



Board of Trustees

November 15, 2024

2:45 PM

Via Zoom

In accordance with Massachusetts Executive Order Suspending Certain Provisions of the Open Meeting Law, G.L. c. 30A, § 20 dated March 12, 2020

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

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| 1. Call to Order | Chair Salehi |
| 2. Items for Discussion | |
| a. Presidential Evaluation for 2023-2024 Academic Year | Chair Salehi |
| 3. Items for Action | |
| a. Motion – Presidential Evaluation for 2023-2024 Academic Year | Chair Salehi |
| 4. Adjournment | Chair Salehi |

Attachments:

- a. Draft Presidential Evaluation for 2023-2024 Academic Year

BOARD OF TRUSTEES

Evaluation of President Linda Thompson for the 2023-2024 Academic Year

I. Executive Summary

Dr. Linda Thompson has recently completed her third year as Westfield State University's president and continues to demonstrate her visionary leadership that has elevated the university's presence both on campus and within the broader community. Her firsthand, visible approach has fostered a culture of engagement, inclusivity, and academic excellence. Through strategic partnerships and initiatives, she has strengthened university-community partnerships, enhanced student success programs, and prioritized diversity and equity. While the higher education environment is undergoing transformative changes on many different fronts, President Thompson continues to work tirelessly to position the University to adapt successfully through these changes through the identification of potential new student populations and the continual development of innovative programs and partnerships. As a Board we believe that President Thompson has the vision, expertise, and energy for Westfield to thrive in this changing environment. Her success will depend on energizing others and converting her vision and ideas into action. As the university prepares to roll out the strategic plan for the next five years, the University Board of Trustees is fully supportive of President Thompson's efforts and looks forward to collaborating with her and the University community in moving the University's mission forward. Her leadership has positioned the institution for sustainable growth, solidifying her reputation as a transformative figure for higher education.

II. Description of the Evaluation Process

This evaluation of President Linda Thompson follows the Compensation and Evaluation Guidelines and Procedures for State University and Community College Presidents (June 2013) and DHE Commissioner Ortega's memorandum of January 30, 2023. In evaluating President Thompson, the Board considered President Thompson's accomplishments against her identified priorities and goals as endorsed by the Board at the beginning of the year. The Board focused solely on President Thompson's performance during the past academic year.

This evaluation was a comprehensive review that included a self-evaluation which President Thompson submitted (and is an attachment to this document), interviews with representatives across the campus and broader community that were conducted confidentially by pairs of Board members (schedule attached) and written comments from all 11 individual Board members that were solicited specifically as part of this evaluation (consolidated feedback is attached to this document). Trustees were asked to share their written observations by responding to the following suggested prompts: 1) the tone and climate that the president has set for the campus; 2) the president's communication with the campus and with the Board; 3) the president's effectiveness as a manager/leader and ability to develop a team; 4) the president's articulation of an agenda and set of priorities (consistent with the University's Strategic Plan) and the development of clear, identifiable strategies to achieve

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these; 5) the president's effectiveness as a representative of the University to the broader community; and 6) the president's effectiveness in supporting BHE system-wide priorities including the equity agenda (issues of affordability, access, closing achievement gaps, wrap-around support services); and 7) any other observations that a trustee wished to make. The responses of all eleven trustees who responded to the prompts were consolidated and shared with the chair and vice chair.

The Board also considered a variety of metrics related to institutional goals and priorities as well as the BHE equity agenda. Data from the DHE performance measurement reporting system (PMRS) and the University's Office of Institutional Research were used to assess the University's progress in addressing issues of affordability and access, student success and efforts to close achievement gaps, educational cost, overall financial health, and fundraising.

Based upon these materials, this evaluation of President Thompson was initially drafted by the chair and vice chair of the Board who collaborated closely with the president throughout the year, holding individual meetings with her every two weeks. The evaluation was then presented to the full Board for its formal approval and to President Thompson with opportunity to discuss its findings.

III. Tone and Climate Set for the Campus

President Thompson's performance in 2023-24 has strongly demonstrated that she has been phenomenally successful in meeting the institution's goals and priorities. Feedback consistently states that she is bringing a lot of energy to campus and her visibility at campus events is "unprecedented." She has approached her leadership of Westfield State University with a clear understanding of the higher education environment and a vision and set of strategies to move the University forward. In her presentations to the Board as well as to the University community, she articulates compellingly that the University must think about how to reach new populations of students, not just of traditional age, with new programs to attract them and new ways of offering and teaching those programs (not necessarily degree programs). She has continued to be committed to the principle that you cannot cut your way to fiscal and enrollment health but need to innovate. Over time she has brought more University constituents on board to understand the value and necessity of this approach.

Change is often hard in a university setting, but President Thompson embraces her task as a change agent. Her thoughtful approach to standing up a committee to oversee creation of the strategic plan for the next five years will position the institution for success as demonstrated by the four-phased approach that was presented to the board this summer. The approach has been comprehensive, including feedback from across the campus community to foster engagement. This is just one example of how her leadership has strengthened partnerships within the community, enhanced campus resources, and driven strategic growth, ensuring the university's progress toward long-term sustainability and innovation. Some specific feedback from community members: "She's gone out of her way to become the face of Westfield State." "President Thompson has been very visible at city wide events, Moreso than any other president, whether it's at Stanley Park's 75th anniversary, downtown concert series, or at Sheriff Cocchi's picnic, she's everywhere." "She's always doing something that's surprising me like the police cadet program that was held on campus this summer."

Several initiatives and accomplishments are particularly noteworthy from the Board's perspective. One recent example is changes that were made within the Urban Education program, now called LEAD (Leadership, Excellence, Achievement, Diversity). A renewed focus on this program emphasizes the dedication Westfield State has always made to cultivating excellence in all students and celebrating the diversity that enriches our college campus. This transformation will provide even more opportunities both inside and outside of the classroom. Feedback from several members of the Student Government Association demonstrates the respect students have for her leadership style. "I admire the way the president looks at the University, not pointing out problems, but jumping in to address them." "The president is not just interested in making WSU the best it can be, but also in helping students be the best they can be." Another recent example Dr. Thompson should be proud of is the official opening of the new Parenzo Hall. Every aspect of this remodel was aimed at improving the students' experience and providing an easier way to get the support they need. The opening of the new RIDE center (Research, Innovation, Design and Entrepreneurial Center) sets the bar high as a place to develop innovative idea and entrepreneurial ideas by providing a place for students to partner with external stakeholders and community leaders to address complex problems. New programmatic efforts are also underway, particularly in areas of health (a major theme of President Thompson's presidency), mental and behavioral health, data science, criminal justice, and business. These programmatic initiatives are early in the process, but they are critical to President Thompson's priorities.

IV. Communication with Campus and the Board

President Thompson has shown herself to be a strong communicator and from the time of her hire president Thompson has been passionately committed to changing the tone and culture of the University. In this effort she has had the full support of the Board and most University members. Not only has President Thompson communicated this frequently, but she has also modeled this in her own behavior. In the feedback that the Board has received, many mention this as a significant strength of the president. Specifically, they reference the very human face that she presents to others in her interactions, and openness and humility that have been welcomed by the University community. She continues to be intentional in meeting and listening to a wide variety of stakeholders, both internally and externally. Here are several trustee comments: "She goes about her work in a way that encourages participation, is inclusive and aligns with the values of the University. She is visible within the campus community."

The President has routinely communicated to the campus community and the Board of Trustees on matters of importance. Her new "Connecting with You" monthly newsletter has highlighted the aspects of her role that many in the campus community – particularly students – do not see on a day-to-day basis, including external meetings that yield promise for the future of Westfield State University. The routine communications have been replicated by her Cabinet members, with staff members reflecting positively on the routine newsletters sent out by each division to faculty and staff.

With her team now fully shaped, she is effectively communicating with the stakeholders through various means. Direct letters (emails to the campus), open office hours, various campus meetings, weekly or bi-weekly cabinet and board chair meetings, direct reports to the board and other outside stakeholders. She is now the president of "Council of Presidents" due to her abilities and communication skills. Feedback from one trustee states "Dr.

Thompson has effectively shaped the team that she can trust and rely on for advice. A team that is collaborating with her, not against her; therefore, she has become the communicator in chief and the face of the university within and without. All I hear across the state and from other higher education stakeholders is “Linda is a GEM.”

V. Effectiveness as a Leader and Ability to Develop a Team and Set Measurable Goals (KPIs)

Dr. Thompson has proven to be an effective leader, guiding the university through considerable progress, and navigating some large potential pitfalls, both internally and in the external environment. As mentioned earlier, her leadership style is marked by a clear visionary approach, ensuring that all initiatives are aligned with the university’s mission and long-term goals. She has cultivated a culture of transparency and inclusiveness, encouraging open communication and collaboration across all levels of the institution. Under her leadership, the university has achieved notable improvements in student success, community engagement, and starting to make strides in academic innovation. This is an area that the board would like to see continued progress in how the university and different departments can leverage innovation to meet the changing needs of our students. President Thompson is a visionary, and she has ideas that are grand. She is collaborating with her team to continue to challenge innovation and put in place the new Strategic Plan that is consistent with the values and traditions of Westfield State, yet innovative. She has “wisely recognized that the future is a combination of “New and Old.” Innovative approaches, innovative programs, new course offerings, new fields in conjunction with already established programs in Teaching, Criminal Justice, Environmental Sciences, Nursing and Physician Assistant are the future of the University. These innovative approaches, new visions and innovative programs are needed to carry the university for another 185 years.

In addition to her leadership, the president has made progress toward developing a strong and cohesive leadership team, which has been a challenge since President Thompson first joined the university. The board recognizes and supports the fact that Dr. Thompson had to make difficult, but necessary, personnel-related decisions within the past fiscal year that puts the University and its students first. These decisions were not taken lightly and were not without impact on her personally, as an individual. New cabinet members added in the last fiscal year have brought positive energy to the campus and the cabinet now appears to be working cohesively, which is a positive sign for the institution. Feedback on the recent rollout of “Cabinet Casuals,” where cabinet members rotate coordinating casual get togethers, whether at a campus sporting event or dinner before a theater performance, has been very well received.

Although the institution has not set KPIs at the speed the Board wants, progress is being made that should be enhanced by the approval of the new Strategic Plan. The introduction of sample KPIs at the April Board meeting is promising, but more will need to be done in the next academic year to set and maintain KPIs for review by the Board. There are positive developments on the data governance front that should hopefully allow for metrics to be as accurate as possible. While the level of KPI’s historically has not been adequate, the board looks forward to President Thompson addressing this challenge in the coming years.

VI. Articulation of an Agenda and Set of Priorities

The prior Strategic Plan was derailed with the COVID Pandemic and the formation of UEAC. The new Strategic Plan is being developed and is a culmination of a collaborative and an all-inclusive effort by various campus members. Highlights of the plan have been shared with the board and others. The plan as it stands now articulates the vision of the future yet adheres to the values and traditions established by Horace Mann. Linda Thompson has set the agenda very clearly and she is articulating it to BHE, DHE, the campus, to the state, to the city, to campus, students, and the faculty alike. She has become the face of the University. She is all over the country, the state, and the city. She is attending functions, receiving awards, and continuing to promote the University and its agenda. She has made several significant changes in collaboration with campus in reviving DGCE, reformation of DEI, Academic structure of the University and Innovation fund and budgeting measures.

The President's articulation of an agenda and set of priorities (consistent with the University's Strategic Plan) and the development of identifiable strategies to achieve these priorities is clear. Specific feedback included: "I am impressed with President Thompson's strategic thinking and ability to envision innovative ideas that can drive the University forward. It is important that she prioritize and clearly communicate the difference between ideation and goals the broader team should execute on."

VII. Effectiveness as a Representative of the University to the Broader Community

The President has been just as well-received externally, also. Her connections with political, business, health, and higher education leaders, along with professionals from a variety of different industries, have allowed for the development of new partnerships and initiatives on-campus and beyond, including an exciting opportunity to collaborate with the Republic of Ireland in an effort to expand Westfield State's global footprint. She was instrumental in bringing Mary Lou McDonald to campus in May for a series of events aligning with commencement weekend and was the keynote speaker at commencement, which was a great opportunity for students to learn more about not just local ties to the Republic of Ireland but to also hear from a Leader who could provide a global perspective from her time as Leader of the Opposition. President Thompson also leveraged her connection with a local accounting firm and provided an invitation to meet with faculty, staff, and students on-campus along with the Superintendent of Westfield Public Schools, which spurred the potential development of a new Westfield Promise course in accounting to augment the pipeline of accounting students. These are just a couple examples of how she is making changes both within the global community as she continues to expand and deepen relationships across Western Massachusetts and the broader Commonwealth.

President Thompson's relationships with sister organization presidents are extremely strong, which is a testament to the relationships she is built. She is valued and respected for her work ethic, knowledge, and experience. Feedback received consistently demonstrates President Thompson's dedication to representing Westfield State University across all aspects of the local community, across the Commonwealth and even globally. "All I hear across the State is that she is a "GEM." Community leaders within the city, other University Presidents, Donors, and supporters of the University, all in unison are praising Linda Thompson as a visionary and effective leader who is promoting the University and its agenda. They all have reported Linda's visible and effective presence at campus functions "More than any other President, ever." Students, faculty, and administrators alike praise her participatory presence in a variety of functions and events and her effectiveness in these events."

VIII. Effectiveness in Supporting BHE System-wide Priorities including the Equity Agenda

Dr. Thompson played a pivotal role in advancing the Board of Higher Education’s (BHE) system-wide priorities, particularly through a strong commitment to the equity agenda. By ensuring that policies, practices, and resources were aligned with the goal of improving access and outcomes for underrepresented student populations, the president fostered an environment where diversity and inclusion became central to the institution’s mission. Initiatives, such as targeted recruitment efforts (i.e., continued support of the Reach to Teach program; billboards in underserved communities, etc.), enhancing financial aid programs, and academic support programs aimed at first-generation, low-income and minority students demonstrated this commitment. These efforts not only helped increase enrollment and retention rates among marginalized groups but also contributed to continually working to close the equity gaps that have existed. Dr. Thompson has worked tirelessly to promote and implement the equity agenda set by BHE, not because it is a mandate, but because that is the right thing to do. Promoting and attracting students from African nations, Asian nations and Ireland has been on top of her agenda. She tasked a team to explore the possibility of becoming a Latino served community. Specific feedback received stated, “She is rebuilding the urban development program and more significantly, she is working with her campus team to close the achievement gap based on data driven methods. She is doing the work, talking the talk, and walking the walk to promote DEI, close the achievement gap, make the university accessible and affordable for all students of race, color, creed, and nationality.”

Issues of Affordability & Access have been a strong area of focus, and the President has worked with the Division of Institutional Advancement to conceptualize a comprehensive capital campaign focused on student access (still in development). In the meantime, she has worked tirelessly to garner support from donors for scholarships for students. In addition, the president has been clear that no student who is housing or food insecure should be left without these necessities, particularly when classes are not in session. Thanks to her vision, the Foundation, Residential Life, and Dining Services have worked together to positively impact these students' lives.

Additionally, the president worked to develop and enhance collaborative programs that aligned with statewide goals for equity and inclusion. This included signature events, such as the “Keeper of the Dream” honoring individuals dedicated to their commitment to diversity and a speaker series featuring a lecture by General Clara Adams-Ender who paved her way to become one of the first female Generals in the United States Army, among others. She also strengthened community partnerships (i.e., through LEADS program) designed to create pathways for historically underserved students. By advocating for funding and resources that supported these initiatives, the president ensured that Westfield State University remains a leader in promoting equitable educational opportunities, consistent with the founding principles of Horace Mann. This leadership in driving equity initiatives reflected the president’s effectiveness in fulfilling the BHE’s broader goals of ensuring that all students, regardless of background, have the opportunity to succeed in higher education.

IX. Other Observations

Additional noteworthy observations include data-driven improvements in retention and enrollment because of targeted efforts in staffing and program improvements. Additionally, the opening of the newly renovated Parenzo Hall has provided a centralized starting point for on campus tours and visits highlighting new spaces, such as the

RIDE innovation space, updated Dever Stage and centralized student support services highlighted in a modern state of the art building.

The idea of the Innovation fund as started by President Thompson has provided a place for innovative ideas from across campus to be considered for implementation and no idea is too big or small. Feedback is that the process could use some streamlining with some faculty and staff noting they would like more guidelines on what types of ideas the selection team is looking for and the president has noted that the team is also relooking at the budget process. One suggestion heard was the use of a “think tank” team to review and prioritize ideas that are submitted and ensure all submissions are acknowledged in a timely, more public manner and that innovation funds are spent, and ideas are highlighted. This is a notable example of how the iterative process is encouraged at Westfield State and how President Thompson is consistently innovating and embracing an open-door policy to seek feedback from the entire campus community.

The president is collaborating with her team to refine the budgeting process to ensure funds continue to be allocated, not just for the Innovation fund, to support strategic initiatives. Her team is diligently and consciously working on the deferred maintenance projects of \$150+M and looking for creative ways to use the assets the campus has, such as unoccupied beds within dorms. She is consistently looking at creative ways to maximize assets and minimize liabilities to continue to make Westfield State an attractive, affordable education for all students.

X. Conclusion

In conclusion, this evaluation of President Linda Thompson highlights a period of considerable progress, strategic leadership, and an unobstructed vision for the institution’s future. Under the president’s guidance, the university has strengthened its academic programs, expanded student support services, and deeply enhanced community engagement. This focus on student success, combined with efforts to diversify the student body, reflects a commitment to inclusivity and long-term growth. President Thompson continues to demonstrate her visionary leadership that has elevated the university’s presence both on campus and within the broader community. Her firsthand, visible approach has fostered a culture of engagement, inclusivity, and academic excellence. She has the courage and confidence to take risks and to try new things, while also inspiring others to do the same. Furthermore, the president’s adept navigation of financial challenges and resource allocation has enabled the university to maintain fiscal stability while investing in innovative projects and infrastructure improvements.

The evaluation also recognizes areas for continued development, specifically in the areas of developing success criteria (KPIs) to ensure accountability across all areas, especially as the new strategic plan is rolled out, as well as continuing to look for creative ways to convert her vision and ideas into action.

As a Board we passionately believe that President Thompson has the vision and energy for Westfield to not only succeed but thrive in the coming environment. She has the right people in the right positions to support her vision and has done an excellent job motivating others by communicating frequently and broadly, sharing her vision as often as possible and remaining open to other perspectives. Dr. Thompson’s leadership has positioned Westfield State University for continued success, and this evaluation commends her ability to inspire a shared sense of

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purpose among faculty, staff, librarians, and students alike. The university is poised to advance further, thanks to the president's passion and dedication to academic excellence and student-centered initiatives. The University Board of Trustees is fully supportive of President Thompson's efforts and looks forward to collaborating with her and the University community in moving the University forward. **With this vote of confidence in Dr. Thompson's leadership qualities, visionary and transformative abilities, the board of trustees at Westfield State University would strongly recommend the highest possible salary and auxiliary benefit adjustments possible. She truly is the Right Person, at the Right Time and at the Right Place to lead this institution and lay the groundwork for another 185 years of continued success.**



Ali R. Salehi, Chair

October 25, 2024

Date