APPROVED

Fitchburg State University

Minutes

Student Experience Committee

Board of Trustees Meeting

Date and Time
Monday October 20, 2025 at 2:00 PM

Location
This is a virtual only meeting and it will be livestreamed

Public Live Stream:
https://www.fitchburgstate.edu/live

Committee Members Present
C. Stimpson (remote), D. Tiernan (remote), L. Barrieau (remote), M. Fiorentino, Jr. (remote), S. Rodriguez (remote)

Committee Members Absent
M. Gill

Guests Present
Donna Hodge (remote), K. Lundgren (remote), Matt Bruun (remote), Matt Burke (remote), Nathan Robichaud (remote), Pam McCafferty (remote), Stacey Luster (remote), Stefan Dodd (remote), Tim St. John (remote)

I. Opening Items

A. Record Attendance

B. Call the Meeting to Order

L. Barrieau called a meeting of the Student Experience Committee of Fitchburg State University to order on Monday Oct 20, 2025 at 2:03 PM.

C. Approve Minutes

S. Rodriguez made a motion to approve the minutes from Board of Trustees Student Life Committee Meeting on 04-11-25.
D. Tiernan seconded the motion.
The committee **VOTED** to approve the motion.

Roll Call

L. Barrieau	Aye
M. Fiorentino, Jr.	Aye
D. Tiernan	Aye
C. Stimpson	Aye
M. Gill	Absent
S. Rodriguez	Aye

D. Committee Charge by BOT Chair and President

Michael Fiorentino opened the meeting by welcoming attendees and acknowledging that some information would be repetitive for those who attended prior committee meetings.

- New Process: The President and Chair developed a slightly different process for committee work this year.
- Committee Charge: The charge is a list of activities, emphases, or priorities designed to provide direction to the committee throughout the year.
- Alignment: The work aligns with the President's priorities and goals submitted in her report at the August retreat, supporting the administration's leadership of the university.
- Consistency: The new structure provides a consistent structure and process across all committees, encouraging the sharing of information.

The President added:

- Trustee Availability: The administration team aims to prioritize and ensure that trustee calendars are managed for consistent scheduling of meetings with sufficient time for document review.
- Interconnected Work: Emphasized that the work of all committees (e.g., student experience, academic component) is interdependent and does not happen in a vacuum.
- Cabinet Assignments: Every Cabinet member (with the exception of Matt Brun and Stacy Lester) is assigned to a committee to ensure administrative support and full context of discussions.
- Liaisons: Tim St. John and Matt Burke are co-chairs for this committee, focusing on Student Affairs, Athletics, and Recreation.

- Cross-Collaboration: Noted that Pam McCaffrey (Academic Affairs) would also present, as the student experience supports enrollment and retention initiatives which rely on academic affairs decisions.
- Cabinet Attendance: All Cabinet members are encouraged to attend all meetings, with the designated liaison ensuring notes are taken and context is maintained.

Lynn Barrieau asked if there were any questions for the President. Hearing none, the committee moved on to the Student Experience update.

II. Student Experience

A. Student Affairs Report

Student Experience Update
Tim St. John (Chief Student Affairs Officer) provided an update on the division's focus on restructuring and aligning operations with student success and enrollment management needs.
Housing and Residential Experience

- Occupancy Rate: Current physical occupancy is 55% (reflective of original room design); real occupancy rate is 76.35% (reflecting current space usage).
- Retention: Residential retention from last year is 78%.

New Initiatives:

- Herlihy Hall: Occupied at 90% this fall, serving as a successful proof of design concept.
- Mount Wachusett Community College (MWCC) Partnership: 10 MWCC students are living on campus this fall, with more expected in the spring.
- Strategy: Working with Matt Lechter (CPM) and the MSCBA to optimize housing and explore options for graduate and adult learner housing.

Intentional Engagement & Enrollment Strategy

- Graduate/Online Students: Increasing intentional engagement efforts.
    - Upcoming Noel-Levitz survey includes questions on belonging and engagement.
    - Piloting a dining hall event for graduate students next week to encourage survey participation and build community.
    - Outreach planned for online students living in the local area (Fitchburg, Leominster, etc.).
- Site Visits for Learning:

    - Tim St. John and Pam McCafferty are visiting Tarleton State University (Texas), which has seen six consecutive years of record enrollment, to learn from their success.
    - The Student Affairs team will visit Southern New Hampshire University (SNHU) to study their combined online/campus-based services and successful online student engagement model.

Student Wellness Metrics

- Care and Case Management: Since the launch of the Office of Care and Case Management last fall, there has been a 46% increase in care referrals compared to this time last year.
- Counseling Services: Saw 14% more appointments and 8% more students served.
- Reasons for Increase: Attributed to increased faculty and staff awareness and trust in the referral process, leading to earlier intervention.
- Proactive Decisions: The creation of the Office of Care and Case Management, alignment with national best practice, staff training, and resource reallocation have enabled the effective response to rising demand.
- External Support: The partnership with Uwill continues to provide crisis counseling, teletherapy, and psychopharmacology support.

Student Engagement

- Clubs/Organizations: 55 clubs and organizations are running and have held 107 events to date, a 23% increase from last year.
- Culture: Building a culture of collaboration and innovation, resulting in a robust calendar. Anecdotally, there are higher levels of student engagement across campus.
- New Organizations: Highlighted the Student Veterans Association and the Indian Student Association, the first to be led by both graduate and undergraduate students.
    - Mentioned the successful Diwali event held last week.
- Falcon Athletics: A key driver of campus life and pride. Student Affairs is partnering with Athletics to amplify home games with supplemental programming to boost fan engagement and community.

Discussion and Feedback

The President thanked Tim St. John for his work, noting he is managing a smaller team while serving a very different student population (balancing traditional residential with growing online/adult learners). She emphasized that the decision to visit external campuses (Tarleton, SNHU) is key to shortening the time to decision/change by learning from others' success.

Shane Rodriguez commented:

- Acknowledged the team for doing more with less.
- Pleased with the housing occupancy rates (especially Herlihy Hall at 90%) and the MWCC partnership (10 students).
- Happy to see the effective launch of the Care and Case Management system and looks forward to increased referrals.
- Agreed that Falcon Athletics events are key to driving excitement and visits (e.g., Homecoming football parade).

The President added:

- The MWCC partnership is expected to grow, with the ultimate goal being for those students to become Fitchburg State students.
- Stressed the importance of being savvy about scheduling to avoid conflicting programming and using marquee events (like football games) as anchors for other engagement activities (e.g., open houses during Homecoming).

B. Athletics Report

Matt Burke provided the update, starting by thanking the Board, President, and Cabinet for attending athletic events, noting that this is appreciated by student-athletes and coaches.

Coaching Staff and Personnel

- New Coaches:
  - Jonathan Mandeldove: Head Women's Basketball Coach (hired April); successfully recruited a roster.
  - Theo Booras: Men's Soccer Coach (hired June); helped stabilize the program.
  - Nicole Gaffney: Alum, Head Women's Cross Country and Track (building program numbers).
  - Ben Sacramone: Alum, Head Strength and Conditioning Coach.

- Athletic Trainers: The department successfully hired two new athletic trainers, Kara Desmond and Jasmine Williams, addressing a critical staffing shortage under the leadership of Head Trainer Rebecca Shersnow. This significantly enhances medical and mental health support.

Recreation Facilities

- Gymnasium Resurfacing: The Recreation Center gymnasium underwent an important resurfacing project this summer.
  - Addressed the need for a true varsity court for Women's Volleyball.
  - Resolved safety issues related to the age of the prior court.

    - Expanded services for the rest of the student population, now accommodating various activities like bad mitten, pickleball, basketball, and volleyball.

Academic Support for Student-Athletes

- New Program Launch: A department-wide academic support and study hall program was launched this fall to help student-athletes balance unique demands, especially during their first semester.
- Requirements:
    - Mandatory for all first-year student-athletes.
    - Mandatory for any returning student-athlete with a GPA below 2.5.
    - Open to all other students on a team-by-team basis.
- Program Structure: Requires two hours of weekly study halls.
    - Allows flexibility to fulfill hours via faculty office hours or the tutoring center.
- Early Results: Exceptional early-year engagement, with over the 95th percentile completing the required hours weekly.
- Leadership: Led by Laura Pierce (Academic Success Advisor for Athletics) and supported by campus partners (Librarians, Beth Swartz, Kat McLellan, Department Chairs).
- Mentorship: Nine current coaches, many of whom are Fitchburg State alums, provide mentorship and monitoring for the study halls.
- Intervention: Program allows for immediate response and assistance when early alerts are received at midterms.

Discussion and Feedback

The President commended Matt Burke for focusing first on the student part of the equation, specifically prioritizing student safety and success.

- Athletic Trainers: Reiterated the importance of hiring the four athletic trainers, acknowledging the hard work of the search and screen team (HR).
- Club Sports Oversight: Matt Burke took on the care of Club Sport organizations this year, which are funded by the Student Government Association (SGA).
    - This ensures expert oversight of athletic programming, student safety, and field/court time management.
    - Noted the strong performance of some club sports (volleyball, men's lacrosse) and the recent inclusion of women's competitive games in ice hockey.
- The President praised the collaboration between Matt Burke and Tim St. John.

C. Special Presentation

Athletics: Proposal to Elevate Women's Ice Hockey to Varsity Sport

Matt Burke began the presentation seeking the subcommittee's support to elevate Women's Ice Hockey as the 18th varsity sport with a starting date of Fall 2027, and to bring this proposal forward for full Board review on October 30th.

Rationale and Data for Expansion

- Historical Context: The last varsity sport added was Women's Volleyball in Fall 2017. While volleyball was chosen then for its limited expense and ease, the opportunity to be on the forefront of Division III women's ice hockey growth was missed.

- Collegiate Growth:
  - Participation has grown 39% over the last 10 years (almost 3,000 student-athletes nationwide).
  - 78 colleges and universities sponsor DIII women's ice hockey.
  - MASCAC Competitors: Salem, Worcester, Framingham, and MCLA all sponsor the sport. The MASCAC began sponsoring it for the 2025-2026 season, with NCAA automatic bid status coming in 2027-2028.

- High School Growth (Recruiting Funnel):
  - Massachusetts has seen a significant addition of 80 girls' hockey teams in the last 10 years, growing to over 200 teams.
  - Unlike men's ice hockey recruits (who are typically 20-22 year old junior college players), women's ice hockey student-athletes are direct high school to college enrollees, providing an immediate recruiting opportunity.
  - New England girls' hockey participation is up 15% over 10 years.

- Strategic Advantages (The "Golden Opportunity"):
  - Men's Hockey Success: The men's program, led by Coach Dean Fuller, has created tremendous notoriety and interest in hockey at Fitchburg State.
  - Facility: The Wallace Civic Center provides a home ice advantage, unlike many schools that must rent ice time.
  - Student Demand: The existing Club Women's Ice Hockey program, started by student ambition, has a stated goal of achieving varsity status.

Impact on Title IX and Enrollment

Title IX Compliance (Matt Burke):

- Adding the sport will go a long way in improving Title IX compliance by:
  - Increasing the number of female athletes.

    - Increasing the financial support of women's athletics (by roughly matching the men's ice hockey budget).

- Current Status: The University is not meeting the primary Title IX prong (athletic population matching overall student body population) due to the size of the football and men's hockey programs.

- Compliance Strategy: This move shows a strong step forward in meeting the needs of the underrepresented campus population (female students), which is one of the alternative ways to comply with Title IX.
    - The addition would bring the number of women's sports to 10 and men's sports to 8, increasing the program-count ratio in favor of women's sports.
    - Michael Fiorentino agreed that achieving equity is nearly impossible with a football program but supported this as a step in the right direction.

Enrollment and Retention (Pam McCafferty):

- Growing Population: Student-athletes are a growing population, representing 16% of the full-time undergraduate students (up from 11% five years ago), offering consistent, predictable growth.
- Retention: Female athletes are retained at a significantly higher rate than non-athletes: ~82% vs. just over 70% for the most recent fall cohort.
- Academics: Female athletes also demonstrate a more positive GPA compared to non-female athletes.
- Student Success: Athletes engage with the community (live in dorms, eat in dining halls), providing a key differentiating factor for Fitchburg State.
- Roster Size/Revenue: Matt Burke expects a target roster of 25 student-athletes (MASCAC average is 22).
    - New Revenue: 25 student-athletes are projected to generate roughly $250,000 in new revenue, which more than covers the estimated $200,000 annual expense of the program.
    - Residency: 70% of the 2024 freshman women athletes lived in residence halls, which will assist residence hall occupancy numbers.

Campus Experience (Tim St. John):

- Campus Pride: A winning culture adds to campus pride and enhances the overall student experience.
- Engagement: Men's ice hockey games have the highest and most consistent fan engagement (full of green and gold). The women's program is expected to do the

same, particularly with games scheduled on nights and weekends when other engagement activities are often harder to schedule.
- Life Skills: Participation teaches valuable life and professional skills (leadership, time management, teamwork).

Logistics and Budget

- Timeline: An 18-month process is preferred to begin the recruiting process early.
  - Begin search for Head Coach immediately upon full Board approval.
  - Begin recruiting students for a Club Season in 2026.
  - Varsity Season Launch in Fall 2027.

- Budget:
  - Requesting to begin funding for equipment, uniforms, and club operations in FY27.
  - Fully operating varsity expense in FY28 is projected at approximately $200,000.
  - Michael Fiorentino confirmed the budget figures represent an increase in the Athletic budget.

Conclusion and Call to Action

The President reiterated that this is a strategic opportunity that must be seized now, as waiting will put the University behind its peer institutions. She noted that the conversation has been ongoing since her first semester and has the support of the Student Trustee, Matt Gill, and the current club team members.

- Action Requested: The ask is to support taking a vote at this subcommittee meeting and moving the discussion to the full Board on October 30th for a vote to add women's ice hockey.

D. Q&A

Questions and Discussion

- Shane Rodriguez acknowledged and thanked Matt Burke and his team for their dedication and long hours. He called the proposal a "no-brainer," citing the rise in women's ice hockey teams, the strong enrollment management potential, and the fact that the new revenue from 25 students will cover the program's cost. He fully supported moving it forward to a full vote.

- Lynn Barrieau called the proposal "fabulous" and asked if there were any untapped players on campus, particularly multi-sport athletes (like field hockey players) who might help fill the roster.
    - Matt Burke replied that significant campus recruiting efforts for the club team only yielded 3-4 additional students, suggesting there is not a large untapped population.
    - He noted that ice hockey is a full, long-term commitment (October–March) that overlaps significantly with field hockey and lacrosse. He expects the varsity team would primarily see new recruits coming specifically for ice hockey rather than a high number of dual-sport athletes.
- The President clarified the use of the Wallace Civic Center, noting that the University does rent ice time from the management partner (FMC), but as the stewards of the facility, they have a strong position.
    - She noted that standing up the team will require updating the facility (specifically the locker room) to ensure the women's team has similar amenities to the male athletes.
    - She sees this as a fundraising opportunity, as there is strong donor interest in women's ice hockey.
    - The President concluded that this is one part of a bigger strategy for growth and enrollment that involves collaboration across campus and strategic commitment to the students and the region (e.g., the Fitchburg Promise direct admissions program).

The President concluded the discussion on the proposal, tying the addition of the new sport to the University's broader strategic goals.

- Strategic Vision: The addition of Women's Ice Hockey, along with initiatives like the Fitchburg Promise direct admissions program, demonstrates a commitment to growth and investment in the campus and region.
- Ultimate Goal: The expected success of the program won't be measured only by a winning season, but by its impact on enrollment, student success (in the classroom and community), and reinforcing North Central Massachusetts' confidence in Fitchburg State as an economic and creative driver.
- Call for Vote: The President thanked the subcommittee and welcomed the opportunity to take the proposal to the full Board.

E. Vote to advance consideration of a women's ice hockey team to the full Board for action

S. Rodriguez made a motion to Vote to advance consideration of a women's ice hockey team to the full board for action.
D. Tiernan seconded the motion.
The committee **VOTED** to approve the motion.

Roll Call	
D. Tiernan	Aye
C. Stimpson	Aye
M. Fiorentino, Jr.	Aye
M. Gill	Absent
S. Rodriguez	Aye
L. Barrieau	Aye

III. Closing Items

A. Adjourn Meeting

There being no further business to be transacted, and upon motion duly made, seconded and approved, the meeting was adjourned at 3:05 PM.

Respectfully Submitted,
L. Barrieau