

Summary of Remarks to the University of Tennessee Board of Trustees by Professor Louis Gross
October 23, 2020

Thank you for the opportunity to address you today. This is my 42nd year on the faculty at UTK, I currently am a Chancellor's Professor and Alvin and Sally Beaman Distinguished Professor of Ecology and Evolutionary Biology and Mathematics, I direct two research Institutes, and I have served in a variety of faculty leadership roles including as UTK Faculty Senate President and as the first elected faculty member on the UTK Chancellor's Advisory Board. There are three main points I will make regarding potential UT System expansion.

1. The UT System Strategic Plan for 2019-2025 makes no mention of expansion plans or a process to consider expansion to add new units to the System. As best I and my faculty colleagues are aware, there has not been a deliberate process established to consider potential System expansion that would take into account the variety of stakeholders in the System, the higher education needs of the State, and the potential costs and benefits of adding new units to the System. We have throughout the System a wide range of talented individuals, knowledgeable about the changing nature of higher education, the current availability of State resources to support higher education, and projected demographic changes that impact the development of an educated workforce here. Establishing a process to utilize the talents of these individuals prior to expanding the System would ensure efficient planning that meets State needs.

2. Viewing potential System expansion from the business perspective of mergers and acquisitions, a goal would appropriately be to evaluate additions based on their effectiveness and ability to quickly utilize the potential efficiencies of joining the System to very rapidly enhance the overall System Strategic Goals. Thus, adding potential units that are already very strong contributors to State higher education would be a priority. There are many metrics that are used to assess success in undergraduate higher education, with one of the most significant being graduation rate. High graduation rates for public institutions imply that limited State resources are being used in an effective manner. The proposed merger with Martin Methodist College is problematic in this regard. Among all private four-year Bachelor's degree granting institutions in the State, Martin Methodist has almost the lowest 6-year graduation rate (35%), and far below the rates for each of the UT System campuses. Adding this institution to the UT System would immediately decrease the overall System 6-year graduation rate (currently 56% according to the UT Transparency page).

3. Increasing graduation rates across the UT System has been a goal of all recent administrations and significant resources have been applied at each campus to foster this. The various Chancellors can provide explicit data on the new resources expended and the resulting graduation rate changes. We therefore have data to assess the potential cost to increase graduation rates at Martin Methodist to be comparable to those at the UT System. Such a calculation of costs could inform potential alternative expansion, options to utilize the associated resources to expand current programs across the UT System or devote to new initiatives such as the Oak Ridge Institute.

In sum, prior to further effort on UT System expansion, I suggest that the Board request that a deliberate planning process be established, utilizing the professional expertise across the System in higher education, business expansion and State needs, to consider a range of alternatives. As part of this, I suggest that estimates be made of the resources needed to ensure that any unit added to the System enhances, rather than detracts from, the key Strategic Goals of the System.