one of our executive members show people with no experience how to play.
 - Our final senate session is on May 6. The Provost will attend. We will also swear in the newly elected leaders.
- Other updates:
 - We had a meeting with William Vittetoe (Director of ISSS) on April 23. He provided some very important clarifications to the latest issues affecting our international student community:
 - Not all the affected students have criminal records in their background.
 - He is of the opinion that some SEVIS terminations are unjustifiable, and some of them may have grounds to legally demand a redress.
 - There have been 12 individuals affiliated with the University - 3 on OPT, 8 current graduate students, and 1 undergraduate student.
 - One student (with the help of a legal expert) has successfully gotten their status back as active. This means that they can now proceed as normal; however, their revoked visa remains revoked, which means they may never be able to travel until the end of their study, or risk not returning if they choose to travel.
 - There is no need to worry, students' statuses are active unless they hear from William Vittetoe or ISSS.
 - The last SEVIS termination was recorded was on April 10th, and none since then. Hopefully, this may indicate that things are finally settling down.
 - It is important for international students registering for less than 9 credit hours to check with ISSS to obtain a form to submit to the ISSS, which will be authenticated by their advisor and updated on the Government SEVIS platform.
 - The Graduate student body will be voting on some constitutional amendments soon.
 - Thank you for an amazing year of working with you! - Iyanuoluwa Oyeturji, Shokoufeh Soleimani, and Nick Jakel.

Graduate Council Chair (Siris Laursen)

- Parking: parking has improved, especially the after-hours parking. Parking has allocated 4 or 5 lots around campus that are free during the evening.
 - I want to share that I learned that it costs the university \$25,000.00 for one parking space. So, should this amount of money be spent on creating parking spaces? Is there a better way to reduce the need of parking spaces. Maybe to ride share or contact Lift and Uber to ask if a package deal might be available with a reduced rate.
- The mentoring survey has been distributed. Hopefully, we will get some good responses and maybe we can share the responses before the end of the semester.
- Insurance. We are making progress on reducing premiums.

Question: How is the cost calculated for the parking spots?

The value of the parking spaces is from the idea of building a parking garage. If a half a block is allocated for building a new parking garage, then the cost per parking space is \$25,000.00. Also, the debt service on those garages is paid through Parking Services. That is where the expense comes in. Parking services are responsible for managing that debt. So, the more they invest in garages, the more we pay for parking.

- I am in the process of developing another survey. A student came up to me after a GSS meeting and asked about inappropriate contact and sharing inappropriate content in office spaces. The survey will ask if this is an issue across campus. It might be in the fall before we see the data from that survey. Maybe from this survey, we can create a document that can be posted in office spaces.

Question: what steps have been taken in creating a space for online master's students to collaborate or make personal connections with each other?

Josh Steele: Digital Learning does provide support to faculty in creating and engaging experiences within the online classroom. We also have conversations with academic units about opportunities for creating community. For students interested in research, I have talked with faculty across campus that there are

some units who have identified research opportunities for DE students that are variable based on the nature of the research and what is available at a given time. The program directors in the DE programs will have the best information to provide to the DE students.

Ashley Browning: Thank you to all who participated in the SACSCOC onsite visit. I asked back in January for your assistance in providing teaching courses that we offer to our graduate students. The response was limited but we did find 4 courses that we shared as evidence with SACSCOC. Those 4 courses were COUN 675, EEB 608, SOCI 511, and SOWK 675.

Any other questions or comments?

Is there an update for the leave for child-bearing issue?

Cathey: The comment in checking on the progress of that document was in the Office of General Counsel. The comment we received was there has been some legislation that has changed since last fall when the pregnancy proposal was put forth for graduate students. On the pregnancy proposal the legislation has changed so that the need for a specific proposal as it relates to pregnancy is not necessary in the way it was because of other workers' acts. One item the Graduate Student Senate brought up and continues to bring forward more broadly is the opportunity to have leave for graduate assistantships for many different reasons to include traveling home and medical leave, particularly for students who are on a 12-month assistantship. We have done benchmarking with other schools. The consistent way this is handled is that the Graduate School makes a recommendation in terms of different types of leave, such as bereavement leave, medical leave. We are in the process of working through this. Marla Bruner in the Graduate School has included this information in the Graduate School handbook which will be released over the summer and in effect in the fall. This should provide a consistent set of recommendations, and the colleges/departments/units will have the ability to implement those recommendations as appropriate for that particular student.

With no items coming forward, the meeting is adjourned.

The meeting was adjourned at 4:25.

Respectfully submitted,

Catherine Cox
Graduate Council Liaison