

Austin Peay State University
Faculty Senate
Meeting of Thursday, September 18, 2025
Morgan University Center, Ballroom | 3:00 pm
Agenda

Call to Order: Senate President Brandon Di Paolo Harrison

Recognition of Guests: 106 guests

Roll Call of Senators: Senate Secretary Alice Lin

Absent Senators: Ronnel Berry, Philip Elike, Charles Gonzalez, and Sam Ligo.

Approval of Today's Agenda: Motion made, seconded, and passed by majority vote

Approval of Minutes from August 21, 2025, Meeting

Remarks

The meeting was called to order by President Di Paolo Harrison, who stated that the only item to be discussed at the meeting was the recent termination of Professor Darren Michael, which was done without following APSU Policy 2:043. President Michael Licari, Provost Mitch Cordova, and Vice President for Legal Affairs and Organizational Strategy Dannelle Whiteside were present to address questions from the assembly. A lengthy and, at times, heated discussion of Professor Michael's termination followed. President Licari acknowledged several times that the termination violated APSU policy and stated that the case is under legal review. As a result, details of the case could not be discussed. Both President Licari and VP Whiteside took many questions and comments from the assembly and provided answers to the degree permitted by law. The following is a summary of the key points discussed.

1) Due Process, Policy, Status

Q (many): What policy was violated? Was a hearing committee convened per termination policy? What is the faculty member's current status? Will this ever happen again?

A: President: Process was not followed; no further detail on original decision. "In the works" to correct via proper policy; outcome not presumed. Explicit promise from President: actions like this will not occur again without following policy.

2) Academic Freedom, Tenure Protections & Classroom Climate

Q: What are our protections (tenured, pre-tenure, adjuncts, visiting)? Is it still worth pursuing tenure here?

A: President: Yes, tenure here remains worth pursuing; students need faculty; APSU remains committed to upholding tenure.

Provost: Will work with colleges/chairs to protect instructional spaces and

support faculty in teaching sensitive topics.

- 3) Comparisons to prior hiring and dismissal of Dr. Logan Smith over his alleged connections to a website that promotes Nazism, racism and hate group.

Q: Why was that situation handled differently?

A: President: Prior case involved speech prior to employment; policies and hiring processes were changed afterward.

- 4) External Influence / Politics

Q: Did political pressure (e.g., elected officials) drive the decision? Which voices are valued more—politicians or students?

A: President: Cannot discuss communications tied to decision; the job of a university president involves trade-offs to advance the institution. Could not speculate about future political pressure; reiterated commitment to due process and shared governance.

- 5) Public “Hate Preacher” vs. faculty free speech

Q: Why is an outside preacher allowed to target students while a faculty member is terminated for a repost? Why not ban the preacher?

A: VP Whiteside: Public campus = First Amendment forum; university must allow speech with time/place/manner limits unless it meets narrow exceptions (true threats/harassment). If individualized harassment occurs, students should file a complaint for investigation. Standard differs for employees (separate employment policies and balancing tests).

- 6) Trust, Reputation & Communications

Q: How will you repair reputational harm to the faculty member, department, and university? Will there be a press release acknowledging the due process error?

A: President: Will consider a statement saying what can be said; emphasized long, incremental work to rebuild trust and clarify the University’s academic mission to the public.

- 7) Safety & Support for Marginalized Students

Q: How will the university protect trans, queer, disabled, Black, Asian, and other marginalized students if it cannot protect its faculty?

A: President: Commitment to follow rules and deploy support resources.

VP Whiteside: Named student support units (Student Affairs counseling, Institutional Culture) and pledged administrative availability.

- 8) Operational Impacts (Courses, Coverage, Hiring)

Q: How will Theatre & Dance courses, advising, productions, and recruiting be covered? How can we recruit strong candidates amid fear?

A: Provost: Department/Dean/AA are “all-in” to cover courses and recruit the best faculty; will resource gaps.

President: Recruitment pitch remains mission, student commitment, and educational environment.

- 9) NDA / Transparency

Q: Please do not require an NDA so the full story can be known.

A: VP Whiteside: Representation/negotiations occur attorney-to-attorney; no further detail.

- 10) Concrete Actions Going Forward

Q: Beyond intent, what specific steps will be taken?

A: President: Will work with Faculty Senate leadership to define tangible steps

(acknowledging trust is low and change will be incremental). No specific, dated action plan announced during the meeting.

Notable Themes from Floor Testimony

1. Acute loss of trust in leadership; repeated calls for concrete actions (some calls for resignation).
2. Student grief and fear; many personal statements about safety, identity, and educational disruption.
3. Faculty fear (untenured/adjunct/visa-holding) about speaking up; concern for academic freedom in politically charged climate.
4. Reputational harm to the affected faculty member and to APSU; frustration with timing and public release of the termination letter; request for institutional statement acknowledging the due process error.
5. Operational stress in Theatre & Dance (class coverage, productions, advising, recruiting). Calls for respect, transparency, and visible institutional support for students and faculty, particularly those in marginalized or vulnerable positions.
6. Faculty and students participated from across the university, including the Colleges of Arts & Letters, Education, Business, STEM, and Behavioral & Health Sciences, as well as the Library and staff.

Adjourn: The meeting was adjourned at 5:20 PM. Motion made, seconded, and passed by majority vote