THE UNIVERSITY OF TENNESSEE

April 23, 2026

Members present: Kaplan, G. (Graduate Council Chair); Rocconi, L. (Graduate Council Co-Chair); Akerman, J., Aydeniz, M., Bai, H., Bettaieb, A., Bishop, W., Boles, E., Castillo-Rodriguez, M., Coe, D., Crouch, C., Crowley, J., Dhar, M., Donovan, P., Down, I., Finotti, L., Fussell-Ware, D., Garvey, A., Heck, H., Hembree, D., Higgins, P., Jalata, A., Lang, M., Lucio, R., Mahero, M., Montgomery, K., Ohnesorg, S., Okafor, C., Ostrowski, J., Ownley, B., Pannu, H. (Graduate Student Senate President), Patrick, J., Penney, J., Reynolds, T., Shum, K., Skinner, C., Su, S., Thompson, P., Wang, T., Whiteside, Whitlock, B., E., Xu, S.

Ex-Officio members present: Cathey, A., Childers, C., Danquah, M., Dzikus, L., Lane, I., Laursen, S. (Graduate Council, past chair), Lukosi, E., Mohsin, M., Stazyk, E., Tran, L.

Other attendees present: Graduate School: Bruner, M., Cheatham, M. Cox, C. (Graduate Council Liaison), Favier, G., Hammock, H., Van Puymbroeck, M.; Digital Learning: Gramling, J.; (SACSCOC), Browning, A.; Foster, B., Vice provost for Academic Affairs; Noble, C., Faculty Senate President; Weber, T. (Graduate Student Senate President elect) and Joubert, J. (Graduate Student Senate Vice President elect).

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

1. **Call to Order and Welcome** (Greg Kaplan, Graduate Council Chair)

   The Graduate Council Zoom meeting was called to order by Graduate Council Chair, Greg Kaplan, on Thursday, April 23, 2026, at 3:00 p.m.

   Kaplan noted:
   - Today's meeting is the last Graduate Council meeting for this academic year and thanked all the members for their service on Graduate Council and the sub-committees.
   - Chair elect: Phyllis Thompson, from the College of Social Work, is our nominee for the next chair elect. The vote will take place at the end of today's meeting.

2. **Minutes of the Preceding Meeting**

   Kaplan reported the March 31, 2026, Graduate Council Minutes were approved electronically on March 31, 2026.

3. **Committee Reports**:

Academic Policy Committee (Stefanie Ohnesorg, Chair) – Verbal report of the March 26 meeting

Onnesorg communicated because of the lengthy discussion at the March 26 APC meeting and with no voting items coming forward that a verbal report would be presented today to Graduate Council.

The charge of the committee at the beginning of the academic year was to review the Leave of Absence policy and to look for different options for leave of absence.

Ohnesorg presented a comprehensive report on leave of absence policy revisions.

One of the sticky points is the precarious situation of our international students. They do not really have the option that is outlined in the catalog to go on leave of absence, because the process takes them out of registration, and therefore affects their visa status. They would have to leave the country, which is what we ideally try to avoid, because if somebody is on leave of absence, the hope is that this is temporary and that the student has a clear path in how to reconnect to their studies and come back.

The committee discussed the merits of creating two distinct types of leave of absence: one with base registration and one without base registration.

- Explained that without base registration would be similar to current leave of absence, while with base registration would address Center for Global Engagement concerns.
- Suggested base registration would be attached to zero credit hours to avoid triggering costs.
- Also discussed what university services and access students should retain during different types of leave of absence.
- Discussions covered how students would initiate and navigate the leave of absence process under the new system.
- Discussed challenges with leave of absence requests that don't align with semester boundaries. Such as accidents, medical issues, ill family members, or mental health crises.
- Discussed various implementation challenges including financial aid implications, assistantship coverage, partial enrollment, students on federal grants, and visa compliance issues.
- Discussed policy flexibility among departments. Some departments may have more stringent requirements.

Ohnesorg invited committee members to identify other policy areas needing attention.

- Committee members should send their questions and other policy suggestions to Ohnesorg and Marla Bruner over the summer. We will also continue discussions with Center for Global Engagement.

Appeals Committee (Louis Rocconi, Chair) – No appeals came forward for review

Rocconi: No appeal to report. I want to express my gratitude and thank everyone who served on the Appeals Committee for their dedication and quick turnaround when we did have an appeal.

Curriculum Committee **(**Erin Whiteside, Chair) – No meeting, no report

Graduate Student Research Awards (Marieke Van Puymbroeck)

- We received 179 applications. We are waiting for one reviewer to submit their scores before we can meet and make the final funding decisions. We hope to meet in the first week of May.

4. Administrative Reports and Announcements:

Dean's Update (Marieke Van Puymbroeck)

Van Puymbroeck reported:

- the Graduate School Office in Suite 111, will be working remotely from May 4 – May 25 to have the office painted and new carpet installed. You can still reach them by email, Teams, and phone calls. The Graduate Admissions Office will continue to be open during that time. It was the offices in 111 that were damaged by the flood.
- Graduation numbers for candidates that applied to graduate for spring 2026, include 288 doctoral candidates and 1,375 masters.
- The Graduate Hooding Ceremony is Thursday, May 14 at 2:30 p.m. The Master's Ceremony is Friday, May 15, at 9:00 a.m.
- During the summer we will continue to work on our strategic plan to develop a graduate identity, to work with our GSS partners to frame graduate students in a more forward and centered view for the university. We are also working on clear guidelines about who does what in the Graduate School.
- We are also working on a website redesign, which we hope will launch in a year or so.
- We are hiring for several positions. Two associate dean positions, both full-time. Faculty positions: Professional Development and Well-being and Curricular Innovation and Program Vitality. And several staff positions.
- I want to share that Louis Rocconi, our current chair elect, just received the Excellence in Teaching Award at the Academic Honors Banquet earlier this week. Congratulations Louis.

Graduate Student Senate **(**Harkeet Pannu, Graduate Student Senate President)

Pannu congratulated Dr. Rocconi on the award and noted he was his statistics professor during his first year as a doctoral student and can attest to the fact that he teaches with excellence in the classroom.

Year-end Reflection and Achievements

Pannu delivered an extensive review of GSS accomplishments, emphasizing collaboration, advocacy, and organizational growth. Highlights included:

- Advancing initiatives in affordable housing and athletics access for graduate students.
- Establishing a legal support pipeline with the Law School's Pro Bono Clinic.
- Strengthening social media engagement and community visibility of GSS activities.
- Maintaining effective administration of the GSS Travel Awards Program, distributing $298,592 to 401 students across 518 applications between July 2025 and April 2026.
- Developing tools—including a departmental leadership toolkit and senator code of conduct—to support internal development and departmental outreach.
- Promoting research transparency and assistantship postings, while enhancing internal communication structures.

Pannu commended the dedication of senators, remarking on their "tireless work and collaborative spirit," and encouraged members to thank them for their service.

Leadership Transition

Pannu introduced Taylor Weber (President-elect) and Jeandre Joubert (Vice President-elect).

- Taylor Weber expressed gratitude and excitement for the opportunity to serve, emphasizing advocacy and engagement.
- Jeandre Joubert discussed plans to build collaboration across campus, emphasizing inclusivity and professional growth initiatives.

Pannu affirmed his confidence in the incoming team's leadership.

G. Kaplan thanked Pannu for his work as GSS President this year and praised the executive board and all the GSS senators for their excellent work this year.

Graduate Council Chair (Greg Kaplan, Graduate Council Chair)

Kaplan expressed gratitude to all those who served on Graduate Council this year. And highlighted the positive trajectory of the Graduate School under Dean Van Puymbroeck's leadership.

Kaplan announced his retirement is effective July 31, 2026, after serving UT since 1995.

Nominating Committee:

Thank you to the nominating committee for bringing us the name of Phyllis Thompson, from the College of Social Work, as the next chair-elect. Phyllis previously served as chair-elect and chair and therefore is familiar with this role. Thank you, Phyllis, for volunteering to serve in this key role again.

A poll was launched to vote Phyllis Thompson as the next chair elect.

Poll results: majority vote of yes, with one to abstain.

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

The Graduate Council meeting adjourned at 3:50 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Catherine Cox
Graduate Council Liaison